

ORIGINAL

MA

Villa
10/3

MIAMI PUBLIC LIBRARY
FLORIDA COLLECTION



—PHOTO BY OLLIE ATKINS, WP-12 HOLLYWOOD PHOTO NEWS
President Nixon Tries to Comfort Mrs. Isabel Villa at His Key Biscayne Retreat
... she said after 13-minute meeting that she has "a lot of faith" in the President

2 Nations Act on Boat Incident

Castro Calls Attack Reprisal for Raids By Exiles on Cuba



VILLA

DEC 17 1971
By WILLIAM MONTALBANO
Herald Latin America Correspondent

The Cuban government Thursday portrayed its attack on the Miami-based freighter Johnny Express as a direct reprisal for exile raids against the Fidel Castro regime.

The Panamanian-registered Johnny Express, attacked Wednesday near the Bahamian island of Little Inagua, made port Thursday in Cuba's Oriente Province under escort from Cuban naval units.

On Key Biscayne, President Nixon met with the wife and three children of Jose Villa, the freighter's captain, and said the United States would demand Villa's return.

Villa, a Cuban-born naturalized American citizen, and several members of his crew were reported wounded in the attack, which the Cuban government statement acknowledged had occurred in international waters.

In a dramatic account of the attack by radio, Villa said at one point that he was dying. But White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler said Thursday that Villa was alive in Cuba.

Ziegler called the attack on the Johnny Express "deplorable... an unconscionable act... clearly in violation of international practice."

But U.S. authorities stressed that the incident would be of most immediate concern to the government of Panama, because the Johnny Express was not only regis-

Turn to Page 2A Col. 3

President Assures Wife of Captain We'll Seek Release

By JOHN McDERMOTT
And RAUL RAMIREZ
Herald Staff Writers

The wife of freighter captain Jose Villa, in a brief, tearful meeting Thursday with President Nixon at the Key Biscayne White House, successfully appealed for presidential help in seeking her husband's safe return from Cuba.

Mrs. Isabel Villa, 41-year-old wife of the captain of the Johnny Express, hurried to the presidential compound upon learning of Nixon's presence there. After a six-minute wait, she and her three children met with the President.

Nixon expressed "grave concern" over the shelling and capture of the Panamanian ship by a Cuban gunboat.

"The President had a very positive reaction to our plea," Mrs. Villa said. "I have a lot of faith in him. I see that he is a fine person. I also have great faith in God."

Mrs. Villa and her children, Isabel Cristina, 21, Mari Pili, 18, and Jose Antonio, 14, arrived at the entrance to the Nixon compound shortly after noon.

THE VILLAS at first were rebuffed by a guard, but six minutes after a note written in English by Isabel Cristina was taken inside by a presidential aide, another aide came out and invited them in to see the President.

"Gracias a Dios." ("Thanks to God"), whispered Mrs. Villa when she was asked inside. The family met with Nixon for 13 minutes.

"We love our father and we are concerned for him,

Turn to Page 2A Col. 4

Castro Calls Attack Reprisal for Raids

Cuba: Johnny Express Aided CIA

Mia Her 17 Dec 71

From Page 1

tered in Panama but also owned by a Panamanian corporation.

"WE DO HAVE some interest because at least one of the persons aboard, the captain, is an American citizen," said Ziegler. He said the United States was maintaining close contact with the Panamanian Embassy in Washington.

There was no immediate comment from the Panamanian government.

The Bahamas Line operators of the freighter, said the crew included nine Dominicans, two Haitians and two Spaniards.

In acknowledging the attack the Cuban government called the Johnny Express a "pirate ship" in the service of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The statement said "This ship, like the Lyla Express, which was captured Dec. 5 in the same area, was flying the Panamanian flag to facilitate its activities of transporting arms and men to Cuba."

In a telephone conversation with the Herald, a man at the Cuban Foreign Ministry in Havana confined himself to the government statement. He refused to say where the crewmen were being held, or how many were wounded and what their conditions were.

THERE WAS some speculation that the 1,400-ton Johnny Express had been taken to the port of Baracoa in Oriente. The Lyla Express has been held there since its capture, and the Cuban government has said it would bring criminal charges against at least some of the Lyla Express' 14 crew members.

"Cuba will not hesitate to act at any distance from our coast where these pirate ships are operating and under whatever flag or camouflage they are carrying out their crimes against our nation," said the Cuban government statement as heard on Radio Havana.

The statement accused the Cuban exile Bahun family, operators of the Express vessels, of being "well-known counter revolutionary agents in the service of the U.S. government."

The Cuban statement recalled an exile attack Oct. 12 on the coastal fishing village of Boca de Sama in Oriente, in which several persons were killed and others injured, including a 13-year-old girl



Photo by OLLIE ATKINS, White House

President Chats With Mrs. Villa and Her Three Children on Key Biscayne

whose leg had to be amputated.

"It was one of dozens of similar crimes committed by the imperialistic government of the United States against Cuba," the statement said.

CUBA CHARGED the attackers at Boca de Sama reached the village in a speedboat launched from "a mother ship."

The Cuban statement did

not directly link any of the Panama Line Express vessels to the attack.

Informed U.S. sources here said the "mother ship" at Boca de Sama was a vessel called the Aquarius, owned by the exile organization Cuban Liberation Front, which claimed responsibility for the attack.

The Bahun family is prominent among anti-Castro ex-

iles here. At least two members of the family are veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion and one police arrested two Bahuns and seized a large quantity of explosives from their shipyard here.

