

Cuba: Strange accidents and other unexplained deaths

Report of July 31, 2012

Cuba Archive has received reports of a considerable number of deaths or uncanny “accidents” of detractors of the Cuban regime—in Cuba and in several countries—surrounded by mysterious circumstances. Some are featured in our electronic database of documented cases (www.CubaArchive.org/database/), but most are not for lack of evidence or because the victim survived. There are also a number of credible first-hand reports of seeming attempts against the lives of human rights’ defenders in Cuba, many perpetrated with vehicles. Systematic recording of these occurrences—whether in Cuba or abroad—has not existed. Therefore, the actual number of occurrences may be much greater than imagined.

A decisive pattern emerges from the known cases, some summarized herein, that defies odds and points strongly to state-sponsored killings or attempted killings. This should not come as a surprise. The surviving archives of totalitarian regimes of the former Soviet bloc similar to Cuba’s—to which Cuba long belonged—have documented proof of many operations like the ones described herein. Cuba’s intelligence services, as those archives prove, had close ties and joint training, strategies, and operations with the secret police of East Germany (Stasi), Czechoslovakia (BtS), Bulgaria, and others that specialized in techniques to repress and silence the internal opposition and eliminate opponents. While most of these countries have built democratic societies since the fall of Communism, Cuba’s rulers, Communist Constitution, and repressive machinery remain in place.

The deliberateness and ultimate responsibility of these occurrences are very difficult to establish, most leave little or no tracks, and the perpetrators are seldom seen, much less apprehended. Most of the surviving victims realize they have been targeted, but can rarely prove it. Often they have no record or sufficient evidence that the event actually took place. The incidents are usually dismissed or quickly forgotten. In Cuba, where the incidents are more brazen and overt, twice-targeted Juan Francisco Sigler, explains: “We have no protection, no one to turn to for help. The police does nothing when we make claims; they are the police.” Abroad, Miguel Sales—exiled writer who escaped one such incident in Paris—illustrates the futility of seeking redress: “The perpetrator, if one were to be found, would have been a lowly hit man with no connection to Cuban espionage services, perhaps a marginal foreigner who had a few drinks that night and was probably driving without a license. In the worst case for him, a charge of involuntary manslaughter would entail a prison sentence of a few years that would turn into a few months thanks to sentencing reductions. He would then return to his country and get his payment. Twenty thousand dollars is not a lot in Paris, but it is a small fortune in Syria, Nicaragua, or Cameroon. Contrary to what we see in police flicks, the perfect crime does exist...” (Translated from Spanish.)



Evidence of the Cuban regime’s practice of eliminating opponents is found in accounts—some published in different venues—of former insiders who have defected and are living abroad. Many are in hiding or with changed identities for fear of becoming victims. But, in the case of an attack on **Father Miguel Loredo**, a Cuban Catholic priest who died in 2011, the perpetrator later came forward. Loredo had served over nine years of political prison falsely accused of aiding a counter-revolutionary and sheltering him at his church. After his release in 1976, he was apparently still a threat to a state that had outlawed religion; he was a very charismatic and popular priest, especially among the youth, which was very unwelcome in. In 1982, he was run over by a truck during his daily walk from one church to another in Havana. He survived, but badly injured, and the driver was not prosecuted. But, years later, he went to Father Loredo’s parish to ask for his forgiveness, confessing he had been forced into doing the deed.

Perfect crimes or extraordinary coincidences?

Some examples follow from scores of similar cases spread out over five decades. See records of those who died at www.CubaArchive.org/database/.

I. Six recent cases in Cuba

Note: A separate forthcoming report will detail the deaths of Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero.



In 2009, **Laura Pollán**, leader of Cuba's Ladies in White, was riding in a car near Havana giving an interview to Italian filmmaker Pierantonio Micciarelli, accompanied by a cameraman and an independent journalist. Suddenly and ostensibly with deliberateness, a vehicle crashed into their car forcing it off the road, then sped away. (See videos of crash at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIJCndCGSsw and Micciarelli's remarks at youtube.com/watch?v=dmp34WfxNY&feature=related.)

