

Broadcasts by U.S. continue to cloud relations with Cuba

By Lionel Martin
Reuters

HAVANA — A middle-age elevator operator in Havana keeps her ear close to her Soviet-made portable radio, listening to a soap opera on Radio Marti.

No one knows how many Cubans like her tune into the U.S. propaganda station, which has been beamed into Cuba from the Florida Keys since May 20, 1985. But the radio remains a sore spot in Cuban-American relations.

"Radio Marti is an affront to us for two main reasons," Ricardo Alarcon, Cuba's vice minister of foreign relations, said in an interview.

"First, it is an official U.S. station which uses the name of our revered independence hero Jose Marti, who warned that the United States was a threat to us," he said, referring to the 19th-century leader in the war for independence from Spain.

"And secondly, because it violates the spirit of international radio agreements by bombarding us on the medium-wave band, which should be reserved for our own stations," he said.

The 50,000-watt radio station, with its anti-communist message, operates out of Marathon, Fla., on a frequency of 1180 kilohertz.

During its 14 hours of daily transmission, Radio Marti comes in clearly on AM radios. Cuban government jamming creates a background hum, but the interference appears designed to be a nuisance rather than an impermeable shield.

The U.S. decision to start up the radio station, strongly supported by President Reagan and opposed by many congressmen and broadcasters, was controversial and led directly to a setback in U.S.-Cuban relations.

The day the radio went on the air, Cuba suspended a U.S. immigration accord that had been signed less than six months earlier, on Dec. 14, 1984.

That agreement, achieved after lengthy talks, had ended the wrangle over Cuban "undesirables" who had gone uninvited to Florida in the 1980 Mariel boatlift. The pact called for Cuba to accept the return of 2,700 "Marielitos" and the United States to resume a normal immigration quota for Cubans wishing to leave their homeland.

Havana also retaliated against the Cuban exile community in the United States for its support of Radio Marti. It cut off further visits to Cuba, apart from those authorized "on strictly humanitarian grounds."

As part of the legislative compromise that won passage of the bill establishing Radio Marti, the station was placed under the Voice of America's authority and was prohibited from broadcasting blatantly inflammatory programs.

Its supporters and creators see the radio, similar to Radio Free Europe, as a beacon of truth, providing Cubans with an alternative to the controlled Cuban media.

Cuba regards the broadcasts as subversion and an infringement on its sovereignty.

Some observers regard the timing of the radio programming as ironic — it debuted about the same time that President Fidel Castro himself began criticizing aspects of the 1959 revolution that brought him to power.

"For the past year, Fidel Castro has been the revolution's worst critic, making savage attacks against inefficiency, corruption and passivity in a way that takes some of the wind out of Radio Marti's sails," one Western European diplomat said.

An American diplomat here disagreed, saying that "Radio Marti stresses such things as human-rights violations in Cuba and military casualties in Angola, which the official media on the island seldom mentions."

One Cuban journalism professor expressed doubts, however, that people here placed much value on the U.S. broadcasts.

"Counterrevolutionaries here doubtlessly draw ideological sustenance from Radio Marti, but for the majority of Cubans, even those who listen to it sometimes, Radio Marti was born with the stigma of only caring about overthrowing our regime," he said.

"And for that reason, it is not going to convince anybody who is not already convinced," he said.

During the U.S. debate over the radio, the National Association of Broadcasters voiced opposition, fearing Cuba would retaliate by interfering with U.S. commercial radio.

Turning its powerful 500,000-watt transmitters broadcasting the Voice



United Press International

A Radio Marti transmission tower on one of the Florida Keys.

of Cuba toward the United States on Aug. 25, 1982, Cuba demonstrated that it did have the capacity to wreak havoc on U.S. broadcasts as far north as the Canadian border.

But Cuba has not repeated such action, and one Western diplomat said the restraint indicated that Havana did not want to provoke the Reagan administration into retaliating.

"The Cubans know that relations will not improve while Ronald Reagan is in the White House, and they look forward to the day when some U.S. president will seek detente and

create an atmosphere in which the future of Radio Marti can be discussed dispassionately."

Last year, word reached Washington that Cuba wanted to talk about Radio Marti and the immigration accord, and in July, Alarcon met U.S. officials in Mexico City.

But the talks ended in failure, with the Americans declaring that the Cuban proposals — among them the suggestion that Cuba would accept Radio Marti if the United States gave Cuba a clear-frequency channel to address the United States — were totally unacceptable.