

For Cubans in Miami, there is no escape from terrorism

BY YVETTE CARDOZO/PHOTOGRAPHS: PAT CANOVA



Jorge Mas Canosa and his 357 magnum — just in case.

Jorge Mas Canosa doesn't always work with a 357 magnum sitting atop his desk. Usually, it occupies his right top drawer. There's also a 45 in the left drawer and a semi-automatic machine gun downstairs in the car.

It's not that he's a gun freak. Nor does he consider himself particularly paranoid.

It's just that one of his closest friends now walks on plastic legs and a couple of others are dead. Mas Canosa's preoccupation with guns, along with the 24-hour guard he has outside his home and business, are among the nastier results of what Miami has come to call Cuban terrorism in the past several years.

By now, terrorism is a familiar subject to south Floridians. Much has been said about who is bombing whom. But another aspect has, for the most part, been overlooked — namely the psychological results. Talk with people around town about this subject and the single common denominator you encounter is fear:

- ✓ Fear that has equipped several Cuban businessmen with bodyguards and an uncountable number with guns.
- ✓ Fear that keeps people with unpopular views from speaking their minds except among friends who share their thoughts.
- ✓ Fear that enables some people to deal in extortion and succeed in getting the money they demand.

It's not that the entire city of Miami sits quivering at home expecting momentarily to be blasted to extinction. People do not cancel plans to see a movie, shop for food, go to the beach or whatever because they fear the next terrorist bomb, much as psychologist Fernando Gonzalez remembers they did in Cuba during the waning days of the Batista regime.

In fact, in the past year or so, things have quieted. Yet, a subtle pressure does remain because there have been such lulls before. The violence re-emerges every so often to remind people of its presence.

Last year, the *Miami Herald Tropic* magazine ran a story about young Cuban adults growing up in Miami under two cultures. Most of the letters that praised the new biculturalism and the story were signed; most of the critical letters were not. One woman felt strongly enough to come in, dictate and sign a letter at the newspaper office. Shortly after, she telephoned in tears to beg the letter be pulled. Her husband, she said, was sure someone would blow up their home.

This is not necessarily a case of overreaction, authorities agree. In the past eight years, Dade County's bomb squad has looked over 130 bombs that did not explode and the remains of another 129 that did. Eight men were either bombed or shot to death and another six were injured (two of whom accidentally blew themselves up making a bomb).

Some people see this violence as a natural progression . . . an inevitable result of the temperaments and events involved.

"The use of violence and force to obtain political goals has been almost a tradition in Latin America," explained Gonzalez, a Florida International University psychology professor who at one time directed clinical training at a family guidance center for Latinos.

"This involved the use of force not only directed at specific government figures but the widespread use of violence as an instrument of change."

These methods were not left behind in Cuba, added Metro Lt. Thomas Lyons, who heads the county's terrorism and narcotics task force. They simply went underground for a while in Homestead and the Keys, where the CIA helped bands of Cubans train for raids against their homeland.

In the early 1960s, "it was a social symbol as a Cuban to be a CIA agent. Maybe the Anglo community did not know much about it, but it was no secret in Little Havana," explained Maria Herrera, a Miami-Dade Community College professor of sociology and Cuban history.

"It was the patriotic thing . . . and the expedient thing to do." Not only did it give one extra cash for his family, it fed his desires to be doing something . . . anything . . . to help The Cause.

Then came Vietnam. Priorities switched from Cuba to Southeast Asia. Funds dried up. Projects getting down. "But that didn't stop the Cubans, who went on with training and plans," said Lyons, adding, "Meanwhile, airplanes started getting hijacked."

Lyons referred to the wave of skyjackings by criminals, political extremists and others who chose a short flight to a supposedly safe haven — Cuba.

"The U.S. government had to do something," Lyons recalled. "And the result was the (U.S.-Cuban) anti-hijack agreement made in the mid-1960s. One point was that the United States was to use whatever force was necessary to stop exiles in Miami from attacking Cuban coastal villages." In return, the Cuban government agreed to keep in custody any skyjacker arriving in Cuba and to allow the return of any hostages.

