

Bomber initially thought task was `heroic mission'

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In My Opinion

Jim DeFede HAVANA -- As he explains precisely how he planted a string of bombs at hotels around the Cuban capital in the summer of 1997, Raul Ernesto Cruz Leon mentions the Hotel Nacional. The Nacional? ``Nacional, si, bomba." I tell him that's where I'm staying. He laughs and then smiles and shrugs. Among Cubans, Cruz Leon is known simply as "The Salvadoran," the man who placed six of the dozen or more bombs that rocked Cuban tourist sites that year, including the bomb at the Copacabana that killed Italian tourist Fabio di Celmo. He was captured not long after the Copa bombing and was sentenced to death in March 1999. His sentence is under appeal -- which means the Cuban government values him more alive than dead, at least for now. In his first interview with a U.S. newspaper since his conviction six years ago, Cruz Leon talked about his life in Cuba's Guanajay Prison, the death of di Celmo, and his feelings toward Luis Posada Carriles, the man responsible for sending him on what he once believed was a ``heroic mission." Our meeting takes place away from the prison, in a house used by Cuban state security in Siboney, a neighborhood on the west side of the city. Dressed in jeans, a polo shirt and sneakers -- as opposed to his normal prison uniform -- and with his hair neatly trimmed, Cruz Leon appeared healthy. A former member of El Salvador's military, Cruz Leon was 26 when he was recruited in San Salvador for the bombing campaign. He said he was approached by another Salvadoran, Francisco Chavez Abarca, who was familiar with what Cruz Leon described as his ``spirit of adventure." "He also knew I had right-wing thoughts," Cruz Leon said. Cruz Leon never met Posada, but as a Herald investigation discovered in 1997, Chavez worked for Posada and was one of the first people recruited by Posada to initiate the bombing campaign. Cruz Leon

said he was to be paid approximately \$2,000 for each bomb detonated. He was given a list of hotels, but it was up to Cruz Leon to decide the exact location inside each building. Cruz Leon claimed he balked at first because he didn't want anyone to get hurt. He told me that Chavez responded by saying: "Well, try to put it in the lobby in a place where you won't kill anybody, but if there are people that die, that's the price. If there are people that die, they die." 'A HEROIC MISSION' After his first set of bombs went off in July 1997, he felt great. "I thought that I had accomplished a heroic mission," he said. "I thought it was an action against the evil." He returned a few weeks later to plant a second string of bombs -- one of them at the Copacabana. He learned someone died in that blast only after being arrested two days later by Cuban police. While Cruz Leon was awaiting trial in Cuba, Posada came forward to take credit for the bombings in a series of newspapers and television interviews. Posada expressed little sympathy over Cruz Leon's arrest or his fate. "He's not Cuban," Posada said dismissively. "He did this for money." Cruz Leon told me he was stunned by Posada's words. "I would say to him that he should look backwards and see how much damage he has done and to stop," he said. "He should pay the same way I am paying for a death I caused." He paused and then added, "I am not in a position to make any judgment about anybody, and I want to make clear that I cannot make the statement that I know for sure that [Posada] has done everything he has been blamed for." But if Posada is guilty, Cruz Leon said, "he deserves to pay for it." In an interview with The New York Times, Posada said he slept like a baby after learning the Italian tourist had been killed in the Copacabana bombing. "I don't sleep like a baby, you can be sure of that," Cruz Leon told me. "I know that my hands are full of blood." 'WE WERE FOOLS' The person in the cell next to him at Guanajay Prison is another Salvadoran, Otto Rene Rodriguez Llerena. He planted one bomb in 1997 and was caught smuggling C-4 explosives into Cuba in June 1998. He, too, has been sentenced to death. A

former officer in the Salvadoran military, Rodriguez Llerena was selling cars at San Salvador's largest dealership when he was approached by Posada, who was hiding in El Salvador under the name Ignacio Medina. He has consistently identified pictures of Posada as the man who hired him. "We were fools," Rodriguez Llerena tells me in a separate interview at the state security house. He said Posada agreed to pay him \$1,000 for each bomb, and \$100 for every pound of C-4 he could smuggle into Cuba. He agreed, he said, because he had money problems. He had fathered children with different women and couldn't pay all of their bills. He said he feels Posada exploited his weakness. "I cannot say if he is a freedom fighter or a terrorist," Rodriguez Llerena said. "In my personal case I am angry, because whether he is a freedom fighter or not, he used me. My mistake was letting him use me." Today, Rodriguez Llerena says he is being used by the Cuban government. He said Cuban state television never shows his statements of remorse. "They only put on TV what is politically necessary and useful for them," he said. Now both Cruz Leon and Rodriguez Llerena spend their days in a special unit segregated from the rest of the prison population. They say they have a small garden where they grow vegetables and a television set where they watched the news about Posada's entry into the United States and his arrest by Homeland Security. Actually, Rodriguez Llerena said, the two men don't talk much about Posada. "It's a painful subject," he said.