ONE OF the brothers, Teofilo, had a Herald reporter ejected from the Bahamas Line offices Thursday. He said he was angered by an article on the family's back-

ground, published Thursday morning.

But he denied, according to United Press International, the Cuban charges of CIA connections.

The family claimed the attack on the Johnny Express was part of a personal vendetta against the Bahuns by Fidel Castro. UPI reported.

THE JOHNNY Express, like the Lyla Express, was en route back to Miami from

Port-au-Prince, Haiti, when it was attacked.

The Lyla Express, the Cuban government has charged, landed exile guerrillas in Cuba "from bases located on United States territory" on three occasions in 1968 and 1969.

The crew of the Lyla Express included two Cuban exiles, as well as Colombians, Haitians, Hondurans and Guatemalans.

Mia Her 17 Dec 1971 Col 1

Mia Her 17 Dec 1971 2A. col 2

Nixon Vows to Seek Captain's Release

Mia Her 17 Dec 71

From Page 1

Names, Nationalities of Crew

Here are the names and nationalities of crew members of the Johnny Express, according to Bahamas Line officials:

Jose Villa, Captain, American citizen; Felix Gari, bosun, Spanish; Juan A. Romero, first officer, Dominican; Andres Jazmin, seaman, Dominican; Juan Henriquez, seaman, Dominican; Ocius Ocius,

seaman, Haitian; Danilo Velez, officer, Dominican; Jose Rodriguez, first machinist, Spanish; Oscar Cambero, second machinist, Dominican; Felix Miluades, officer, Dominican; Casimiro Vasquez, cook, Dominican; Cesar Vanderpool, steward, Dominican; Antoine Medy, seaman, Haitian, and Luis Astracio, seaman, Dominican.

but we also are concerned for the rest of the crew." Isabel Cristina told Nixon in what White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler described as a "very moving scene."

Nixon consoled the Villas and tried to give them hope that everything possible would be done to bring about Villa's release, Ziegler reported.

Following the meeting, Nixon demanded that Cuba release Villa, a Spanish-born American citizen. His demand was sent to the Castro government via the Swiss Embassy in Havana.

THE PRESIDENT'S very deep, personal concern for the safety of the skipper, now a prisoner in Cuba, was expressed to the Villa family in the brief, tearful meeting, Ziegler said.

Nixon gave Mrs. Villa a lapel pin with the presidential seal. The President also gave her son Jose Antonio a pair of presidential cuff links to give to his father.

"We are very encouraged," Mrs. Villa said following her meeting with Nixon. "We are very hopeful that he will be returned to us, to his family."

She declined to reveal fur-

ther details of her meeting with Nixon.

Mrs. Villa said she first learned of the attack on her husband's ship upon returning home at 5 p.m. Wednesday from her job at a Hialeah garment factory.

"I WAS very upset and very nervous. Imagine our reaction. We did not know what to do," she said.

Mari Pili, a Miami-Dade Junior College student, said she learned of the incident

from a friend at the school library.

"I was shocked, but I had faith then and I have faith now that everything will turn out all right and our father will be returned to us," she said.

Wednesday night, after hearing of a grim tale of blood and violence, told by her husband over the ship's radio during the three-hour ordeal before communications between the Johnny Express and Miami suddenly were broken, the family waited in "frantic despera-

tion" for further word about the ship's fate.

"IT WAS a night of sleeplessness, frustration, tears and prayers," not only for her husband but for all 14 men aboard the ship, Mrs. Villa said.

"I'm willing to do whatever I have to do for him to be returned to us," she said. "I don't know how my husband is, but after seeing the President I feel more tranquil now."

Villa, who came to Miami from Havana in 1960, had

made only three trips with the Bahamas Lines prior to Wednesday's fateful events, Mrs. Villa said. He is now a U.S. citizen. Villa has been a mariner all his life, she said.

"He is a man without vice, a very good man," she said. Isabel Cristina, a Florida Atlantic University student whose 21st birthday was Wednesday, added:

"He is an excellent father."

Ziegler, meanwhile, told newsmen, "We expect to receive a positive response from the Cuban government."

Late Thursday night, nearly 200 Cuban exiles demonstrated at the British Consulate in Miami, protesting what they called lack of response by the British, Panamanian, and U.S. governments to the Johnny Express incident.

Shouting "freedom, freedom, freedom," the demonstrators marched seven blocks from Bayfront Park to the consulate, at 25 SE Second Ave., and back to the park.

Police, hoping to avoid trouble, did not intervene when the group returned later to the consulate, although a city ordinance prohibits demonstrations within 500 feet of a foreign consulate or embassy.

U.S. Sends Protest to Cuba on Seizure

Mia Her 17 Dec 71

WASHINGTON — (AP) — The State Department Thursday sent a protest to Cuba for its seizure on the high seas of a Panamanian freighter and asked for the return of the vessel's American captain.

In a brief statement, the department said it "strongly protested to Cuba through the Swiss Embassy in Havana the armed attack on the Panamanian freighter Johnny Express which resulted in the wounding and

detention of the American captain."

The department instructed the Swiss Embassy to request the repatriation of the citizen, Jose Villa, captain of the Johnny Express, as soon as his physical condition permits.

Villa reportedly was wounded when a Cuban gunboat attacked the freighter Wednesday near the Bahamas and towed it into a Cuban port.