

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

5

#### 6. Cuban Seizure of Panamanian Flag Vessels

On December 15, 1971, Cuban gunboats seized the M/V Johnny Express in Bahamian waters and brought it back to a Cuban port. The Cuban government charged that the Johnny Express as well as the Layla Express seized by Cuban gunboats 10 days earlier, had engaged in subversive attacks against Cuban territory. The White House strongly protested the Cuban attacks on vessels engaged in peaceful commerce in international waters and demanded the release of the wounded US citizen captain of the Johnny Express, Jose' Villa. The US later ordered protective surveillance of sister ships of the seized vessels in the Caribbean to prevent a repetition of these incidents. The Panamanian government at first communicated with the Cuban government via the Mexican Embassy in Havana, requesting the Cuban version of the Johnny Express incident. Later, a Panamanian delegation accepted Castro's invitation to come to Cuba to be informed on circumstances of this incident. In early January, all except four of the crew members of the Johnny Express were released to Panamanian custody. The four, including Captain Villa, as well as the ships and cargo remain in Cuban custody.

\* \* \*

It should be noted that most of the above incidents relate to the issue of our jurisdiction in the Canal Zone, which is the key issue in the current canal treaty negotiations with Panama. If we can successfully conclude negotiation of a new treaty with Panama, the potential for such incidents in the future will be reduced. If not, then we can expect the jurisdictional issue to continue to exacerbate US-Panamanian relations with the likelihood of further such unexpected incidents. ARA/PAN has acquired experience in the crisis management of such incidents and in the inter-agency coordination related thereto.

ARA-LA/PAN:LJHorwitz:ns  
February 2, 1972

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~