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politics

14Feb94 CUBA: CUBA BLAMES MIAMI EXILES AND CIA FOR CONFRONTATIONS.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, Feb 13 (Reuter) - Cuba has blamed exiles in Miami and the CIA for rumours that prompted a series of confrontations in which 82 people were arrested after authorities threw a security cordon around the U.S. diplomatic mission Friday and Saturday.

In a full-page article in Sunday's *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper, Cuba charged the events were "the absolute responsibility of Miami counterrevolutionary organisations and the special services of imperialism".

Cuba often uses the latter term to mean the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The paper said rumours began spreading through Havana Thursday that the Cuban government had removed its security guards from the area around the U.S. Interests Section and that the mission would give entry visas to all Cubans who want to go to the United States. Aware of the rumours and plans by some groups to march on the mission, Cuban authorities set up a strong security cordon around it, at a distance of at least two blocks, early Friday.

The rumours prompted hundreds of people, many of them teen-agers, to approach the mission in the hope of getting travel visas for the United States.

The article described three major incidents Friday.

In the first one about 80 people on bicycles, many with "an openly hostile" attitude, gathered at one security barricade but made no effort to break through, the article said.

About three hours later, 70 people on foot tried to break through the police security cordon but failed. An hour after that, about 90 people tried but were also turned back.

The paper said 82 people were arrested in the incidents.

"At present, some remain under detention while investigations continue to discover the instigators of these incidents," it said.

The newspaper also carried the full text of a note distributed by the U.S. Interests Section in Havana on Saturday morning denying the rumours.

The note says the Interests Section "continues processing applications for visas...in the usual way."

Juventud Rebelde wrote that "on giving the lie to these rumours, things have returned to normal."

"Nevertheless," it continues, "this type of event could have more serious consequences, and the responsibility for them will fall on those who fostered them."

The *Juventud Rebelde* article declared that "once more it is confirmed that the streets of this country belong to the revolutionaries".

The communist-ruled Caribbean island was plunged into economic crisis with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the old East bloc and the end of its traditional trade and aid ties.

Last year, 63,000 Cubans, most of them saying they wanted to visit relatives, were denied short-stay visas by American authorities because of the U.S. belief that they would ask for asylum once in the United States.

In 1993, about 3,500 Cubans crossed the Straits of Florida in small boats and rafts to seek asylum, an increase of about 1,000 over the previous year. Washington's policy has been to provide asylum to all Cubans reaching U.S. shores.

In addition, some 900 Cubans braved mine fields and heavily patrolled waters to seek asylum at the U.S. Guantanamo Naval Base in eastern Cuba.

Cuban officials say Washington's strict policy on legal immigration and its red-carpet treatment for illegal Cuban arrivals has encouraged many Cubans to risk their lives in the dangerous crossing.

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba were severed in January 1961 but since the mid-70s both have maintained interests sections in each other's capitals. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana operates under the aegis of the Swiss Embassy.

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