Not long afterwards, on October 14, 2011, Laura died at age 63 of a sudden unexplained illness. Healthy and active despite a diabetes she controlled with medication, she became increasingly ill with chills, vomiting, joint pain, fever, and, eventually, shortness of breath. Numerous medical tests failed to shed a cause or allow doctors to establish a diagnosis. Her condition quickly worsened, even after her hospitalization. In short order, shortly before she hospital authorities had reported the illness was dengue fever. The official cause of death was listed as diabetes mellitus type 2, bronchopneumonia, and syncytial virus, yet bronchopneumonia is not caused by dengue and was not the unexplained ailment



and the others rarely cause death, much less one like hers. As she was dying, the family had asked doctors about potential exposure to a toxin or germ. Since 2009, members of the Ladies in White have been reporting being pricked with needles by regime supporters and soon developing physical ailments. Less than a month earlier, Laura and a group of Ladies in White had been attacked by a government-led mob as they tried to leave her house to attend Mass. Laura had been bitten, pinched, and scratched. See her interview with Spain's TV during the siege of her home at <http://www.cihpress.com/2011/09/declaraciones-de-laura-pollan-el-24-de.html> and photos of the attack at <http://alanacubana1962.blogspot.com/2011/09/cuba-fotos-pruebas-graficas-de.html>.

Laura died in the evening and the political police rushed her body to a brief autopsy immediately after which a midnight wake was allowed for just over an hour. The body was then taken for cremation. The family was not allowed to witness the send-off into the chamber (around 2AM) and in less than two hours was handed the ashes, which were not hot. This timeframe for a cremation would be impossible with even the latest cremation equipment and the ashes would not have been sufficiently cool for handling. Given her high public profile and puzzling illness, the absence of a diagnosis, and the questions raised by the family, this quick disposal of the body (in less than ten hours) is illogical if the regime had nothing to hide. A few days afterwards, as a dissident was being released from a 2-day detention, a well-known State Security officer (Fernando Tamayo Gómez) threatened him: "We killed Laura; we can do the same with you and nothing happens." He had been one of the key security police figures managing her case at the hospital. Whether true or just an opportunistic remark to cause fear is anyone's guess.



Ladies in White co-founder, **Dolia Leal**, survived a furtive car accident in 2007. She had been warned by a State Security agent to tone down her activism or she could suffer a car accident. About 20 days later, on June 15, 2007, she was a passenger in a car with her neighbor and his mother on the way to the Combinado del Este prison of Havana to visit her husband and their relative. A car traveling in the opposite direction reportedly made a U-Turn and crashed into their vehicle at high speed; the

driver was reportedly a German citizen in a rental car. Dolia, riding in the back seat, suffered the brunt of the impact and lost consciousness. She suffered multiple facial and body blows, a bitten tongue, cuts to her lips, and vitreous detachment of the right eye. After the accident, the German was not to be found and Germany's diplomats in Havana first said they had no accident reports by their nationals and later would not discuss the case. Cuban authorities never responded to requests for an investigation. (See http://cubaarchive.org/home/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=23&Itemid=100.)

Human rights activist **Liborio Borroto**, age 65, was killed November 19, 2007 at Jatibonico, province of Sancti Spiritus, after he was run over by a horse-drawn cart in what was officially reported as an accident. Borroto was President of the Democratic Party 30th of November for Jatibonico and member of the Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, both outlawed in Cuba. Earlier that same day three Communist Party members had visited his home to threaten him for placing stickers with the word "Change" on the walls of his house.

Since 2007, **Juan Francisco Sigler**, head of the opposition group Movimiento Opción Alternativa of Matanzas province has escaped two attempts to run him over. On January 25, 2007, he was heading for work riding his bicycle around 6AM, while it was still dark and foggy. He heard a car approaching at great speed and turned his head to look as it struck him. The brunt of the impact hit a supply box mounted on the bike, which he believes saved his life. As he lay sprawled on the ground, the car pulled over a few yards ahead of the deserted road with the lights off. Two men and one woman began yelling insults: "You were lucky this time, but we will squash you." "Mercenary, we are going to kill you." He took blows to the head and stomach and went to a clinic for treatment. Around three months later, in broad daylight a white car he recognized as part of the Matanzas government fleet attempted to run him over on the highway as he was walking his disabled bicycle. He managed to duck in time, but the car went over the bike's tire and sped away.



Wilber Sigler Gonzalez, age 37, Juan Francisco Sigler's son, was nearly run over with a truck in early 2012 by a well-known regime official from Matanzas. He was able to duck, bolting to the curb. The perpetrator stopped, stuck his head out the window to look, and sped away. Many passersby witnessed the incident and yelled at the driver.

Dagoberto Santana, Board member of the Movimiento Opción Alternativa of Matanzas, was heading home in his bicycle after visiting his mother last Mother's Day, May 13th. A car hit him from behind and he was thrown to the curb. As he lay there stunned, the driver stopped to yelling at him "lackey of the empire" and other insults.

