

Cuban group wants deserters spared death

The Miami Herald
May. 07, 2007

HAVANA --

A leading Cuban human rights group on Monday urged governments around the world to petition Havana to spare the lives of army deserters who could face a firing squad for allegedly killing soldiers as they fled military bases.

The statement by the non-governmental Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation referred to a deadly attempted hijacking at Havana's main airport last week, as well as a previously unreported December shootout and escape in eastern Cuba.

Signed by veteran human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez, the statement noted that Cuban military law calls for capital punishment for deserters older than 20. The two cases of escaped soldiers involved six men, only two of whom were old enough to face a death penalty.

The statement called on organizations and governments around the world to protest capital punishment in Cuba, where several dozen prisoners are on death row.

The government's swift execution of three men convicted of hijacking a Havana passenger ferry in April 2003 - a case in which no one was killed - led to international protests, which were largely ignored by Cuban authorities.

The government also almost always ignores what Sanchez says and refuses to legally recognize his committee.

In the most recent case of desertion, three conscripts shot their way out of the Managua base southeast of the Cuban capital in late April, killing at least one soldier.

They avoided capture until they allegedly commandeered a city bus before dawn Thursday, forced it to drive to the airport and loaded eight of its passengers aboard an empty jetliner they demanded be flown to the United States.

Officials say they shot and killed an army officer who had been on the bus before a gunbattle at the airport led to the capture of two of the escaped soldiers. The third soldier was arrested earlier.

It was unclear which of the three soldiers was 21.

The earlier desertion came on Dec. 20, when three soldiers killed two Interior Ministry officials and made off with machine guns in fleeing El Manguito garrison near Santiago, 525 miles east of Havana, according to the committee.

The suspects were captured a short distance away following an "intense military operation," it added, saying only one of them was 21. Cuba's government has not reported the incident.