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Media eye focuses on Union City's Cubans

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Omega 7 bombings attract attention to exile leaders

UNION CITY—After years of relative obscurity, the Cuban exile community here has become the object of media attention focusing on anti-Castro activities and bringing reporters and television cameras into the city.

Since September, three large newspapers, The New York Times, The Village Voice, and the Philadelphia Inquirer, and New York Magazine, have published articles about the Cuban community and anti-Castro terrorism here. The CBS television newsmagazine, 60 Minutes, is also planning to air a segment on the topic.

With the exception of the murder in 1976 of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier in Washington, D.C., and the trial and conviction three years later of three Union City Cuban exiles for the crime, the Cuban communities here and in the Miami area had received little national attention.

But with this new flurry of media attention, the Cuban exile movement has been given a new prominence and wider recognition. The CBS program, with close to 40 million viewers, should catapult the exile movement and some local Cuban leaders to national recognition. No air date has been set for the show.

Most of the articles were published during a lull in anti-Castro terrorism in the New York area — between the bombing of the Soviet Mission to the United Nations in December and the blast last week at the Angolan Mission. Omega 7 claimed credit for both incidents.

But the recent media attention underscores a shift in the terrorist group's focus from Miami to the New York metropolitan area. In the New York area, terrorist incidents have occurred on an almost

monthly basis in the past year. In 1979, no incidents of terrorism were claimed by Omega 7 in Miami — down from 25 incidents in 1975, according to FBI records.

An FBI agent in New York City said the increase in terrorist activity in this area and the subsequent media attention was partially a result of Cuban President Fidel Castro's visit to the United Nations in October. Thomas Locke, supervisor of the FBI's Criminal Terrorist and Fugitive Squad in New York, said the media attention is a "backlash" from the "rash of bombings in December."

But it could also be the result of the FBI's new desire to give out information about Omega 7.

"We're not in a position of no comment anymore," Locke said. "We're looking to reach the

people in whatever way we can to solicit their help. In the last three or four months, there has been the most interest in talking to us, although we've never really solicited it."

Locke said he has been interviewed by the three major television networks and The New York Times.

While the FBI hopes the media attention will help them crack the Omega 7 case, local Cuban exiles who have been interviewed recently by the media are not sure the articles will help their cause.

Two groups, Abdala, comprised mainly of young exiles, and the Cuban Nationalist Movement (CNM), some of whose members are believed by the FBI to be part of Omega 7, have called press conferences to deny recent published reports that some members belong to the terrorist group.

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Armando Santana, leader of the CNM northern office, located in Union City, said Friday night the FBI is giving information to the media about the anti-Castro movement to "gather public sympathy for future prosecution" of suspected terrorists.

Santana, who has granted several interviews recently, said at a press conference several months ago he does not really like the media spotlight but must give interviews in the absence of Guillermo Novo, head of the CNM here before Santana. Novo is serving a double-life sentence for the murder of Letelier and his aide, Ronni Moffit.

Two weeks ago, Gustavo Marin, president of Abdala, called a press conference to deny allegations in The Village Voice that he is a suspected member of Omega 7 and that his group is "right-wing" and "reactionary."

Manuel Santana, a spokesman for Abdala, said the media attention could hurt his group's reputation by focusing on anti-Castro terrorism, which he said Abdala opposes.

"There is only one particular point of view in the media — that all groups are right-wing — and that is not true," Santana said. "That could probably hurt."

Santana said one of the reasons for the media attention is that the United States government "sees it in its interest to criticize Castro ... So in a way, the government is behind the media's attention."

But the interest in Cuban exile affairs has actually helped Abdala's membership, bringing the group another 100 to 150 new members nationally and "many more sympathizers" in the last year, Santana said.

Julla Valdivia, a Union City mayoral aide who was named as a Cuban community spokeswoman in the New York Magazine article, said the number of interviews

she has had since then is increasing and becoming repetitious.

"It's the same thing all the time — the reporter wants to know about life in Union City and he wants to be fair," Valdivia said. "But after all the information I give, they all come up with the same question: Who is Omega 7? I'm getting tired of it."

Yet Valdivia said the media attention could help the exile movement by "opening the eyes of the country" as well as "letting Castro know what's happening here."

But both Valdivia and Marin said the media has portrayed Union City in an inaccurate and unhealthy light and is giving the impression that the Cuban community here lives in fear of the terrorists.

"They write about Union City like there's a bomb every day, like it's a terrorist town and everyone is scared," said Valdivia. "This is a peaceful town."