

UP 889
politics

27May89 CUBA: MORE THAN 100 HIJACKINGS TO CUBA WITHOUT CASUALTIES.

By **Lionel Martin**

HAVANA, May 27, Reuter - If a hijacked American Airlines jetliner had been forced to fly to Havana on Saturday it would have arrived at an airport which has handled more hijacked planes than any other in the world.

The Boeing 727 with a crew of seven and 150 passengers aboard was hijacked by a Cuban refugee on a flight from Dallas, Texas to Miami, Florida. The pilot diverted towards Cuba but returned to Miami airport when he began running out of fuel.

Police took the hijacker into custody about 90 minutes after the plane landed in Miami.

Since 1961 there have been more than 100 hijackings of U.S. passenger planes to Jose Marti airport in Havana. Despite the large number of hijackings to Cuba, involving thousands of passengers and crew, nobody has been killed.

The amazing safety record was rung up even though hijackers have used weapons ranging from guns and knives to aerosol cans with lighter fluid in one hand and a cigarette lighter in the other.

Until now the hijackings have been handled routinely by the airport's experienced security police.

The scenario is usually as follows:

U.S. authorities notify the Havana control tower that a hijacking is in progress and that the probable destination of the passenger plane is Havana.

Upon arrival at the airport in Havana the hijacker surrenders to Cuban security police and is taken off to jail.

In interviews given over the years to Havana-based foreign correspondents, U.S. diplomats have said that they receive full cooperation from the Cuban authorities.

Once the hijackers are taken away the passengers are allowed to go to the terminal building to eat and drink, usually at the airline's expense.

Many passengers also buy Cuban cigars and rum which cannot be purchased in the United States because of the government's embargo against trade with Cuba.

In almost all cases the planes and passengers return to the United States several hours after arriving.

In December 1984, only two weeks before a New Year's Eve hijacking to Cuba of another American Airlines plane with 198 people aboard, Cuban President Fidel Castro said that Cuban courts had increased sentences handed out to hijackers.

Castro said that the hijackers of two planes in 1981 were given 10-year jail sentences while hijackers after that date were given sentences ranging from 12 to 20 years.

REUTERS NEWS SERVICE