II. Operations Abroad

Many suspected state-sponsored killings or attempted killings have taken place outside of Cuba, in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Most cases are never resolved. In a few cases, a diplomatic crisis has ensued.

Brian Latell, scholar and former CIA National Intelligence Officer for Latin America, describes many assassinations ordered by Cuba in his 2012 book *Castro's Secrets: The CIA and Cuba's Intelligence Machine*. (The Miami Herald published a synopsis on 4/21/2012 titled "The hit teams that carried out Castro's vendettas.") Latell writes that illegals, surrogates of other nationalities, and Latin American terrorist and revolutionary groups are used as executioners controlled by Cuban intelligence for assassination operations on defectors, traitors, and "worthy enemies." Deniability is compounded by degrees of separation, he explains, and some of the most sensitive missions have been carried out overseas against high-visibility targets such as former Latin American dictators Somoza (Nicaragua) and Pinochet (Chile) and two Bolivian generals and an army intelligence officer involved in Ché Guevara's 1967 capture and death in Bolivia (Gen. Joaquin Zenteno in Paris 1976, Gen. René Barrientos (former President) in Bolivia 1969 and former intelligence officer and diplomat, Roberto Quintanilla, in Hamburg 1971).

In some cases, Latell claims, carefully screened Cubans are the selected assassins. Norberto Fuentes, formerly of the Castro brothers' inner circle, has written (see his book *Dulces Guerreros Cubanos*, 1999) that Cuban hit teams sent overseas were led by former intelligence officer Antonio de la Guardia (who, in turn, was executed by Cuba in

a 1989 internal purge). In his 1993 autobiographical account, *In the Pirates Den: My Life as a Secret Agent*, the Argentine Jorge Masetti details operations in which he participated or on which he had direct knowledge.

Latell describes defector accounts of a number of state-sponsored assassinations and attempted assassinations. One is the 1970 death by poisoning of Cuban defector **Miguel Roche**, living in Virginia, in the greater Washington, D.C. Roche, who was perfectly healthy, collapsed almost immediately after attending a lunch at a restaurant with "one or more mysterious Cubans." No police investigation was opened although the autopsy's toxicology report indicated that 90% of his hemoglobin had been contaminated, causing extreme inflammation and leading to respiratory failure (cyanide poisoning the likely culprit). Roche had received threatening letters indicating: "We know what you are doing, ...so one way or another, we will take care of you."

Uncanny recurrence of out-of-control cars

Cuban writer/poet and former political prisoner **Miguel Sales** survived what he believed was an assassination attempt. He was acquainted with three other exiles also targeted. Aside from the obvious benefit to the regime of silencing problematic voices, he explains the purported logic: "The idea of eliminating less prominent exiles coincides with the modality applied on the island. (...) This is less costly –in terms of international public opinion— but more effective in creating mass terror.

On January 17, 2007, Sales was working for UNESCO in Paris. In exile since 1979, he publicly maintained his highly critical views of the Cuban regime. One evening, as he left his office and was crossing the street, a fast approaching car with its lights off veered towards him and accelerated. He jumped forward, missing the car by two centimeters, and fell to the ground as the car sped away. (See details, in Spanish, in Julián B. Sorel, "Cebras letales," CubaEncuentro.com, 30/01/2007. Sorel was Sales' pseudonym; the three cases that follow are described by him.)

In 2003, **Manuel Antonio Sánchez**, was hit by a powerful motorcycle while crossing a centric Barcelona intersection. He died shortly afterwards from the injuries. The former Cuban Vice Minister had escaped a kidnapping attempt a few days after requesting political exile in Spain in 1985. The incident had taken place in plain daylight on a busy Madrid boulevard. Spanish police thwarted the kidnapping, several Cuban diplomats were expelled, and a chilling of relations with Cuba ensued.

In the summer of 2005, internationally renowned Cuban painter **Guido Llinás**, living in exile in Paris since 1963, was crossing a Paris intersection when a powerful motorcycle ran him over. He arrived at the hospital in a coma and died a month later. Highly and openly critical of the Cuban regime, his fame had been growing as his work was increasingly appraised. Today his paintings hang in leading museums.

