

ABC News Special Report

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1:24:59 p.m.

3 minutes and 53 seconds

DAVID MUIR: We're coming on the air from major developments at this hour in the rising tensions between the U.S. and Cuba. Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche is set to hold a news conference in Miami just a short time from now. These are pictures coming in right now of the motorcade headed to this news conference in what will be considered a major escalation here between the U.S. and Cuba. The Justice Department has just unsealed an indictment charging former Cuban President Raul Castro with murder for his alleged role in the 1996 planes that were carrying humanitarian aid that resulted in the deaths of four people, including three Americans. Now 94 years old, Raul Castro, of course, is the brother of the late longtime President Fidel Castro, who ruled Cuba for nearly 50 years. The four volunteers who were killed were part of the humanitarian group Brothers to the Rescue. The charges come after President Trump took action, of course, in Venezuela, then Iran. He's now focusing on Cuba as well. President Trump previously imposing a blockade of oil shipments to Cuba in an effort to continue to cripple Cuba's economy. President Trump has said in recent months that the U.S. was in talks with Havana. He raised the possibility of a friendly takeover of Cuba, in his words. And the President has said Cuba is going to fall pretty soon in his words as well. You saw those images just moments ago, the motorcade bringing the attorney general, Todd Blanche, to this news conference. Also traveling with the attorney general is our chief Justice correspondent, Pierre Thomas, who joins me on the phone. Pierre, this will be a major announcement here today.

PIERRE THOMAS: Indeed. It was 30 years in the making. This case has been developing Justice Department now saying they have evidence they can charge Raul Castro with direct involvement in the shoot down of those two planes in which four people were killed, three Americans. The attorney general will be speaking shortly. We expect to get a question or two to him. The motorcade just landed. It took us about 15 minutes to get here, David.

MUIR: We have been watching images of the motorcade come in, bringing Todd Blanche to this news conference in Miami again, where they will announce these charges against Raul Castro up here. The obvious question for Americans watching this unfold. Why now?

THOMAS: That is the exact question I expect to pose to the attorney general. They claim that they have evidence if you read the indictment, I had a chance to peruse it. They claim they have evidence that any kill order regarding those boats that were in — planes that were dealing with trying to get out of Cuba, this rescue group was involved in trying to help people who were trying to traverse the straits to get to the United States. In this particular case, the order was given to shoot those planes out of the sky, killing those people. The government says it has evidence that Raul Castro was directly involved in that chain of command. David.

MUIR: We're going to keep our eyes peeled on this news conference. Pierre, I know you're traveling with the attorney general. You'll be entering that room right along with the AG just moments from now. We will go right to him when he announces this indictment that's been

unsealed. Also watching with us, Matt Rivers. He's live in Miami at this hour. South Florida, Little Havana news spreading very quickly there, Matt. I'm sure people have learned of this indictment.

MATT RIVERS: Yes, they absolutely have, David. They've been waiting for this really even since we reported it last week. They knew this was coming. And now, that they can see the indictment for themselves, we've been seeing people drive past us here in Little Havana, honking their horns, Cuban flags out the windows. We've seen some Make America Great Again hats here. People are very much in favor of this, at least in this part of the world. I think a lot of the people that we've had conversations with now, David, are saying a couple of things. One, this is a big deal for them, but also what it means to have the United States government call this man formally a criminal. It means a lot to people here in Little Havana.

(...)

1:50:32 p.m.

11 minutes and 47 seconds

MUIR: You heard the deputy FBI director say three decades of investigating this case, culminating with this indictment today. From a legal perspective, what is — what's the rationale, the reasoning for bringing these charges now?

