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Tried to Halt Zaire Raid, Castro Says He Reportedly Told U.S. Aide of Bid At May Meeting

By John M. Goshko
and Don Oberdorfer

Washington Post Staff Writers

Cuban President Fidel Castro told the United States in mid-May that he knew of the invasion of Zaire's Shaba Province a month or more in advance and that he tried unsuccessfully to stop it, informed sources said last night.

The first half of Castro's statements on May 17 to the chief U.S. diplomat in Havana, Lyle F. Lane, seems to buttress the Carter administration's claim that Cuba had advance knowledge of the cross-border attack.

But the second half of the Castro statement, which has not been officially disclosed, contradicts President Carter's May 25 declaration that Cuba "obviously did nothing" to restrain the invaders.

The U.S. diplomat's report on his conversation with Castro was made available to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday. Sources familiar with the diplomat's report said Castro told Lane that he tried to persuade the Angolan government of President Agostino Neto to restrain the attack by Katangese rebels across Angola's border into Shaba Province.

Castro reportedly said he may have failed because Neto was ill and out of the country part of the time before the attack by Angola-based Katangans on May 11-12.

There was no immediate explanation for the administration's failure to disclose Castro's claim that he sought to head off the invasion. CBS, which reported the story on its evening news last night, quoted a State Department source as saying the claim was withheld because the department did not believe Castro but did not want to call him a liar.

The fact of Castro's meeting with the U.S. diplomat was disclosed by administration officials on May 18, the day after it occurred. The officials said then that Castro had said Cuba was not taking part, directly or indirectly, in the Shaba invasion. No further details were given.

Carter's May 25 declaration, which was drafted by a committee of White House and State Department officials, stated: "The government of Angola must bear a responsibility for the deadly attack, which was launched from its territory, and it's a burden and a responsibility shared by Cuba."

"We believe that Cuba had known of the Katangan plan to invade and obviously did nothing to restrain them from crossing the border. We also know that the Cubans have played a key role in training and equipping the Katangans who attacked."

The Carter administration's accusations that Cuba played a role in the attack have been rejected by Cuba and questioned by some administration officials and members of Congress.

Central Intelligence Agency Director Stansfield Turner, in a series of classified briefings this week for four Senate and House committees, sought to prove the case that Cuban help was a factor in the invasion.

Turner's two-hour closed session presentation yesterday to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — like similar briefings to other Hill units — drew sharply mixed reactions from lawmakers who heard it and failed to resolve the controversy over Cuban aid to the forces that invaded Shaba.

Those who have tended to support Carter said Turner had convinced them that the president's charges were correct. But those who have questioned the accuracy of the evidence said they still have heard nothing to put their doubts to rest.

Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), who originated the committee's request for the administration's evidence, summed up the situation by saying:

"There's a definite parallel with what happened during the Vietnam war. Different people look at the same data and draw different conclusions from it."

McGovern, who has been the most vocal of the doubters, added that he was still unconvinced after hearing Turner and examining the evidence. He said: "While they may have enough circumstantial evidence to bring in a rather shaky indictment against the Cubans, they would never get a conviction based on the evidence

Even committee Chairman John J. Sparkman (D-Ala.), a staunch administration loyalist on most issues, reacted cautiously. He said, "The weight of the evidence is circumstantial, and that weight is substantial but by no means conclusive."

Similar caution was expressed by such key committee members as Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho), who is in line to become committee chairman next year, and Sen. Dick Clark (D-Iowa), who heads the subcommittee on Africa. Both said they wanted to take closer and harder looks at the evidence before making up their minds.

Of those senators willing to comment on Turner's presentation, the strongest support for the administration came from Sen. Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.). "The president has not conjured up some incident to discredit the Cubans," Javits said, but he added that he was unwilling to characterize the degree and depth of Cuban involvement in the Zaire situation.

Although the reactions yesterday were the most skeptical and reserved that Turner has encountered in his forays up to Capitol Hill this week, the administration has been encountering questions about its charges ever since Carter first made them in a Chicago press conference on May 25.

The president said specifically that the rebels who invaded Zaire's Shaba Province from the neighboring Marxist state of Angola were trained and equipped by the Cubans. He also charged that Cuba knew of the invasion plan and did nothing to stop it.

Castro's government had denied these charges. It has admitted helping train Angola-based rebel foes of Zaire President Mobutu Sese Seko in the past, but has insisted it played no role in last month's invasion.

The ensuing argument about whether Castro or Carter is correct has centered on two points: Whether the intelligence on which the administration based its charges comes from reliable sources and whether it establishes a recent connection between the Cubans and the rebels.

Those who have seen the evidence say part of it involves satellite photos that allegedly show Cuban camps located near rebel camps in northern Angola and a Cuban ship unloading supplies at an Angolan port.

But, as has become clear during the past week, the overwhelming mass of the administration's evidence consists of reports collected by the CIA from African diplomats, from captured rebels and from agents of other governments.