

FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : AMEMBASSY, HABANA

1338

February 13, 1952

DESP. NO.

DATE

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON.

REF : Biographic Memorandum Jan. 16, 1952

Air Pouch
DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF
INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: Murder of Ex-Minister of Interior, Alejo COSSIO del Pino; New Chief of Police Named

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Alejo COSSIO del Pino, former Minister of Interior and former member of the Cuban House of Representatives, was shot and killed at about 8:30 p.m. on February 12 by two as yet unidentified assailants 1/. Cossio was owner of the radio station "Radio Cadena Habana". PNC Congressman Radio CRLMARA and two other persons who were with Cossio at the time were wounded. The shooting took place at the "Strand Bar" in Habana and evidently was premeditated and well-planned. Cossio was shot from behind and his body was perforated by 17 bullets. The killer, along with other accomplices, escaped in a waiting automobile.

One of the immediate results of this shooting was the removal by President PRIO of Chief of Police Colonel Cecilio PEREZ Alfonso. He was replaced by Lt. Col. Juan CONSUEGRA Valdes, Acting Chief of the Fifth Regiment of the Army. It was announced that Colonel Pérez would return to his old-command as Chief of the Army Fifth Regiment. According to press reports, Col. Pérez, upon being informed of the shooting, immediately went to President Prío's home to give the President details of the case. Evidently the President decided then and there to remove Pérez as Chief of Police and ordered him to turn over his office at once to Consuegra 2/. A release issued to the press and signed by Pérez Alfonso stated that Consuegra assumed charge of the police force as of 4:00 a.m. February 13. Later, it was announced that the Chief of the Bureau of Investigations of the police and the chief of the Motorized-Radio Section of the police had also been removed. Their positions were taken by Captain Leopoldo PEREZ Coujil and Major Roberto GUTIERREZ Arrate respectively.

1/ The Minister of Defense stated on February 13 that the Government knows who they are. He did not, however, give any names.

2/ One report states Pérez tendered his resignation to the President when he called upon the latter and that the President accepted it. There have been rumors for several weeks that Pérez would be removed as Chief of Police and would return to the Army. It is probable that there was some basis for these rumors and that the present killing served to bring the whole matter to a head.

NAHoyt:WJN
REPORTER(S)

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The police apparently have not determined the motive for the killing as yet. It has been pointed out, however, that Cossío was Minister of Interior in 1947 at the time of the "Battle of Marianao", usually known as the Orfila shooting. (Despatch 4382, Sept. 26, 1947) Reportedly, persons involved in that case had sworn to kill Cossío because of his failure to take vindictive action against the murderers. The trial of those involved in the Orfila shooting in which Emilio TRO, among others, was killed, is now underway in the Habana courts. Although the Orfila shooting took place almost five years ago the case has not come up for trial until now. It is therefore possible that some connection does exist between Cossío's death and the Orfila shooting.

At the time Cossío was killed he reportedly was reading a verdict handed down on the afternoon of February 12 by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal denying him the right to replace Benito REMEDIOS in the House of Representatives. It will be recalled that Remedios was killed on January 15 as a result of an altercation with a policeman over a traffic violation. Although Cossío was the first alternate for Remedios, he had failed to register as a member of any political party during the recent registration period. As a result, his right to occupy the vacant seat had been contested by the third alternate José BASTERRECHEA 3/.

Due to this contest for the vacant political seat there was, following Cossío's murder, some attempt to connect Basterrechea with the event. The latter, however, presented himself immediately to the police authorities and evidently was able to produce sufficient evidence to prove that he was not in any way connected with the killing.

The Ortodoxos and other opposition groups have implied that the murder of Cossío may be related somehow to the fact that he had continued to allow PFC Congressman José PARDO Llada to broadcast on "Radio-Cadena Habana". Alertá even quoted Cossío as having stated shortly before his death that the Government had offered to give him Remedios' seat in Congress if he denied Pardo Llada the use of his radio station. Apparently, however, the general opinion is that Cossío's death is probably a matter involving criminal groups in Cuba, and is not a political murder. The rounding up by the police of numerous known gangsters and statements by Government officials indicating that the Administration intends to take strong measures in this matter tend to support

3/ The second alternate was not eligible because he had joined another political party.

this general opinion. President Prío, Hevia, and other political leaders have denounced the assassination as the work of gangsters.

COMMENT

This latest in the series of criminal killings has aroused public opinion considerably and may have important repercussions in the political field. The recent escape from jail by Policarpo SOLER and the various gang shootings which have taken place during the past year have made ridiculous the Administration's boast that it has wiped out gangsterism. It can be expected that this latest killing will be exploited fully by political opponents of the Administration.

The inept and weak handling of the police by Pérez Alfonso has been severely criticized during the past months. The President's action in immediately replacing him as Chief of Police is an indication that the Administration has become sensitive to this criticism and realizes it must take energetic steps to counteract the adverse opinion which this lawlessness has created. With a national political campaign in full swing the Administration can ill afford to allow such sensational and easily publicized acts to go unpunished.

For the Ambassador:

Henry A. Hoyt

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Second Secretary of Embassy