DAN ABRAMS: Well, look, we're going to have to we're going to have to see the indictment and hear more to know exactly why they say. Now, my guess as to why they say now would be that they would say they have been more vigilant in trying to bring this case than past administrations. And as a result, they would say they've gathered new evidence. But here's something very important to remember. This is actually going to be adding something to an existing criminal case that was brought in 2003 in connection with this attack. So, it's not as if there have been no charges brought in connection with the attacks since 1996. There were charges brought in 2003 against three people, but they were never extradited to face trial. And that's going to be the challenge here, right? So, once they get this indictment, which they now have, they have the charges. It doesn't seem they have statute of limitations problems, because these particular federal charges don't have statute of limitations. Challenge one is going to be getting these people, including Raul Castro, back to the United States. And number two, even if they do, remember, this is now a 30-year-old case, right? That means witnesses are going to be testifying about things that happened 30 years ago. That's not easy in any case. Now, prosecutors will say that they have an audio intercept of Raul Castro where they may have his voice. That would be a very important piece of evidence. Of course, there'll be a fight over whether that becomes admissible, but probably would be, so a lot of things to think about after the point of we've got an indictment, we now have a grand jury. Then you start thinking about the next steps, which is getting them here and what a trial might look like.

MUIR: 94 years old Raul Castro and I know it is a bit of a guessing game at this point, Dan Abrams, but what does that look like when you talk about extraditing a 94-year-old to the United States for a case 30 years later here?

MUIR: Look, Cuba doesn't extradite, right? So, there's going to have to be some new policy that is implemented based on political force to get Cuba to suddenly give up Raul Castro. I don't see how that would happen. But look, things are changing and there's a lot of pressure going on right now. So — so that would be the only way. There's not going to be, I don't think, the sort of typical extradite extradition process that we would have with, for example, you know, a European ally, etc. So, that's going to be the first thing they're going to have to think about. And you point out, David correctly, his age, right? He's 94 years old. You know, how long would this process take? Has there been any working behind the scenes to think about what would happen next and how they would go about getting these folks? Remember, in Venezuela, the United States took a took another tack on that and went in and captured him. And the justification was that he was wanted on federal charges, and they were old federal charges. So, could there be a situation like that that happens again here? That's another possibility.

MUIR: Of course, you're bringing up Nicolas Maduro. That looked very different from what we're seeing play out here. But as you point out, Dan, this will certainly be fascinating to watch as it does play out, obviously, because of the relationship between U.S. and Cuba or lack thereof, there isn't an extradition process in place. And even with our allies, extradition can oftentimes be a real challenge, let alone when you're dealing with ongoing tension for many, many decades with Cuba. So, we'll continue to watch the legal process still very early in all of this, since we have just learned of the indictment, Dan Abrams watching along with us here today. Dan, thank you also watching this play out. And again, we're awaiting the attorney general who will take questions from reporters in that room, including our Pierre Thomas. As we await that moment, I want to bring in Teresa Rodriguez. She's a longtime former reporter for Univision, very well known in South Florida across the country, but in South Florida, particularly because she covered Cuba for many years, continues to cover this story. This is a major headline, a major development for many who wanted to see charges for three decades now.

TERESA RODRIGUEZ: It certainly is. David, thank you for having me here. As has been said already, 30 years in the making, so this is quite unprecedented. And especially for a government, a regime like Cuba's. Now, when the question is that Dan brought up, what happens next? No. Will the regime, will Raul Castro be defiant? Is there already a planned plan in place that we don't know about? These are all questions we got to think about. We got to think about the Maduro playbook. Circumstances are definitely different here. But for some of these people that I see in that audience today, some of them are relatives, one of which I spoke to yesterday. And you can see the smiles on their faces. They lost their loved ones, they lost their — their sons. So this is quite a day, a historic day for the Cuban exile community, not just here, but all over the world.

MUIR: Theresa, we have heard in recent months from President Trump a number of messages on Cuba. Among the messages we have heard that there could be a friendly takeover. In his words, he said there have been back-channel talks, if you will, with Cuba. But he's also indicated if it's not a friendly takeover, that regardless, it is time for leadership change there. I know it's a hypothetical for you, but it is hard to predict what this is going to look like, what Cuba will look like in the months ahead, weeks ahead perhaps.

