

Killings spotlight Cuban migration via Mexico

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CANCUN, Mexico --

Luis Lara arrived in Hialeah from Cuba five years ago and led a largely quiet life -- until he left last year for the city of Mérida on Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.

Lara's bullet-riddled body turned up four weeks ago in an isolated spot more than 15 miles from Cancún, the beach resort where gunmen had earlier kidnapped him and his wealthy Mexican girlfriend. Her body was discovered four days later, along with those of two Mexican men.

The four murders, believed linked to smuggling rings responsible for bringing growing numbers of Cubans to the Yucatán Peninsula, have shaken Cancún, an international beach resort normally associated with sand, sun and fun.

They have also cast a spotlight on the growing number of undocumented Cuban migrants detected by U.S. authorities. If current trends continue, the number of illegal departures from Cuba will have grown about 14 percent since about the time ailing Fidel Castro handed over power to his brother Raúl.

Members of the U.S. intelligence community say the increase is causing them concern about a potential mass exodus, but add that it's too early to speculate on what is behind the increase.

The four abductions and homicides have not altered the happy rhythms of beach partying along Cancún's glitzy hotel strip. Mexican officials insist they were isolated cases that do not compromise the security of foreign tourists.

"Tourists are safe," said María Antonieta Salmerón, spokeswoman for the state prosecutor's office in Cancún. "These episodes are likely the result of a settlement of accounts among criminal gang elements."

But longtime Cuban residents say they are now fearful -- and don't want to talk to journalists -- because of the rising stakes on the Cuban-smuggling route that ends in the Yucatán Peninsula.

The route -- which sidesteps U.S. Coast Guard patrols along the Florida Straits -- starts in parts of western Cuba like the province of Pinar del Río and the Isle of Youth, crosses the 135-mile-wide Yucatán Channel, and winds up in the Mexican ports of Isla Mujeres, Cancún and Cozumel.

Earlier this month, a report from Cuba said border guards were closing down some beaches on the Isle of Youth in an apparent effort to thwart landings by smugglers. It added that the guards were looking for one particularly fast boat -- outfitted with four outboard engines -- known as Reina del Caribe, or Queen of the Caribbean.

Last year, the Cuban coast guard shot one smuggler to death and captured another who Havana media reported had confessed to helping a Mexico-based smuggling ring that charged him \$20,000 to arrange his wife and child's departure.

MEXICAN CONCERN

The head of the Mexican Immigration Institute's regional office in Cancún, Eusebio Romero Pérez, told The Miami Herald that the flow of undocumented Cubans to Mexico is clearly rising -- 413 in the first seven months of this year, compared with 339 in the same period last year.

"There is concern on the part of our service on how to deal with this new phenomenon," Romero said. He added that his agency had asked the navy to step up its patrols.

If the Cubans are intercepted at sea, Mexican authorities often return them to the communist island, Romero said. But if they land and are caught, they are released after paying a 10,000-peso fine (about \$920), which essentially gives them 30 days to leave the country.

Dozens still waiting to pay the fine are now in detention at facilities in Cancún, Mexico City and Tapachula, on Mexico's southern border with Guatemala. Authorities did not allow The Miami Herald to interview some of them.

Ramón Saúl Sánchez, head of the Miami-based Cuban migrant advocacy group Democracy Movement, said he is getting an increasing number of calls from relatives of undocumented Cubans desperate to find out if they have arrived in Mexico.

"There is a silent exodus taking place from Cuba into any nearby country," Sánchez said. "People have lost hope, even if Fidel Castro is indeed fading from power."

Mexican officials familiar with the issue say smugglers are charging up to \$10,000 a Cuban for their full service -- the boat ride from Cuba to the Yucatán Peninsula and then overland transit to the U.S. border.

How the slaying of 30-year-old Lara fits into the profitable but risky business is now under investigation in Mexico.

Mexican newspaper reports say Lara told friends that he had fled Cuba through the Yucatán Peninsula and then made his way to South Florida. But a woman who identified herself as the mother of Lara's wife, Alely Acosta, 31, said the couple arrived legally in Miami in 2002.

The couple have two young children, but it's not known if they were born in Cuba or South Florida. The woman who said she was Acosta's mother insisted that her daughter was Lara's "ex-wife" but declined to comment further.

Mexican media accounts said Acosta flew to Cancún soon after Lara was kidnapped to pick up the children, who had been staying with him, and flew back to Miami with them.

UNDER U.S. SCRUTINY

Lara was under investigation by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which enforces U.S. economic sanctions on Cuba, according to a U.S. government official who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak about the case.

Treasury spokeswoman Molly Millerwise would not comment on Lara.

Lara left South Florida late last year for unknown reasons and headed to Mérida, the largest city on the Yucatán Peninsula, where he met María Elena Carrillo Saénz, a member of a prominent family. Her family owns the luxury El Conquistador hotel along the leafy Paseo de Montejo, one of the city's principal thoroughfares.

They began to date and eventually lived together. The Mérida newspaper Diario de Yucatán quoted one of Carrillo's relatives as saying that the family did not like Lara, but had no details.

Lara and Carrillo went to Cancún last month to vacation and stayed at a moderately priced hotel, Cancún police told Mexican reporters. On July 19 or 20, police said, they left the hotel ostensibly to go to a nearby supermarket and left Lara's children with a maid. When the couple did not return, the maid called authorities.

Lara's body was found July 30, dumped off the road to Mérida. Carrillo's body was found nearby Aug. 3, along with the bodies of two other Mexicans, Edwin Park and Jesús Aguilar. Police in Cancún told Mexican reporters that the two men were involved with migrant smugglers, but gave no details.

While Mexican authorities are continuing to investigate the four homicides, the migrant smuggling route that Lara is accused of fostering is continuing to make headlines.

The Cancún tabloid Periódico Quequi Quintana Roo carried a front-page story this month outlining the Cuba-Cancún route.

Lara's body, meanwhile, remains unclaimed in the Cancún morgue.