In the summer of 2006, **Dr. Martha Frayde** was about to get into a taxi in Madrid when the vehicle accelerated suddenly and dragged her several meters. Despite her old age, she survived with a broken hip. Exiled in Spain, Frayde had been a close Castro collaborator and had served in high-ranking government posts including Ambassador to UNESCO. She became publicly disaffected with the system and in 1976 was sentenced to 29 years of prison. Released in 1979, she settled in Madrid and founded an acclaimed magazine critical of the Castro regime.

In 2003, **a journalist covering Cuban issues critically** (wishing to remain anonymous), was crossing the street from her apartment building at a major U.S. city when a car stopped at the red light suddenly backed into her and sped away. She was thrown on the street and briefly lost consciousness, but escaped major injury. Two men were in the car and many passersby came to her aid, but she was too dazed at the scene to attempt finding so-disposed witnesses. She did not report it to police and did not tell friends about the incident for fear of seeming to embellish.

Cuban Air Force pilot **Alvaro Prendes**, who died in 2004, had been a high-ranking celebrated revolutionary hero. When he began questioning his superiors and calling for reforms, he was stripped of his rank, imprisoned more than once, and later ostracized. In 1994, he went into exile in the U.S. One day, in broad daylight on a busy Miami street, a vehicle forcefully and deliberately struck his car and forced it off the road, speeding away. He crashed into a nearby structure and suffered injuries requiring hospital care. With a detailed accident report in hand, he repeatedly asked police and the FBI for an investigation to no avail.

III. Suspicious heart attacks and so-called suicides of estranged regime insiders

The list of disaffected regime insiders dying mysteriously is long. Some cases follow –the first two are described in greater detail in Latell’s book based on defector accounts:

Manuel Piñeiro, age 63. Longtime and legendary head of Cuba’s intelligence services, he had been retired in 1992 purportedly for straying from the rigid orthodoxies espoused by the Castro brothers. In March 1998, the government reported that he had been in a single-vehicle accident after fainting at the wheel. Though only suffering minor injuries, he had been kept in the hospital “for observation,” but had died in his bed of a heart attack. A day before the accident, his bodyguard-driver, had been instructed to take some time off. Defectors related that he had announced he was writing his memoirs and just knew too much.

José Abrantes, former Division General of the Armed Forces and former Interior Minister, had been sentenced to 20 years of prison during the Ochoa purge of 1989, when dozens of intelligence and military officers were executed, imprisoned, or removed. Defectors reported he had been subjected to a special nutrition regime to weaken him (toxins allegedly added to his food) and concentrated doses and shots of potassium and digoxina had been administered that provoked a heart attack. He was finished off in the ambulance to the hospital, asphyxiated with a pillow. No autopsy was performed and the family was not allowed to see the body.

Suicides: Cuba Archive has at least 136 documented deaths classified as officially reported for lack of evidence to the contrary. Because most have been in prison or in detention at State Security facilities, cause of death is generally impossible to verify. Additional similarly reported cases have been tentatively classified as extrajudicial killings due to some evidence strongly pointing to that conclusion. Proof is generally evasive.

The Cuban government has reported the following deaths of regime insiders as suicides (from a longer list):

- **Javier de Varona**, age 34. Leading member of the Communist Youth Party arrested for his role in an infiltration of anti-regime elements into Cuba, he died under interrogation in 1969.
- **Manuel Méndez**, age 35. MININT official and President of the Revolutionary Tribunal of Santa Clara arrested in July 1971 with no explanation given to the family. He died 29 days later in custody of a gunshot wound to the chest. The government claimed it was a suicide and produced a letter he had allegedly written confessing to an affair with a married woman, who denied it, and to have met with members of the Ministry of the Interior to discuss problems he blamed on the government.
- **Rodrigo Rojo**, age 35, found with his throat slit in the basement kitchen of the Casa Cuba in Paris, September 1970. He had travelled to France on an official mission for Cuba and was planning to defect.
- **Oswaldo Dorticós**, former President of the Republic (1959-1976) and sitting Minister of Justice. He was reported to have killed himself in 1983 after an argument with Commander Ramiro Valdés.
- At least two were reported to have committed suicide in the aftermath of the Ochoa trial and purge -- **Rafael Alvarez**, head of the Finance Department of the Ministry of the Interior, August 1989, and **Enrique Cicard**, head of the Intelligence Department of MININT, who reportedly shot himself in the neck in September 1989 after having publicly criticized the firing squad execution of Tony De La Guardia.

“Man’s defense against state violence must be absolute; silence is not justified as part of any strategy...”
—Father Miguel Loredó, 1988, victim of a 1982 assassination attempt.

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