
An aggression against US diplomats in Havana? A groundless story

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The unbelievable story of US diplomats that would have suffered hearing loss and other health problems during their tour of duty in Cuba, was published by the media in August last year. The first of such alleged incidents dates back to November 2016 and the last one to only a few weeks ago.

However, to date there is no credible explanation for the variety of symptoms described, and experts deny that the laws of physics could even apply in some of the hypothesis stated.

The story, which seems a science fiction story, has been taken very seriously in Havana.

On instructions from the senior Government, the Cuban authorities opened their own investigation as soon as they were first notified of the alleged incidents by the US Embassy in Havana and by the US State Department on February 17, this year.

“According to the preliminary results and the information we’ve shared with the US authorities, there is no evidence so far that would confirm the causes or origin of the alleged health problems experienced by the US diplomats and their family members”, stated a familiar source with the Cuban investigation.

The US investigations do not shed any light into the story either. Members of the US specialized agencies were invited to Cuba to conduct an on-site investigation, but the results have not been conclusive. “The truth is that we don’t know what or who have caused this”, acknowledged a spokesperson with the US Department of State, Heather Nauert. “This is why the investigation is still ongoing”.

The complexity of the investigation and the perplexity of the experts have not prevented some from trying to point at Cuba as the nation responsible, as they also try to reverse the progress achieved in the US-Cuba bilateral relations that has been taking place as from December 17, 2014.

Marco Rubio, a senator of Cuban-origin and a hardliner against any rapprochement with Havana, sent a letter recently to the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, requesting the expulsion of all Cuban diplomats from Washington D.C. and the eventual closing of the US Embassy in Havana as retaliation for the alleged “sonic attacks” that would have caused the health problems to the US officials in Cuba.

However, the letter signed also by the Republican senators Tom Cotton, Richard Burr, John Cornyn and James Lankford, mentions no proof of the “Cuban guilt” and leaves out the willingness that the Cuban authorities expressed from day one, to cooperate and conduct the investigation.

Rubio was one of the minds behind the review of the Cuba policy adopted by the Trump Administration in June this year to intensify the application of the blockade. The legislator, who holds a seat in the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, has used every means available to him to restrain the ties between both countries.

Unbelievable facts

The hypothesis of a “Sonic attack” and the use of sophisticated “Sonic devices” against US diplomats have been constant since the story hit the headlines despite the lack of evidence and the criteria of experts indicating that no device is able to cause the symptoms described in the conditions stated.

The US Department of State has remained tight-lipped on the particular damages to the health of its personnel in Havana, but the media has reported a wide variety of symptoms. In some cases, these symptoms include severe headaches, dizziness and hearing loss, while others have experienced cognitive disruption, memory loss and mild brain damage.

The diagnosis provoke confusion among experts, the FBI, the State Department and the US agencies involved in the investigation, according to reports of the Associated Press (AP).

“Brain damage and concussions, that’s not possible”, said Joseph Pompei to AP, a former MIT researcher and psychoacoustics expert. “Somebody would have to submerge their head into a pool lined with very powerful ultrasound transducers”.

Dr. Toby Heys, Leader of the Future Technologies research center at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK, told New Scientist last month that directing ultrasound into the ear cavity could theoretically cause permanent hearing damage but it would require the use of huge devices in great volumes, which would be difficult to hide.

Sonic weapons used to disperse crowds and for the protection of some vessels in the face of pirate ships, work with the same type of equipment. The devices cover a considerable area and every person within its reach is affected.

However, most of the alleged incidents in Havana, according to US public sources, took place in enclosed spaces, sometimes even inside one single room, and with precision laser, affecting one person in particular, without affecting the rest.

Some of the alleged attacks would have taken place in the residence of diplomats and even in public buildings such as the Hotel Capri recently refurbished, a 19-story tower of concrete and 250 rooms, where there are no reports of other hotel guests affected.

According to AP reports, the FBI itself travelled to Havana and investigated some of the rooms where the attacks would have taken place, but found no trace of sonic devices.