The official policy turned 180 degrees and the U.S. government found itself in the uncomfortable position of having to stop the very people it had helped to train.

By this time, many Cubans had resigned themselves to the fact that they were not going home immediately. They got regular jobs, settled down, had families.

In the early 1960s, 'it was a social symbol as a Cuban to be a CIA agent.'

"But there was a fringe of former CIA agents who diverted to another form of survival which justified any kind of irregular violent activity," Herrera said.

"It was a natural step since they already had the training — and the leftover gear. In the early years, much of this activity was directed toward the Cuban cause. But apparently that has slowly changed.

Sgt. Arthur Felton, head of Metropolitan Dade County's special homicide investigations group, speaks the popular police view when he says:

About the author

Yvette Cardozo is a free-lance writer living in Fort Lauderdale. A graduate of the University of Florida, Ms. Cardozo was born and reared in the Miami area and has "watched the influx of Cubans, seen the area's growth and change." A newspaper reporter for eight years, her articles won several awards in state competitions. She is not, she notes, Cuban. Pat Canova is a free-lance photographer living in Miami.





Passersby aid Emilio Milian after he was severely wounded by a bomb wired to the ignition of his car (background) on April 30, 1976. Milian (right), a radio broadcaster who chose to ignore warnings about his political opinions, lost his legs and still bears scar tissue on his left arm.

"They needed money to finance their action. So first they went to the community, which willingly gave. But people can give only so much. So then the asking became pressuring and actual extortion. Some of them got into drugs. The money still went for The Cause. Then some of them realized how much money was coming in off drugs and they started to pocket it themselves."

Ask Lyons or Felton just what they think the motive of the terrorists is these days and they'll shrug. Castroites vs. anti-Castroites? International political disagreements? Crime? One or all... take your pick.

One of the last in a two-year string of murder victims was Ramon Donestevéz. In December of 1975, the Coast Guard towed his 63-foot boat into Miami with 77 people crowded aboard. The passengers were mostly old people who wanted to go home to die. They paid up to \$4,000 apiece for what they thought was to be a trip to Cuba. While the state attorney's office was deciding whether to prosecute Donestevéz for fraud, he was killed.

Was his death revenge on the part of his unsatisfied customers or was it because — as one source claimed — he had a disagreement with another political group? Detectives say they've got four strong motives, any one of which could have done him in.

Up to 1974, Lyons said, most of the bombings were mainly for show. A pipe bomb would go off at the Torch of Friendship. A stick of dynamite might explode at the Freedom Tower.

Mostly it was to let people know the terrorists were upset. Then things turned nasty, not only in



Miami but across the country. In the 18 months between January 1975 and June 1976, 104 people got hurt and \$3.2-million in property was damaged in the name of one cause or another around the nation.

Suddenly, anybody could become a target — intentionally or not. A bomb went off at Miami International Airport. Police said it was only luck that it did not take a couple of people with it; the people

who died in a New York airport when a similar bomb exploded were not so fortunate.

On Sept. 5, 1973, Eduardo Perez died when a bomb exploded in a car he had borrowed from a friend. Police figured the bomb was really meant for the friend, Andres M. Purrinos, who was shot to death some months later.

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More recently, things have quieted somewhat. The number of terrorist-related explosions in Dade County dropped radically from 37 in 1975 to 11 in 1976, six in 1977 and only one in the first half of this year. Yet, the threat of renewed activity lingers, as the county learned later last year when four bombs went off one night while the United States talked of reopening trade with Cuba.

Just the thought of violence, then, becomes a useful tool for extortionists. Occasionally a businessman gets an open threat. A letter arrives, as it did once in the office of a Miami bank president, demanding money "or else."

