

Cuban boxers head home, deny defecting

Two boxers thought to have defected from Cuba said they were returning home of their own free will, but the true nature of their wayward odyssey remains sketchy.

The Miami Herald
Aug. 05, 2007

NITEROI, Brazil --

Two Cuban boxers who had abandoned their delegation to the Pan American Games last month were headed back to Cuba on Saturday night, leaving behind a mystery as to whether they had intended to defect to Germany to become professional boxers or were drugged, kidnapped and held in Brazil against their will, a story they told police.

Two-time Olympic gold medal winner Guillermo Rigondeaux, 25, and Erislandy Lara, 24, were arrested Thursday by Brazilian police as they were walking along a resort beach, police said. They departed a federal police station in Niteroi on Saturday night accompanied by heavily armed police and what appeared to be Cuban consular officials.

They were heading to Rio's international airport, where they would board a charter flight home, said federal police investigator Felicio Laterca.

"They're leaving tonight. They're going back to Cuba," he said.

The two boxers refused to comment after being approached by a McClatchy reporter Saturday outside the police station. Laterca said the boxers claimed they were returning of their own free will because ``they are beloved and famous in their country."

The pair had not requested political asylum in Brazil, Laterca said.

How and why the boxers deserted their delegation remains a mystery.

The boxers told police that two German citizens, including one of Cuban descent, had approached them July 20 in the Pan American Games' athletes village in Rio de Janeiro and given them a drugged energy drink. One of the Germans had entered the guarded village with an official press credential, Laterca said.

The boxers said they were taken to an apartment in Rio's Copacabana neighborhood in a drugged state, which caused them to miss their scheduled matches the next day, Laterca said.

Police believe the Germans were representatives of German boxing promoters Arena, which announced last month that the Cubans had signed five-year contracts with the company. Brazilian prosecutors are investigating the Germans, identified only as Michel and Alex, on the allegations of kidnapping the boxers and inducing them to emigrate, both federal offenses.

Police investigators had stopped the two Germans at Rio's international airport Wednesday and questioned them before they boarded a flight back to Germany, Laterca said. The pair were not arrested for lack of evidence against them.

PROMOTER SPEAKS OUT

In an interview with the Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo published Saturday, Arena representative Ahmet Oner said the company had not forced the boxers to defect. He also said the boxers had changed their mind about going to Germany for fear of their family's safety in Cuba.

"They wanted to come," Oner said. "They signed the contract, and we were already looking for housing for them."

Laterca said the boxers had talked to their wives in Cuba before being found by police Thursday afternoon. In a written statement, Cuban leader Fidel Castro said the boxers had been "knocked down with a blow straight to the chin, paid up with U.S. bills."

Jens Wagner, a spokesman for the German embassy in Brazil, said his country's government knew the boxing promoters had organized a deal for the two boxers including new careers for both in Germany. Wagner said he "had no information" about any attempted kidnapping or other criminal activity. The boxers had not filed a request for political asylum in Germany with the embassy.

TAKEN FROM THE CITY

The boxers told police they were taken from the Copacabana apartment to a nearby hotel and then to a guesthouse in the neighboring city of Niteroi. The guesthouse's manager, who asked not to be identified, told McClatchy that the boxers showed up there July 26 with three other men. One spoke Spanish and

another spoke what sounded like German, the manager said. They were accompanied by a translator.

The boxers then went Monday to a second guesthouse in the beachside town of Araruama about a 90-minute drive up the coast of Rio de Janeiro state. The guesthouse's owners, Reynaldo Safortes and Luzia Campos, said the boxers showed up Monday afternoon with only a taxi driver and a translator.

The boxers stayed mostly in their rooms but went for short walks, Safortes said. The translator told him they were Colombian athletes. A neighbor of the guesthouse, Paulo Quintanilha dos Santos, said one of the boxers had approached him Thursday around noon and asked him where they were.

The boxer then asked dos Santos to take his cellphone and repeat the information to a woman on the line.

"She wasn't Brazilian," dos Santos said. "She spoke Spanish, and I assumed she was from where they came from."

Police, acting on information from the Germans questioned at the airport, found the boxers a few hours later Thursday walking along a beach near the guesthouse, Laterca said. Police took them back to Niteroi.

Two other Cuban members of the delegation have also defected. One, handball player Rafael Capote, has requested political asylum in Brazil, Laterca said.