The Cuban specialized services have not detected “possible perpetrators or individuals with motivation, intention or means to carry out this sort of actions”, according to sources linked to the investigations. “The presence of suspicious individuals or means have not been established at the places or surrounding areas where the incidents were reported”.

In Cuba, there is no precedent of this sort of actions. “The Cuban authorities don’t have nor are they familiar with the equipment or the technology that could be used for purposes similar to those described as sonic attacks”, added the same source.

Cuba has always been willing to cooperate

After they were notified for the first time by the US Embassy in Havana, the Cuban authorities set up an inter-institutional expert commission to analyze the facts. They expanded and intensified the measures that guarantee the protection, security and safety of the Embassy premises, its staff and the diplomatic residences. They also opened new direct communication channels between the US Embassy and the Cuban Department for the Security and Safety of Diplomats, as stated in the official statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated August 9, 2017, when the news were made public.

The Cuban side insisted that the US specialized agencies should travel to the country and conduct the investigations on-site, which occurred in June 2017. Other visits by these agencies took place in August and September.

"The three meetings held between representatives of the Cuban authorities and the US specialized agencies took place against a constructive and professional backdrop", said a source with knowledge of the exchanges. The US side, he stated, expressed the intention to cooperate "more substantially with the investigation of the incidents". Likewise, the members of the US specialized agencies who have visited Cuba, have acknowledged that the Cuban local authorities have acted promptly and with professionalism.

"We value positively the continuity of these visits. The Cuban authorities have great interest in expediting and completing the investigation, for which purpose, cooperation from the US authorities is essential", said the source.

In the face of countless of variables to the case, influenced by the long history of conflicts between the two countries, cooperation is essential. Some of the fundamental aspects for the success of this cooperation and to achieve the results in any case scenario should include actions such as: timely notification of the incidents; submitting evidence; sharing information that would help establish the facts and identify possible perpetrators, should there be any; having access to those affected and to the medical doctors who diagnosed, and exchange with those experts who are familiar with the incidents and the alleged technology used.

Not even in the worst moments

Another fact that does not add up to the story of the sonic attack is timing. In November 2016, the governments of Cuba and the United States advanced quickly towards the completion of an important number of agreements for the benefit of both peoples.

After a long history of aggressions and attempts to subdue the Cuban people out of hunger and necessity, to transform the Cuban political system, the Obama Administration acknowledged on December 17, 2014, that the blockade had failed and accomplished the isolation of the United States.

The political backdrop between the two countries changed completely. Diplomatic ties were reestablished and 22 agreements on different areas were signed, including but not limited to environmental protection, the reopening of non-scheduled flights and the cooperation in the area of security and safety. Who would even think of sabotaging the relationship with Washington?

In addition, if the Cuban government never resorted to the use of aggressive methods against US diplomats out of its revolutionary principles, even when tension was at its height, what would be the logic to start doing so now, after the sovereign decision to reestablish ties with Washington?

On May, the State Department expelled two Cuban officials from the United States as a consequence of the alleged attacks that damaged the health of members of its staff in Havana, a measure considered by Cuba as "groundless and unsubstantiated".

Now we know that, at the same time the Cuban officials were being expelled, the Cuban authorities were conducting the investigation and expressing their complete willingness to collaborate with their US counterparts.

The official statement by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs reads that Cuba "strictly and seriously" observes and has always observed its obligations deriving from the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which refer to the protection of the integrity of diplomatic agents and local staff of the mission. "Our country's impeccable track record in this area is recognized internationally and Cuba is universally considered as a safe destination for

both visitors and foreign diplomats, including the Americans”, he said.

In line with the statement, a Cuban high-ranking diplomat reaffirmed that “that Cuba has never perpetrated nor will it ever perpetrate actions of this nature, and has never permitted nor will it ever permit any third-party use of its territory for this purpose”.

Facing the lack of evidence and the complexity of this case, the Cuban authorities keep the investigation open and are willing to collaborate with their US counterparts to establish the facts.