But actually documented instances of this are rare. More often, the pressure against small businessmen is more subtle. Lyons set up the following scenario:

You own a small jewelry store and one day you read in the newspaper that El Taco claimed credit for a bombing the previous night against Jose Begonia's newspaper stand. And then a guy walks into your shop and says, "Buenos Dias. How are you doing? Did you hear about the bombing last night? That man was a communist." And you say, "Hey, great. He's a communist. Do whatever is necessary." Then the guy says, "Well, as a matter of fact, I am El Taco and I stopped by here for a purpose, my friend. You obviously are against Castro and El Taco has been carrying out actions against Cuba. We are going on our biggest action yet and we need money from you." And, of course, you cough up the money.

Lyons added, "We made a case similar to this but it never went down because our victim got scared. But through the investigation, we identified something like 15 or 20 businesses that had gone through the same thing. We went out and interviewed every one of them and every one of them was scared. A couple made some admissions but none would make a statement and none would testify."

Talk to those who run the 2,200-member Latin Chamber of Commerce and they are ready to swear that they have never received any such complaints.

"There hasn't been one single case in the history of Miami since we (Cubans) are here where any businessman or person has been bombed because he refused to give money," said former chamber manager Dr. Ernesto Aragon, while chamber president Rogelio Barrios nodded his agreement.

"On the contrary," he added, "I have seen it myself in a church or gathering of Cubans where someone has come up and requested money for the cause of liberation of Cuba and I have seen women and men take their wedding rings and give them without pressure."

"Oh sure," countered homicide Det. Julio Ojeda. "Miami's not like New York in the old days where someone came right out and said, 'If you don't give us money, bam, we'll blow your legs off.' But there's an underlying fear because of all the things that are happening and the rumors on the street.

"See, the Cuban community works off rumors. If you don't close (referring to a protest march last September when Little Havana stores closed en masse to protest the thaw in U.S. relations with Cuba), you're not a patriot, and if you're not a patriot or there are even rumors to this effect, people are not going to come in your store to buy from you."

Plus, there is the fact that the vast majority of



Miami police say Little Havana is basically the area in yellow, but political violence has hit at the city's main airport and two memorials near the downtown business district.

Cubans do, fervently, want to see the overthrow of President Fidel Castro. And as long as they believe the collectors are fighting for that cause, there is tacit approval of even the rougher tactics.

"There is something that has to be clarified," businessman Aragon explained:

"There are still some underground Cuban organizations who try to get enough money to fight Castro outside of the United States. For that purpose, they sometimes go to see businessmen or doctors and ask them for some money. If they (the businessmen) get scared and call the police, the police would say this is an extortion. From our point of view, we have the right to request help with money to keep on fighting Castro."

And if the hot-blooded young men make their request a little too strong?

"Well," Aragon replied, "You have to forgive them for that."

Sometimes, too, the community approval is more than just tacit. After a Miami Latin radio station urged donations for the families of Humberto Lopez Jr. and Luis Crespo (injured when a bomb they were building went off) people brought more than \$12,000 to members of an anti-Castro youth group.

There are those who have spoken out against the use of violence in this country. Some have become targets, themselves. Others have rearranged their entire lives.

First they went to the community. But then the asking became pressuring and actual extortion.

A prominent Cuban businessman, who would talk only if his name were kept secret, displayed the 38 he keeps in a holster clipped to his belt. It goes wherever he goes, never more than inches from his hand. He keeps heavier artillery — the M1 rifle — at home.

He says he's gotten his share of threatening telephone calls . . . the people who call and whisper, "Forget about Cuba having relationships with the United States. Remember what happened to Torriente. Remember what happened to Milian."

As for Mas Canosa, who keeps his own arsenal

ready, he says his name has appeared on so many so-called death lists, he's given up keeping count.

He's been an outspoken member of various exile groups since the mid-1960s, has testified before various investigating committees about exile activities and says he doesn't fear speaking his thoughts.

"Am I nonviolent? No, I am proviolence. I think Castro has to be overthrown by revolution and physical force. But I am short of advocating any type of criminal activities within the ranks of the exiles or within the sanctuary we have in the United States."