RODRIGUEZ: Oh, it certainly is. But I will tell you this. The Cuban government, the Cuban regime, is very aware of how politics work in the United States and timing of everything. So, they know that if any action is going to take place, it's going to take place soon, sometime before the midterm elections. And I will also say that they do respect President Trump, because after what happened with Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, they respect him a lot more and they take him seriously. And also things that are happening and falling into place as if, you know, the dominoes, they're all falling into place. Today is the 20th. It is the day of the revolution. It's observed by the people outside of Cuba. It's a day that Cuba was freed from Spain, but obviously not observed in the island. Also, the fact that Secretary Marco Rubio sent a very direct message today via X to the people in Cuba, and this is the first time he's done it in Spanish, where he's clarifying we are not responsible. The embargo is not responsible for this dire situation you are facing right now. Your government is responsible for this, and then he also made an appeal and he said, this administration, this President, wants to give you the opportunity to be able to speak freely without any fear of repercussions. This administration wants to give you the opportunity to know what it's like to have ownership, own your own property, your own businesses, and become — become as prosperous as those Cubans who are living just 90 miles from your border. So, it was a very direct message. He also talked about the aid that they want to the humanitarian aid, the \$100 million they'd like to provide Cuba. So, it was a very direct message. Did they hear this? I hope they did. But a lot of things are happening, and I think there's a bigger plan in motion here.

MUIR: Theresa Rodriguez, veteran journalist who has covered Cuba for many, many years. Our thanks to you right now. Florida's attorney general speaking after him, Todd Blanche, will be back up at the microphone to take questions. And Teresa makes an excellent point that the Cuban people but certainly the Cuban regime, the leadership of Cuba, very aware of politics in the U.S. and how this works here, that with an announcement of an indictment and with the upcoming midterm elections this year, of course, just a few months away, that the dominoes could fall here and fall rather quickly. I want to bring in Whit Johnson, who was just in Cuba, interviewed the foreign minister for us. We aired the interview on *World News Tonight* with not only did you talk to the foreign minister, but you talked to people in the Cuban community who live there, the Cuban people, to get their thoughts on the situation, the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. But I want to start with the foreign minister. When you sat down across from him, was there a realization that change was coming through the legal process in this indictment? And certainly the political pressure that's mounting, given what the Trump administration is signaling here?

WHIT JOHNSON: Yes, David, I absolutely got the sense that Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez was feeling that additional pressure from the United States. And, in fact, at the moment that we sat down, there was another round of sanctions that the United States imposed on Cuba. We've sort of seen this week after week. And this is just, you know, one more example of how the Trump administration is turning up that pressure. And if they're not going to get the Cuban government to go along and change on its own, they're trying to force that change. And there are some interesting takeaways in my conversation with the foreign minister. One, he said that talks between the U.S. and Cuba were showing no signs of progress whatsoever. He also said that they take the threats from President Trump seriously, but that there would be a bloodbath if the U.S. tried to take military action, something similar to what we saw in Venezuela. And I pressed the

foreign minister if they were willing to negotiate on anything, if anything was on the table, as it comes to demands from the United States government economic reforms, the release of political prisoners, which he denied that Cuba even has, and we know that's not true. Based on numerous reports from human rights groups. But he essentially said that Cuba was unwilling to talk about anything relating to its internal affairs, and unwilling to take any responsibility for the current state of the suffering of the Cuban people. And David, I can tell you, I've been getting messages from people today. The situation is growing much more desperate. There's a lot of anticipation about what will come next, what the United States might do. I interviewed somebody who was sifting through the trash, looking for food, also looking for phone cables that perhaps they could sell on the black market. I heard from a family who said that the blackouts there are getting worse. They were 16 hours a day when I was there a couple of weeks ago. Now? They're 22 hours a day, and many more people are forced to cook their food by burning coal. They can't get fresh food. There are no markets open. They're using nonperishable food items, you know? So — so, people are forced to try to buy a carton of eggs when their monthly salary doesn't even cover that. So — so nothing is working. And it absolutely feels like it's on the brink of collapse. And people are desperate to know what comes next. David.

