

The cry in Havana: Posada is a murderer

In My Opinion
COMMENTARY
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father died in the 1976 Cubana bombing HAVANA -- María Rojo Alvarez was 10 when her mother showed up unexpectedly at her school on the afternoon of Oct. 6, 1976. "She was very emotional, very nervous," Maria recalled. "She told me my father was dead." It was hard for her mother even to say the words, and she wouldn't be able to say them again. So the school principal told Maria to retrieve her youngest brother, 5-year-old Camilo, from his kindergarten class. There was no time for tears as Maria walked alone down the hallway to her brother's classroom. "I knew at that moment I was going to have to be the strong one," she recalled. "I understood immediately my mission would be to help raise my brothers." Entering her brother's kindergarten class, Maria walked up to her brother and said matter-of-factly, "Papi está muerto." Daddy is dead. As she tells me the story, her brother reaches over and takes hold of his sister's hand, just as he did on that day 29 years ago. "When she came to me that day in the classroom, I couldn't comprehend what she was saying," Camilo said. "I couldn't understand how my father could possibly be dead. How could it be? How could it happen?" María and Camilo's father was Jesús Rojo Quintana, one of the 73 victims aboard Cubana de Aviación Flight 455 when it crashed into the sea after a bomb exploded on board shortly after the jet took off from Barbados on its way to Cuba. Jesús Rojo Quintana was 33. Among the victims were Cuba's national fencing team. Camilo is wearing a white T-shirt with the face of his father emblazoned on the front. Maria is wearing her own white T-shirt, but this one has the face of another Cubana victim, Manuel A. Rodríguez Font. "His family is all dead now," she said. "But I didn't want his name to be

forgotten, so I decided to wear it for him." The three of us are gathered in a room alongside El Palacio de Convenciones, the city's convention center where the Cuban government is hosting a three-day conference on international terrorism. As we talk, a television in the room is broadcasting live from inside the hall. Cuban President Fidel Castro's image fills the screen as he directs a panel titled "Terrorism: The Miami Connection." The conference is a media show to keep the spotlight on the U.S. government and Luis Posada Carriles, a man many people believe masterminded the bombing of Flight 455 in 1976, as well as more recent attacks, including a series of bombings at Havana hotels in 1997 that killed an Italian tourist, Fabio di Celmo.

THE FULL TREATMENT There have been speeches and panel discussions and even political cartoons. In one three-minute cartoon, Posada's head morphs into a steaming potato that falls into the hands of President Bush, who promptly tosses it to members of his Cabinet. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice immediately throws it back to Bush. "Posada is a hot potato," Castro said, laughing, after the video played. There is little doubt that Castro is relishing the discomfort being felt in Washington over what to do with Posada. The Venezuelan government has said it intends to ask for his extradition so that he can be retried on the Cubana massacre. (Posada was acquitted twice in Venezuela but escaped from prison in 1985 while the case was being appealed.) The United States has strongly suggested it will refuse Venezuela's request, believing Venezuela might in turn ship Posada to Cuba to stand trial. That could be politically disastrous for President Bush. Although there have been no significant protests on behalf of Posada, a recent poll by Sergio Bendixen suggests that Posada enjoys surprising support among Cuban Americans in South Florida. The survey of 300 Cuban Americans last month found that 61 percent believed Posada to be a patriot while 15 percent considered him a terrorist. (The margin of error was plus or minus five percentage points.) While Bush tries to figure out what to