Mas Canosa has not received threatening calls or notes but counters:

"I have my ear right on the surface of the earth and when you are in this type of political environment, you don't have to actually receive any type of threat in the mail or on the telephone to know your life is under threat."

Consequently, Mas Canosa works often with his 357 magnum casually lying on top of his desk. He emptied it of the bullets and showed it to a visitor one day while explaining that life certainly deals some unexpected twists:

In Cuba, Mas Canosa, who is now 38, had planned to become a lawyer. Today, he has a large firm in south Miami that installs sewage and water lines across south Florida. Men stand guard around his home and business 24 hours a day.

"I never expected to live in this environment and yet, I have to do it because you cannot spare any sacrifice. You have only one life and the minute you bring your guard down, that will be the end."

Mas Canosa has only to look at his friend, former newscaster Emilio Milian, for confirmation. On April 30, 1976, Milan wrapped up his broadcast at radio station WQBA, climbed into his car and turned the ignition key. The bomb detonated at 7:17 p.m.

The blast burned his hair, scorched his face, mangled his hand, blew out an eardrum, tore a large hole in his stomach and shredded his legs. Today, deep scars run across his stomach and squeeze his left arm like tight elastic. When he stands on his artificial legs, there's a brief lurching search for balance before his stride becomes sure.

Unlike Mas Canosa, he had received outright threats but chose to ignore them. Today, Milian's house is an iron-grilled fortress with bars over the windows and dogs roaming behind the fence. And yes, he does have someone watching his car.

"You ask a Cuban if he is afraid and he will say no. It is Latin *machismo*. It is hard for a Latin man to admit fear. He will say, 'I have no fear but . . . I



U.S. Customs official catalogs some of the weapons seized in Miami in August 1977; also confiscated were a 50 caliber machinegun and a recoilless rifle.



SW 8th Street, Main Street of Little Havana. It has been estimated that 1 of 4 Miamians is Cuban or Cuban-American.

have children," Milian explained.

"In a private way, people are not affected. But in a public way . . . if they have to talk in front of others, they are afraid."

And there is more, he said, adding, "I have friends . . . people not in politics, not in the news. They told me after the bombing, 'Every morning I was checking my car and I was thinking, Why you, Emilio?' They were afraid. Nobody knows who will be next."

Back in Cuba, people had an idealistic view of the United States. Milian is not the first to say this. It is disillusioning, to find that violence is as possible in the United States as in Latin America, that police and the government can't keep Cubans from blowing up one another.

"To have that kind of war in south Florida . . . it's something you can't cope with. The Cuban people . . . they were looking for a safe place. They believed this was the safest country in the world and that is not true. To have this happen here . . . is . . . incredible. That is the word . . . incredible. I hear it again and again from people."

If all these people are so offended by the violence, the obvious question people ask is why does it continue? The answer involves a complicated and discouraging cycle of mistrust and lack of cooperation between Cubans and local authorities.

The common complaint — from Mas Canosa, from Milian, from the Latin Chamber of Commerce, from the man on the street — is that the various police agencies are next to useless. People say they want to see results before they take the risk of talking to police and police say they can't get these results without cooperation from the people.

"The community feels threatened and all the time they can depend less on the authorities because they do nothing. I mean, nothing is investi-

gated. Nothing is found out. Just what have the authorities done?" asks Dr. Jose Borrell, a prominent Cuban businessman and civic leader.

He points as an example to the federal grand jury in Miami that closed its investigation of terrorism last fall without a single indictment and resumed investigation of the Milian bombing only after heavy public pressure.

But authorities argue that they have, indeed, done something and are trying to do more. They point to the drop in terrorist bombings from 37 in 1975 to one this year and explain that it is because they are more coordinated. There is constant communication between Miami and other hot spots

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such as Washington D.C., New York and New Jersey. Several of the most active bombers are now in jail and there seems, one investigator said, to be less widespread public support for such violence.

