

WR 231
politics

31Aug89 CUBA: GENERAL ACCUSED OF PROTECTING FRIENDS IN CUBAN DRUG SCANDAL.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, Aug 30, Reuter - Cuba's former minister of interior, General Jose Abrantes, withheld information that could have led to the early discovery of drug traffickers within his ministry, the island's Justice Minister charged in a statement released on Wednesday. Justice Minister Juan Escalona told a national television audience on Monday that Abrantes had received a written report from an unnamed Interior Ministry general on February 25 concerning the involvement of Lieutenant Colonel Antonio de la Guardia in drug-trafficking activities.

The full text of the programme was published in Wednesday's official newspaper, Granma.

"Abrantes did not pass the information on to the leadership of the party...in a act of friendship," Escalona said.

De la Guardia was one of the four army and intelligence officers who were arrested in June and executed in July after being convicted on drug-trafficking charges.

De la Guardia headed the Interior Ministry's top-secret department that had the job of circumventing the U.S. embargo against trade with Cuba. He was a close friend of Abrantes for over three decades, according to a high Cuban official.

"We are convinced that if this report would have been given to the leadership of the party and government on February 25 they would have initiated a serious investigation," Escalona said.

The activities of de la Guardia and his department came to light in June when Cuban President Fidel Castro ordered an investigation.

The trial of Abrantes and six of his former aides before a three-judge military tribunal ended on Sunday night.

The defendants are now awaiting the verdict.

Escalona said that Abrantes "believed in loyalty towards friends and did not take into consideration positions of principle that his post required."

Escalona charged that Abrantes often protected friends by putting reports on their misconduct in his personal file cabinet without taking action. On occasions, he said, Abrantes "alerted" his friends.

"Taken in isolation this might seem reasonable if it did not involve doing favours left and right for his personal friends," the Justice Minister said.

He said Abrantes also knew of the activities of Diocles Terralbes, a former transport minister who was sentenced to 20 years in prison last month for using state funds "to support a dissolute and immoral lifestyle".

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