

'Castro nostra' drug war seen in killings

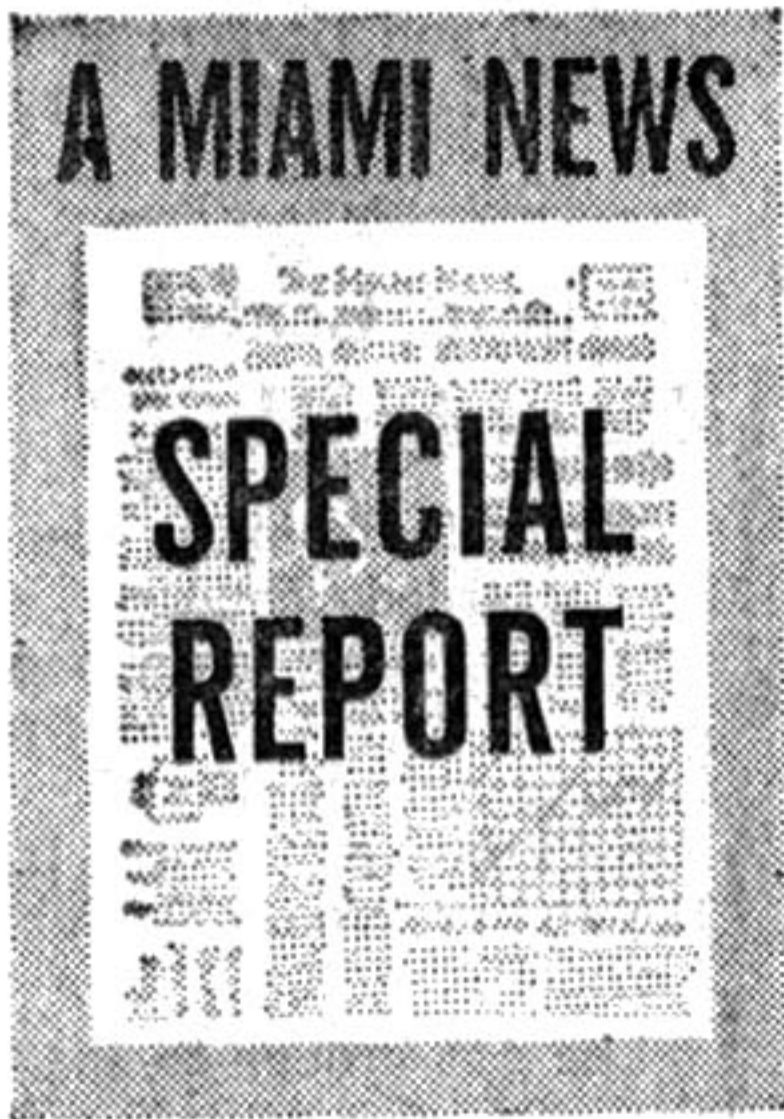
By WILLIAM TUCKER
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Miami police believe today that narcotics smuggling lies behind a series of Cuban exile gunfights that have turned Flagler Street into a sort of "Castro nostra" battleground.

Old feuds carried over from Cuba and always explosive Latin politics also may have figured in the shootings which left two dead within a week, police said.

Homicide officers were conducting an intensive investigation to get at the bottom of the gang-like warfare and bring it to an end.

"It seems whenever you get a crowd of these types together, they start shooting," said homicide Lt. Charles Shepherd.



"We don't have undisputed evidence but we feel that narcotics is behind it," Shepherd added. "That is the information we get from what we feel is a very good source."

He said the police department gets numerous anonymous calls from Latins with a wide variety of tips about narcotics traffic and impending violence "but it's hard to put your finger on the facts."

Meanwhile, the police department is making daily narcotics arrests among the Cubans, mainly for marijuana selling. Cuba is rumored to be one source of marijuana and harder drugs coming into South Florida.

An admitted participant in last week's Flagler Street gun battle in which Hector Duarte Hernandez was slain surrendered to police yesterday but was released after questioning.

Pedro Battle, 29, admitted helping his brother Gustavo, who was wounded in the battle at Flagler and Red Road, but did not admit he shot Duarte in retaliation. Before he turned himself in, Battle made a telephone call identifying himself as the slayer, police reported last week.

But no charges were filed against him and officers believed the motive in the gunbattle went much deeper than impulsive revenge.

Duarte, once accused of slaying two Cuban national police officers during the old Batista regime, had been trailing Gustavo Battle all day with a carbine before the shootout last Friday night, police learned. He apparently blamed the Battles for an attempt on his life two weeks previously. A coroner's inquest will be held in his death.

On Dec. 19, Cuban exile Noberto Gonzalez was shot to death at a filling station on W. Flagler and 8th Ave. Police said witnesses identified the gunman as Julio Costanzo, another well-known figure on the shadowy fringe of "Little Havana" here.

Costanzo was alleged to have called out "you're the first of five" when he shot Gonzalez. He apparently believed Gonzalez was one of the four or five men who shot him up in November of 1968. Costanzo was still being sought.

Police saw no direct connection between the Gonzalez and Duarte killings unless the victims were part of the same web of narcotics or other illegal dealing.