MUIR: Really fascinating with your reporting here. You know, ABC News has been committed to covering the Cuban people for a very long time. It was a decade ago. We took *World News Tonight*, the broadcast to Cuba, anchoring in an historic broadcast from there. And I remember at the time when I was traveling through Havana and other places, talking with the Cuban people, they were actually telling me at the time that many of them and look at this — this is a culture frozen in time. You know, the cars are beautiful. And it's something that you would see here in America, you know, at a vintage car show, an antique car show. But they're — they're without parts. You know, this is because everything is frozen in time there.

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2:02:35 p.m.

3 minutes and 43 seconds

PIERRE THOMAS: Key question, why now? Was there a breakthrough in this case? Can you speak to the evidence that leads you to believe that Raul Castro directly participated in the deaths of those Americans who were killed? And I have a follow-up.

ACTING ATTORNEY GENERAL TODD BLANCHE: Well, I cannot explain or justify why now as opposed to two decades ago or 30 years ago when it happened. But what I can say is that you just heard a lot of people talk about a ton of work that the FBI did, state and local intelligence communities, our U.S. Attorney and the Attorney General's — state attorney general's team. And that evidence was presented to a grand jury in late April and an indictment was returned. So, I can't as far as what the evidence is — well, a lot of it's in the indictment, and it would not be appropriate or fair to comment outside of the indictment about the evidence. But as you guys know, a grand jury is presented with evidence and then returns an indictment to the extent that — that they believe there's probable cause, that a crime has been committed, which a grand jury certainly did here.

THOMAS: And quick follow-up, what are the prospects that you could get Raul Castro to the United States to face justice, given the situation there? And what steps — steps are the U.S. willing to take to get him back here?

BLANCHE: Well, we — we indict men outside of this country all the time, and there's all kinds of different ways that we get them here. The reason why we indict somebody is because we want them here to face justice in front of a jury of their peers. So — [CHEERS AND APPLAUSE] — how we go about doing that obviously depends on the circumstances in the case, and I'm not going to go beyond that. But — but we expect we didn't indict — this isn't a show indictment. This is an indictment because we — we expect that — there was a warrant issued for his arrest. So, we expect that he will show up here by his own will or by another way, and go to prison. and go to prison. All right. Next question.

MUIR: The acting attorney general, Todd Blanche, taking questions. Pierre Thomas making news with his question there. How do you intend to get the 94 year old Raul Castro brought back to the United States? You heard Todd Blanche say, this is not a show indictment. This is the real thing. There is a warrant for his arrest. And he indicated that he would be brought back, but could not say exactly how he would be brought back here. But the intention is to have him tried by a jury of his peers with this indictment stemming three decades after the shootdown of those two planes carrying humanitarian aid. That, of course, resulted in the deaths of four people, three of whom were Americans. Again, the major news today an indictment unsealed. The Justice Department has just unsealed this indictment charging the Cuban — the former Cuban President, Raul Castro, with murder for his alleged role in that 1996 shootdown of those two planes carrying four people, humanitarian aid. And again, three of the four were Americans. As I mentioned just moments ago, we have taken the broadcast to Cuba many times over the course of the last decade and more. At the time when I went ten years ago, the Cuban people, 11 million or so, were making about \$20 a month. Just about five percent had internet access to what the world was talking about. And even that was restricted. You saw, you know, more than a decade later, Whit Johnson returned to darkness. Now, 22 hours a day in the dark, with these energy blackouts and the blockade, and now this indictment of Raul Castro, it would appear that both legally and politically, things are changing in Cuba.