

The plot to kill Castro

Last July, Cuba's leading general and war hero, Arnaldo Ochoa, was shot by a firing squad. Thirteen other senior military officers and intelligence officials were also executed at the same time or sentenced to long prison terms. All had been accused of dealing in the transshipment of drugs from Latin America to the United States.

Now, according to mounting evidence, it appears almost certain the executions were the result of a plot to overthrow Cuba's eternal strongman, Fidel Castro and brother, Raul, the minister of defence.

Three other high-ranking generals and four colonels are currently on trial in Havana, all charged with "abusing" power. A widespread purge of the military and secret police apparatus that rules Cuba is under way, with more heads expected to roll. In this trial, the government dropped the smoke screen of drug trading and went right to the heart of the matter — raw power.

The attempted coup in Havana came around the 30th anniversary of Castro's seizure of power. Small wonder. Many of Cuba's 10 million people are fed up with three decades of threadbare life, food lines and empty revolutionary slogans — just like their long-suffering fellows in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China.

The gale of political and economic unrest sweeping the communist world has finally hit Cuba. Mikhail Gorbachev underlined this point during his uncomfortable visit to Havana this past summer. Mother Russia is broke, he told Castro. The annual \$6 billion subsidy from Moscow had to be sharply cut. Cuba would have to stop stirring the pot in Central America and pull its 60,000-man army out of Angola, in keeping with the new Soviet-U.S. entente. And, Gorbachev reportedly added, it was high time for Cuba to evolve out of 1950's Stalinism into the era of new thinking.

Fidel Castro openly and disdainfully rejected the advice of his Soviet patrons. Cuba, he promised, would adhere to rigid communism and the "sacred" confrontation with the Yankee imperialists. Revolution must take precedence over bourgeois comforts. Or, as Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias put it to me nicely, "Castro still thinks he's up fighting in the mountains."



ERIC MARGOLIS



The two key factors that combined to produce an attempted coup against Castro have been Cuba's worsening slide into poverty and the war in Angola. Cuba maintains the second largest armed forces in Latin America after Brazil and by far the most militarily effective fighting force south of the Rio Grande. Cuban troops have been in combat in Angola against UNITA guerrillas and South African troops since 1975. Defence spending and socialist ineptness have wrecked the once rich Cuban economy.

Last fall I was up in the combat zone in northern Namibia and southern Angola where UNITA and South African forces had been battling communist forces. Months earlier, UNITA, backed by a small South African contingent, had been on the verge of taking the key south Angolan road junction at Cuito Cuanavale. Castro ordered Gen. Ochoa, with a full armored division and heavy air support into the battle.

The Cubans sent in more tanks and aircraft than Canada has in its entire armed forces — this in the remote bush of southern Africa. After fierce battles, the anti-communist forces were fought to a draw. The youthful, dashing Ochoa emerged as Cuba's new hero. Suddenly, Cubans — and particularly the tens of thousands of returned Cuban troops who had rotated through the Angolan war — saw an attractive face that didn't have a beard.

Ochoa and his African veterans might offer a modernizing alternative to the crusty Fidel. Many Cubans no doubt want a change. They receive Miami TV and radio and most know that what the regime tells them about the enormous success of the revolution are just so many barefaced lies. Rather, in fact, like the Chinese students in Tiananmen Square.

Some devious thinkers even raise conjecture that the Soviets, who had close contact with Ochoa in Angola, might have encouraged his plot.

No doubt, the fiery-tongued Fidel has become something of a liability to Moscow's new image of sweetness and light. Get rid of the bombastic Castros, put in someone more modern-thinking, and get Cuba off the backs of the Soviet taxpayers. After all, the Americans would dearly love to resume their old romance with Cuba. Any new Cuban leader who says nice things to the Yankees and stops tweaking their noses will be sure to get lots of dollars.

Meanwhile, Fidel glowers at a changing world that has passed him by, an old lion whose roar not many Latins want to hear any more. An important symbol of Latin manhood and resistance to Yankee bullying he still remains, but a fading one. Now he has to listen for the sounds of soldiers in the night.