do, Castro accuses the United States of being hypocritical in its war on terrorism. The Cuban government's willingness to allow me, a writer for the much-hated Miami Herald, into the country to cover the conference is proof of that government's confidence. (This is only the second time in more than seven years Cuba has granted the Herald a visa.) Unfortunately, in the United States, and particularly in South Florida, this has led people to view the Posada case as merely a contest between Castro and Bush. What Americans fail to realize is how strongly Cubans in Cuba view Posada. Leaving the government-sponsored conference, and without any government minders or escorts, I wanted to see just how deeply these feelings ran among ordinary Cubans. "He's a murderer," Mario, 69, told me as he waited for a bus in Havana's Central Park. "I'm not a revolutionary. I do not support the government. But I tell you that my idea, and the idea of the majority of Cubans, is that Posada Carriles is a terrorist and he must be brought to justice." At a small fruit-and-vegetable market a short distance away, Osvaldo Hernández, 37, and Carlos Cardoso, 36, became agitated when I mentioned Posada's name. "The victims on that plane, the Italian at the hotel, they were innocent victims," Hernández said while sorting through a bin of small and discolored tomatoes. "They had nothing to do with politics." "If the American people have enough common sense, they should see him for what he is, a terrorist," Cardoso added. Time and again, the same thoughts were expressed. William LeoGrande, dean of the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington and a respected expert on Cuba, said he encountered the same anger toward Posada by Cubans on the street during a recent visit to Havana. He said the feelings were very similar to the emotions felt on the island during the Elián González affair. On his most recent trip to Cuba, he arrived the day Castro led more than 100,000 people on a march in Havana demanding that the United States arrest Posada and extradite him to Venezuela. PEOPLE `ENERGIZED' "The marches weren't

large because the people were ordered to march by Castro," LeoGrande said. ``They were large because the people are truly energized by this event. It could have been their son or daughter on the fencing team. It could have been their mother or father on that plane. The anger Cubans feel has that same immediacy as it did with Elián." Even among dissidents, Posada carries little support. One man, who asked that his name not be published, said the United States was doing a terrible job handling Posada, because it had allowed Castro to claim the high ground in the war on terrorism. "Every time Castro can find an excuse to attack the United States, he uses it in order to distract from the problems we have here," the man said. ``The United States has to find a way out of this." On Friday at the convention center, I met with Giustino di Celmo, father of Fabio di Celmo, the Italian killed in one of the hotel bombings in 1997. He was in a reserved seat near the front of the hall, not far from where Castro was sitting. At age 85 he is still filled with fire. "Posada said he slept like a baby after he killed my son," Giustino said, referring to an interview Posada gave to The New York Times in which he took credit for the hotel bombing. ``But if I ever have a chance to put my hands on him, I'll cut him to pieces." He then invited me to join him for pizza next week. He operates a pizza parlor in Havana in memory of his son. "For you, I'll make it a big pie," he said, patting my belly. The families of the victims from the Cubana de Aviación disaster are readily apparent in the hall, since many of them are wearing buttons and items of clothing bearing their loved ones' pictures. They are strikingly reminiscent of the American families of 9/11 victims we've grown accustomed to seeing. When I mention this to Carlos Alberto Cremata Malberti, whose father died on the Cubana flight, he nods. "This was our September 11, that's what you have to understand," he said. ``We want justice and the only justice is Posada on trial." Although it has been 29 years, the pain doesn't fade. "I'm going to confess something to you," Cremata said. ``I dream that my father is still alive. They only recovered eight

of the 73 bodies. Most of us were left with nothing to bury. So I dream that my father is still alive, that he is somewhere, doing some sort of very delicate mission. It is a hope that helps me to live." Camilo Rojo Alvarez -- whose 10-year-old sister told him their father was dead -- understands what Cremata is experiencing. **POIGNANT CONNECTION** Today, Camilo is 33, the same age his father was when he died. And like his father, he has three children, two boys and a girl. "When I am with my children, playing with them, I think about my father and how much I miss him," Camilo said. "I want to give to my children all of the things those terrorists didn't let my father give to me when I was growing up -- love and attention." Recently, he was swimming off the beach with his 9-year-old son. 'He asked me, 'Are we close to my grandfather,' " Camilo recalled. "He knew that the plane crashed into the water and he knew that his grandfather's body had never been recovered. And so I said, 'Yes we are with him. He will always be with us.' " "Our days on the beach now are not sad, they are good days. But I realized the pain that I have been feeling isn't just limited to me and my brother and my sister. It is a pain that goes from generation to generation."