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Staff photo by Dan Oliver

Police stand outside a Weehawken storefront damaged by a bomb. Anti-Castro Cubans claimed responsibility.

N.J. Cuban groups, TWA are targets of bomb blasts

By Seth Kaplan
and Susan Servis Scilla
Staff Writers

Militant anti-Castro Cubans claimed responsibility last night for three bombs that shattered storefronts in Union City and Weehawken and exploded a suitcase about to be loaded onto a jetliner at Kennedy International Airport.

The group, Omega 7, said the explosions marked the beginning of an offensive against organizations sympathetic to the regime of Fidel Castro, and police said they were concerned about revenge bombings in Cuban neighborhoods in Union City and Weehawken.

The first explosion, at 8:48 p.m., injured four baggage handlers at a loading dock outside the airport's Trans World Airlines terminal. A blue suitcase, one of several pieces of late luggage, blew up just as handlers were about to load it onto TWA Flight 17 to Los Angeles. The blast crumpled a metal baggage cart, ruptured a hot-water pipe, and left clothing hanging from overhead beams.

"I thought a gas tank exploded," said Michael Campbell, 24, a supervisor at a restaurant in the terminal. "As I walked around, I was picking up shoes and jackets."

Authorities said the suitcase was to be loaded in a central compartment near the fuel tanks and that a midair explosion would have caused the plane to crash. "Thank God it wasn't in the air,"

said Peter Prezioso, a spokesman for the New York police.

Passengers interviewed

New York detectives and FBI agents examined the aircraft and interviewed the 157 passengers to see whether any had checked the suitcase, but at 2:30 a.m. an FBI spokesman said no clues had been uncovered. The flight departed at 4:30 a.m.

CBS-TV reported that the FBI was investigating whether a woman involved in a love triangle had planted the bomb to get even with her sister and her boyfriend, who were passengers on the plane. FBI agents declined comment.

Other news organizations received calls in which spokesmen for Omega 7, part of a larger Cuban nationalist group known as the Congress of United Revolutionary Organizations, claimed responsibility.

Two hours after the Kennedy blast, explosions rocked Hispanic neighborhoods in Union City and Weehawken. No one was reported injured in either blast, but windows within a block of the blasts were shattered and four walkup apartments in Weehawken were evacuated.

Authorities said package bombs had been placed outside the New Jersey Cuban Program, at 4912 Park Ave. in Weehawken and the Elmaceen Pharmacia at 3600 New York Ave. in Union City.

"I was expecting this," said E.J. Negrin, a 38-year-old Cuban emigre and coordinator of the Cuban program, which aids refugees and supports closer ties with Cuba. "People who did this don't want us to be reunited with Cuba."

Plot charged

In statements to the Associated Press and United Press International, anonymous callers claiming to speak for Omega 7 said they had retaliated against TWA and the owners of the two storefronts for arranging travel tours to Cuba as part of what they called a plot to funnel American money to the Castro regime.

"Needless to say, the Cubans involved in this lucrative business were part of the fifth column created by Castro," an Omega 7 spokesman said. "Similar actions will continue until we shut down this source of revenue to Castro and his servants in the United States who persist in trying to confuse the Cuban people with false promises of reunification, reunification without dignity, ignoring thousands of Cuban patriots killed or incarcerated by Castro."

The group said it had intended to blow up the TWA plane with no one aboard. A spokesman for the airline said two calls were received just before the explosion warning that a bomb was on the plane.

The scenes in Weehawken and Union See BOMBINGS, Page A-4



UPI Photo

Officials sort through debris in the bombed Weehawken storefront. Cuban flag hangs on the wall.

Bombings linked to Cubans

FROM PAGE A-1

City, whose Cuban neighborhoods often bristle with political hostilities, were strikingly different. In Union City, the blast scene was deserted except for four policemen who were surveying the damage.

In heavily Hispanic southeast Weehawken, hundreds of onlookers, police officers, and reporters milled about in a sea of broken glass.

"They have a big mouth," a dark-

haired, well-dressed Cuban man said, gesturing to the Cuban Program headquarters. "They brag about shaking hands with Castro. There will be more of these."

"The people who put the bomb were good people — the people who own the store were bad people," said a Cuban woman whose overhead apartment was filled with broken glass. Asked if she feared further explosions, she said: "I'm not frightened at all, because I know that who put the bomb there doesn't want to

hurt us."

Authorities said the Cuban Program headquarters had received bomb threats in the past, and that the Elmaceen Pharmacia, which ships medicine to Cuba, had moved its headquarters after a similar bombing last December.

Omega 7 in December claimed responsibility for bombings that damaged the Cuban mission to the United Nations

and Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center. There were no injuries in either incident.

Threats in past

Last night's blast was the first at either Kennedy or LaGuardia Airport since an explosion at LaGuardia on Dec. 29, 1975, killed 11 and injured 75. No arrests have been made in that case.