

Cuba honors officer slain by hijackers

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PINAR DEL RIO, Cuba --

A Cuban army officer killed during a failed airplane hijacking was buried with military honors Friday, decorated posthumously with one of the communist regime's top medals as officials blamed Washington for his death.

A government statement said the American policy of letting most Cubans stay if they reach U.S. soil encourages violent attempts to leave this island, such as Thursday's incident that led to the fatal shooting of Lt. Col. Victor Ibo Acuna Velazquez by two army deserters.

The headline in the Communist Party newspaper called the hijacking attempt an "act of terror promoted by the United States."

Acuna, a 41-year-old communications engineer, was among eight people being held aboard a plane sitting at Havana's international airport when he quarreled with one of the captors and was shot by the other, officials said. The deserters reportedly were captured later by soldiers, but the government gave few details.

On Friday, hundreds of civilians lined streets in Pinar del Rio, Acuna's home town, to pay respects as an olive green army truck carrying his black casket wrapped in a red, white and blue Cuban flag made its way to the cemetery.

Soldiers at the cemetery marched alongside the truck to the grave as a military band played a solemn march. Riflemen fired a salute.

Family members told The Associated Press that Cuba's governing Council of State, still officially headed by convalescing leader Fidel Castro, decided Thursday night to posthumously award Acuna the country's Antonio Maceo Medal of Valor.

Known to family and friends by his middle name, Ibo, Acuna was remembered for his sense of humor and dedication to duty. "I was always the focus of his jokes, but he could be serious and profound," his brother Isidoro said.

Acuna's relatives said the officer had finished his shift at a military base - apparently near Havana - early Thursday and was returning by bus to the home he shared with his wife, Idaisnelvis Castillo, and their 5- and 9-year-old daughters.

The bus carrying Acuna, the driver and six other people was seized by two armed conscripts who had escaped from the same base several days earlier after killing one sentry and wounding another.

Military officers at the funeral, who declined to give their names because they were not authorized to speak with reporters, told the AP that the conscripts forced the driver to go to the airport and stop alongside a plane parked on the tarmac.

The fugitives forced all eight hostages onto the aircraft, which had no crew aboard, and demanded to be flown to the United States, the officers said.

Details about what happened next were sketchy, but officials said that when Acuna tried to stop the gunmen, he was shot and killed. The gunmen were captured later, and the other hostages were unharmed.

The government statement said a third conscript who had escaped from the base with the two would-be hijackers also had been captured, but it provided few details.

Capital punishment in Cuba, always carried out by firing squad, has been used sparingly in recent years. But the death penalty seemed likely in this case.

The conscripts, all from the eastern province of Camaguey, were identified as Leandro Cerezo Sirut and Alain Forbus Lameru, both 19, and Yoan Torres Martinez, 21. It was unclear which two were involved in the attempted hijacking.

Four years ago, three men arrested for the armed hijacking of a Cuban passenger ferry were sentenced to death by a civilian tribunal and sent before a firing squad just nine days after that incident - even though no one was killed. The executions in April 2003 were protested by governments and human rights groups worldwide.

Thursday's hijack attempt was the first involving a Cuban plane since 2003, when an architect commandeered an airliner on a domestic flight and diverted it to the U.S. by brandishing fake grenades. A U.S. court convicted him and sentenced him to 20 years in prison.