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BEHIND THE LINES

By Warren Rogers Jr.

WASHINGTON.

Emotions are running high among the 20,000 Cuban exiles in Miami who are related to the 1,113 Bay of Pigs veterans wasting away in Cuban prisons.

The situation is so tense, at this pre-holiday season, that plans to hold an open field mass in Miami this week have been called off. The mass, a ceremony utterly basic to Catholicism in that it celebrates the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, was to be offered as a prayer seeking the intercession of St. Joseph, the head of the Holy Family.

The sponsors of the mass were to be the grieving members of the Cuban Families Committee for Liberation of Prisoners of War. But they decided, after weighing the emotion quotient among the 20,000 or so who would attend the mass, that it was too dangerous from a security point of view. Having that many people in one assembly, even for a religious rite, would be playing with fire.

The committee's chairman is Alvaro Sanchez Jr., whose son, Eduardo, is one of the sick starving prisoners. To take a reading on the emotions of the people who would attend the mass, all Mr. Sanchez had to do was consult his own heart.

Mr. Sanchez and those with whom he is working are trying to gain the release of the men before it is too late. They were very close to success until, with the onset of the Cuba crisis on Oct. 22, the aggravation of American-Cuban tensions disrupted all negotiations.

Now, with an easing of these tensions, the committee is hoping the men can be freed by Christmas. The deadline is important not only for the symbolism of Christmas, the traditional time of beneficence and humanitarianism. It is important because the men are living under such deplorable conditions that many may not survive beyond Christmas unless they are freed.

It is shocking to the 200,000 Cuban exiles in this country that the Castro regime so callously flaunts the revered Latin American tradition of political asylum and amnesty. The men on the Cuban mainland suffer excruciatingly for lack of food, medical attention and decent housing. But the lot of the leaders of the abortive Bay of Pigs landing in April, 1961, is even worse. They are isolated on the Isle of Pines, off Cuba's southern coast, where, in the words of one survivor, "they are treated like animals."

It may strike many Americans as strange, too, that after all this time the men are still rotting away in prison. They made the invasion with the undercover blessings of the United States government and with the active help of the Central Intelligence Agency. They failed, partly because of bad planning and partly because the support they expected, in the air and otherwise, did not appear. It is the moral responsibility of the American government and the American people to get them out, whatever the cost, and President Kennedy recognizes this.

The price Premier Castro is asking has steadily come down. At first, he wanted \$23 million worth of tractors. Then it was \$62 million cash—the total of all the outrageous fines levied against the men. Now, it is drugs, medicine and baby food to the value of \$62 million if purchased in Havana—actually about \$17 million at wholesale and discount prices in this country. The men will be freed as soon as a down payment, about 20 per cent of the total, arrives in Cuba.

James B. Donovan, the New York lawyer representing the families in negotiations with Premier Castro, is prepared to pick up the ball. But he cannot move until he has had some sort of go-ahead.

The best thing, it seems to me, would be a public statement by President Kennedy that freeing the prisoners would be in the national interest.

It is inconceivable that such a Presidential gesture, made in the spirit of Christmas, could evoke serious objections in this country that he is "soft on Cuba" or some other similar nonsense. The best argument against any talk of this kind is a letter from one of the prisoners, smuggled to the United States recently, which said:

"We are starving to death. Here there are some sick of the lungs, minds, and undernourished, nearly all of us. They should burn on the gallows, and we should hang on the gallows. We should go on a hunger strike or provoke a mutiny or whatever is necessary. . . . Forgive me but we are out of our minds."

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