Of the 37 bombings reported in Dade during 1975, Metro has closed 12 cases by arrest, Lyons said. The four men involved were all convicted. Of the 11 bombings during 1976, four were cleared by arrest, though 1977 and 1978 explosions remain unsolved. Yet, police still can't get the information they need from the public. The effort to solve terrorist-related murders is an example. Ojeda in hom-

icide says, "We have a 90 per cent idea of who did it in all our cases but we can't go for indictment because we have no witnesses."

Borrell says he's not surprised at that lack of enthusiasm to testify.

"How about when people see an individual on television who's been cooperating with the government and the man says he's been sold down the river by the authorities? What do you suppose the people expect if they tell what they know? They have no protection and the next day, they're killed."

Ojeda is the first to agree. Last year, he says, "The feds spent \$12-million relocating witnesses. And what do we do? What are we going to offer them — 24-hour protection? Money to relocate their families? We can't do that. We don't have the money."

Ojeda and his boss, Sgt. Felton, remember what happened to the case against the three men charged with killing Luis Hernandez, a 2506 Brigade veteran who became involved with criminals and who police say was killed by his own people for chickening out on a bolita house heist.

The wife of one suspect got hold of the witness list, which is public record. She typed a letter with names, addresses and telephone numbers, then circulated it around south Dade shopping centers. As a result, Ojeda said, "One witness had to sell his bakery and move out of Dade. They found him in another county, slit his car tires and cut his brake lines and he had to move again."

"How many people," added another of the squad's detectives, "would come forward under these circumstances? Very few . . . and that's exactly what we get."

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None of this, meanwhile, is helping the already strained relations between Miami's Cubans and Anglos. Gonzalez, the psychologist, believes that many Latins, for whom violence has been a natural tool of change, simply do not realize how Anglos see the situation.

"I think that perhaps the impact on the Anglo community is not totally understood by the Cuban community. When the victims are Cuban, (Cubans) see it as an internal struggle. They don't see how all this amateur violence is going to affect the Anglo community. The problem, however, is that the Anglos see an intrusion from an alien group into their peaceful existence."

Mas Canosa remembers one night when the guard outside his home heard what sounded like shots. Maybe it was just somebody setting off firecrackers but his guard didn't know for sure and fired a couple of warning shots in the air. Police came. It was 11 p.m. and the community was awakened. Mas Canosa is sure this didn't endear him to his Anglo neighbors.

He added, "The public forms its images by what it perceives and what the American community has been perceiving lately has been all this terrorism and criminal assassination. So that forces Anglos to see Cubans as a people who are uncivilized, who are violent, who are not rational, who deserve what they have in Cuba because they are not smart enough to govern themselves. This not only hurts our image, it hurts our cause."

Meanwhile, no one from either the Anglo or the Cuban community can even begin to suggest a solution. Dade County recently got \$45,000 from the

federal government to study the problem and this summer, the project coordinator spoke optimistically of having a report in hand by early next year.

But whether one short study can help remains to be seen. The situation is quite complex. Police figure that at any one time, there could be a dozen or a hundred political and criminal organizations floating around Dade County — constantly merging and splitting like a mass of mating amoeba.

A lot of Cubans say much of the dissension — and even the bombings — are the work of Cuban agents who just want to brew an air of confusion among the enemy. Police point the finger at criminals. The truth is, nobody knows for sure.

The only thing that does seem certain is sporadic disruption of life for a million and a half Dade Countians.

Mas Canosa says he's been fighting some time to convince people that this is not just a "Cuban" problem.

"If you say from Flagler Street south is Cuban and nobody gets involved — they've got their own money, their own industry — that's fine. But the Anglo and Cuban communities are far too interwoven for that.

"We are on the verge . . . and I have told this to the authorities many times . . . of group wars in Miami. If we don't put a stop to it now, we will be back to a way of life where only the strongest survive. We'll have the pro-Castro people on one side, the anti-Castro on the other and we will be living here like in the time of the Godfather in New York."

The Latin Chamber of Commerce people chuckle at this kind of alarmism.

But nobody down at Metro, Miami Police or the FBI is laughing. ●