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07Jul89 CUBA: FOUR SENTENCED TO DEATH IN CUBAN MILITARY DRUG SCANDAL.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, July 7, Reuter - A highly-decorated general who fought alongside President Fidel Castro during the Cuban revolution and three other officers were sentenced to death on Friday for drug trafficking.

After deliberating for two days on a scandal that has rocked the communist government and was described as treason, a military tribunal also sentenced 10 other defendants, all army and state security officers, to long prison terms, the state news agency AIN reported. In his summing-up on Tuesday, prosecutor General Juan Escalona said the defendants had "stuck a dagger into the back of the nation and the people."

One of the four sentenced to face the firing squad was General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez, a hero of Castro's 1959 communist revolution and former head of Cuban military forces in Angola and Ethiopia.

Some diplomats expected Castro to pardon Ochoa. European diplomatic sources said Castro hinted at clemency over lunch last week with European Community countries' ambassadors.

An earlier military hearing recommended Ochoa be tried for "high treason," and Ochoa himself admitted he committed treason, saying "one pays for treason with his life."

Ochoa and the other 13 were charged with embezzlement and helping Colombia's notorious Medellin drug cartel to smuggle six tonnes of cocaine into the United States. They were said to have accepted at least 3.4 million dollars in bribes.

Castro has consistently denied charges by Washington of Cuban links to drugs traffickers.

The prosecutor in Cuba's biggest scandal in 30 years had requested death sentences for seven of the defendants, saying that they "challenged the credibility of Fidel Castro."

The four sentenced to die were Ochoa, his aide Captain Jorge Martinez, Colonel Antonio de la Guardia and Major Amado Padron, who was under Ochoa's command.

De la Guardia headed a top-secret department of Cuban intelligence entrusted with circumventing the U.S. economic embargo against the Caribbean island-state.

In addition to the death sentences, the military court handed out tough prison terms. De la Guardia's brother Patricio, a general, was sentenced to 30 years, as were Eduardo Diaz, Antonio Sanchez, Alexis Lago, Miguel Ruiz and Rosa Maria Abierno, the only woman defendant.

Luis Pineda, Gabriel Premdes and Leonel Estevez received 25 years and Antonio Rodriguez was jailed for 10 years.

The 14 defendants were cashiered from their respective services following their arrest last month. All pleaded guilty at the four-day trial.

The scandal has tarnished some of the island's most venerable institutions. In addition to the trial of the fourteen, it has also led to the dismissal of the powerful Interior Minister, General Jose Abrenates and the head of the agency that controls private and commercial air traffic in Cuba, Vicente Gomez Lopez.

During the trial, it was revealed that foreign civilian planes carrying cocaine and drug traffickers had landed numerous times at the Varadero airport east of Havana.

Also in the 15 hours of testimony broadcast on Cuban television, the head of Cuba's counter-intelligence department testified that by secretly allowing drug runners into Cuba, the defendants had violated national security.

"We consider that as treason. They have betrayed Fidel and our country," General Manuel Fernandez Crespo said.

He said there was no way of knowing if the drug runners, who often remained in Cuba for days, "might have been agents of the CIA (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency), infiltrated to carry out dangerous activities against our country such as terrorism and assassination attempts."

Because of the actions of the defendants, the government believes "the operative mechanisms of state security have been damaged extraordinarily," Fernandez Crespo said.

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