

State Department: “We don’t know if top terrorist is in US”

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In a White House press conference last week, President George W. Bush was asked how his administration could claim to be winning its “global war on terrorism” when the US State Department’s own figures show the number of terrorist attacks as well as the number of fatalities caused by terrorism having tripled last year.

“I can only tell you one thing,” Bush replied, “we will stay on the offense; we’ll be relentless; we’ll be smart about how we go after the terrorists ... we will find them where they hide and bring them to justice.”

Yet, just days later, a senior US State Department official made it clear that wanted international terrorists can hide in plain sight within the United States itself, without the Bush administration or its Homeland Security Department lifting a finger to apprehend them.

“I don’t even know if he is in the United States,” said Roger Noriega, the State Department’s top official on Latin America, when asked about a terrorist sought for extradition by two countries for bombing an airliner as well as other terrorist crimes.

The terrorist in question is Luis Posada Carriles. He was convicted and jailed in Venezuela for the 1976 terrorist bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner in which all 73 aboard lost their lives. He was allowed to escape from prison in 1985. He has since admitted organizing a string of bombings against Cuban hotels and other tourist areas in 1997 that killed one person and wounded 11 others.

He was implicated in what was at the time one of the worst acts of international terrorism ever seen in the US capital, the 1976 car bombing that killed former Chilean government minister Orlando Letelier and an American colleague in the streets of Washington.

He is also responsible for multiple assassination attempts against Cuban President Fidel Castro and

other Cuban officials, including a conspiracy to bomb a crowded public meeting where Castro was to speak in Panama in 2000. He was jailed for that offense until August 2004, when he was pardoned by outgoing Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso, who, according to published reports, earned a \$4 million payoff from anti-Castro exile groups for her act of mercy.

Noriega’s plea of ignorance came one day after Castro addressed a mass May Day rally in Havana reiterating Cuba’s demand for Posada Carriles’s extradition. Castro called him “the most famous and cruel terrorist of the Western Hemisphere.” The fact that he has found a safe haven in the US, the Cuban president added, “exposes to the world the immense hypocrisy, the lies and the immorality ... with which US imperialism subjugates the world.”

Meanwhile, Venezuela’s Supreme Court has approved a request for the terrorist’s extradition to that country, the government announced Tuesday. “Posada Carriles has been the author or accomplice of homicide and treason, so he must be extradited and judged by the courts of Venezuela,” the Supreme Court statement said. The airline that he bombed had taken off from Venezuela, and Posada Carriles at the time had obtained Venezuelan citizenship, collaborating with the country’s secret police in acts of repression.

Responding to reporters after speaking at a meeting of the Council of the Americas, Noriega, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, claimed he lacked “concrete information” about Posada Carriles.

“To be frank, I don’t even know if he is in the United States,” he said. “Some are sure that he is, and we do not have reason to doubt it, but neither do we have evidence of where he really is.”

For a top official of the US government to claim there is no evidence as to Posada Carriles's whereabouts is preposterous. The press in Miami has been full of stories relating how the terrorist slipped across the US border. Cuban exile groups have launched a campaign on his behalf seeking political asylum in the US, and his lawyer, Eduardo Soto, has held public press conferences announcing his client's presence on US soil and declaring his intention to file an asylum plea.

"The US has no interest in giving quarter to someone who has committed criminal acts," said Noriega, dismissing questions about how Washington would respond to such a plea. "We are a country that respects the rule of law."

Given the history of US relations with Posada Carriles and his cohorts, these claims are laughable. If Noriega wanted to obtain "concrete information" about the terrorist's whereabouts, he could probably get it from the man he replaced at the State Department just two years ago, Otto Reich.

Reich is an anti-Castro Cuban exile who, like Noriega, began his rise in the government bureaucracy participating in the illegal operation mounted by the Reagan administration in the 1980s to finance and arm the CIA-backed contras in their terrorist campaign against Nicaragua.

Reich went on to become US ambassador to Venezuela, where he waged a campaign to secure the release from prison of fellow Cuban émigré Orlando Bosch, who was then serving 11 years in prison for his part in helping Posada Carriles organize the 1976 airline bombing. While Bosch was officially classified by the State Department as an undesirable for his long record of terrorist activity, evidence indicated that Reich sought to get him a US visa.

Arrested in 1988 for entering the US illegally, he was pardoned by George Bush senior in 1990. The current president's brother, Jeb Bush, is widely believed to have lobbied for the pardon as part of his bid to consolidate the political support of the right-wing Cuban exile groups in his run for governor.

Noriega has maintained political continuity with his predecessor Reich, waging a campaign to isolate and ultimately overthrow the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. There is virtually no chance that the administration will hand over Posada Carriles to either country. Any trial would directly implicate Washington

itself in terrorist crimes, as Posada Carriles enjoyed support and training from the CIA and the US military going back to the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and continuing through the contra support operation and beyond.

In short, if the US government doesn't know and doesn't want to know the whereabouts of a man who blew an airline out of the sky and killed 73 people, it is because the man and his heinous actions both bear the stamp "made in the USA."

It is worth noting that the same week Noriega expressed ignorance and indifference about Posada Carriles, the US Justice Department placed a \$1 million bounty on the head of Assata Shakur, formerly known as Joanne Chesimard.

A former supporter of the Black Panther Party, her name was also added to a list of "domestic terrorists." Shakur is wanted in connection with a 32-year-old shooting incident on the New Jersey Turnpike in which her brother-in-law and a state trooper were both killed. She has always insisted that she was framed up for the killing because of her political beliefs. In 1979, she escaped from prison and made her way to Cuba where she was granted political asylum.

A comparison of the two cases is instructive. Noriega speaks only of "criminal acts" when talking about Posada Carriles—a man who boasted of his terrorist exploits and is responsible for mass killing—and expresses open indifference as to whether or not he is caught. Yet Shakur, wanted in connection with a disputed shootout that claimed two lives—one of them from a police bullet—is branded a dangerous terrorist worth a million-dollar bounty.

Clearly, the success or failure of Bush's "war on terrorism" cannot be judged by how many die in terrorist incidents. Those killed by US-backed terrorists don't count, while alleged acts of terrorism carried out by forces hostile to Washington merely serve as grist for the mill, providing fresh pretexts for US imperialism's campaign of global military aggression.



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