

Victims protest Cuban militant's release

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HAVANA --

Tearful relatives of Cubans killed in a 1976 airline bombing blamed on anti-communist militant Luis Posada Carriles denounced on Wednesday a U.S. court ruling allowing the jailed former U.S. operative to be released from prison on bond.

Ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro, in a signed statement, accusing American authorities of planning to free a "monster" after a U.S. judge upheld a decision to grant Posada bail.

"I'm outraged," said Iliana Alfonso, whose father was among those killed on the Cubana de Aviacion flight that exploded off Barbados. "In the United States, they are talking about good terrorism and bad terrorism. To me, all terrorism is bad."

Posada, a Cuban-born former CIA operative and naturalized citizen of Venezuela, is wanted in Cuba and Venezuela for masterminding the jetliner bombing, which killed 73 people - charges Posada denies. Cuba's government has repeatedly accused the U.S. government of protecting Posada by holding him on a far less serious charge.

The 79-year-old Posada is being held in New Mexico on immigration charges, but could go free after U.S. District Judge Kathleen Cardone's refusal to reverse her earlier ruling granting his request for bail.

Cardone ruled in El Paso, Texas, on Friday that Posada could be released on \$250,000 bond from the Otero County jail, pending trial on charges of lying to immigration authorities in a bid to become a naturalized American citizen. She subsequently rejected U.S. prosecutors' motions to reconsider.

Alfonso read aloud a protest Wednesday by relatives of victims of the airline bombing. "It is not ethical to unleash wars against terrorism, provoking the deaths of thousands of citizens in distant parts of the world while sheltering in its own territory terrorists who are self-confessed and still active," it said.

Castro called the decision "brutal."

"The government of the United States and its most representative institutions have decided the liberation of the monster beforehand," he wrote.

The letter was the third in recent days signed by the 80-year-old Castro, who announced July 31 he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery and provisionally ceded his presidential functions to his 75-year-old brother, Raul, the defense minister.

The Cuban leader's medical condition and ailment remain state secrets, but Castro is widely believed to suffer from diverticular disease, which causes inflammation and bleeding in the colon.

"If the government of the United States does not wish to try Posada Carriles as a terrorist, we demand it agree to grant the request for extradition made by the Bolivarian government of Venezuela," the bombing victims' relatives said in their statement.

Before he can be released, Posada's family members in Miami must also post a \$100,000 bond, said Arturo V. Hernandez, Posada's lawyer. And his wife, daughter and son must sign custodianship affidavits committing to supervise Posada upon his release, Hernandez said.

Cuba also accuses Posada of plotting a series of bombings at several Havana hotels in 1997, including one that killed 32-year-old Italian tourist Fabio di Celmo.

His sad eyes partially obscured by thick bifocals, and a voice that wavered and cracked, di Celmo's father, Giustino, said in an interview that "every time I hear the name of Posada Carriles, my personality changes completely."

"Before me, I see blood, blood and more blood," said the Italian citizen, who moved to Havana after his son's death.

Like Alfonso, di Celmo worried releasing Posada on bond could be risky, saying "a person like that, who is still protected by the United States government, could flee."

Posada is a longtime foe of Castro, who publicly accused him at a 2000 presidential summit in Panama of plotting to assassinate him. Soon afterward, Posada was arrested in Panama and convicted on lesser charges before walking free in 2004, after being pardoned by Panama's then-President Mireya Moscoso.

Posada was arrested in Venezuela a few days after the 1976 jetliner bombing, but escaped from prison in 1985 before a civilian trial in the case was completed.

He was detained in Florida in May 2005 for entering the United States illegally. A U.S. immigration judge ruled that he could not be sent to Cuba or Venezuela, citing fears that he would be tortured.

Posada trained with the CIA for the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and served in the U.S. Army in the early 1960s.