

Aggression against U.S. diplomats in Havana: Unfounded and implausible

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The strange story of U.S. diplomats suffering hearing loss and other damage to their health, while working in Cuba burst into the media this past August. The first of the alleged incidents goes back to November of 2016, and the most recent supposedly occurred just a few weeks ago.

Nevertheless, to date no credible explanation exists for the various symptoms described, and experts deny the relevance of the laws of physics evoked in some of the hypotheses presented.

The case, that appears to have been extracted from a spy novel, is being taken very seriously in Havana.

As directed by the highest level of government, Cuban authorities began their own investigation as soon as they received the first notifications from the U.S. Embassy and the State Department on February 17, this year.

"According to preliminary results obtained and the information shared by U.S. authorities, at this time there is no evidence that confirms the causes or origin of the alleged health issues of U.S. diplomats and their family members," affirmed a source close to the Cuban investigation.

The U.S. investigations, for their part, do not provide any clarity. Members of this country's specialized agencies were invited by Cuba to advance their investigations on the ground here, but their results have not been conclusive.

"We don't know who or what caused this," said State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert, "That's why the investigation is still open."

The complexity of the investigation and the experts' bewilderment have not restrained those attempting to place the responsibility on Cuba and undo the progress made in relations with the United States, which began after December 17, 2014.

The Senator of Cuban origin and opponent of any rapprochement with Havana,

Marco Rubio, recently sent a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in which he requested the expulsion of all Cuban diplomats in Washington and the eventual closing of the country's embassy in Cuba, as a reprisal for the alleged "acoustical attacks" which damaged the health of U.S. officials in Havana.

Nevertheless, the missive additionally signed by Republican Senators Tom Cotton, Richard Burr, John Cornyn, and James Lankford, does not supply any evidence whatsoever of Cuban culpability and ignores the willingness shown, from the very beginning, by local authorities to establish cooperation and move the investigation forward.

Rubio was one of the architects of changes to U.S. policy toward Cuba announced by the Trump administration this past June, to reinforce the implementation of the blockade. The legislator, who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee, has used all kinds of ruses to limit ties between the two countries.

Unprecedented events

The hypothesis of an "acoustic attack" and the use of sophisticated "sonic weapons" against U.S. diplomats has been present since the story came to light, despite the lack of evidence and the opinion of experts denying the possibility that any device could generate the symptoms described, under the conditions reported.

The State Department has not specifically referred to the effects on the health of its personnel in Havana, but the press has reported a broad variety of symptomologies. Some cases include migraines, dizziness, and hearing loss, while others go so far as cognitive impairment, trouble recalling words, and light brain damage.

The diagnoses provoked confusion among experts, the FBI, the State Department, and U.S. agencies involved in the investigation, according to reports from the Associated Press (AP) news agency.

"Brain damage and concussions, it's not possible," said Joseph Pompei, a former MIT researcher and psychoacoustics expert. "Somebody would have to submerge their head into a pool lined with very powerful ultrasound transducers." Toby Heys, the leader of Manchester Metropolitan University's Future Technologies research center, in the UK, told New Scientist it was possible for something emitting infrasound - vibrations at a frequency below what humans can hear - to cause hearing loss, but large speakers at high volume would be required, which would be very difficult to hide.

Sonic weapons used to disperse crowds and protect ships from pirate attacks utilize this type of equipment. The devices take up considerable space and all people within their reach are affected.

But many of the alleged incidents in Havana, according to published U.S. reports, took place in enclosed spaces, sometimes in a single room, with laser precision, affecting a specific person without hurting anyone else.

Some of the attacks allegedly took place in the residences of diplomats, and even in public buildings such as the recently remodeled Capri Hotel, a 19-story concrete skyscraper with 250 rooms, where no guests have reported any such health problems.

According to AP, the FBI itself traveled to Havana and carried out investigations in some of the rooms where the attacks presumably occurred. They found no evidence of sonic devices.

For their part, Cuban specialized services have not detected "possible perpetrators, or persons with the motivation, intention, or means to take this type of action," according to sources close to the investigation, "Nor has the presence been established of suspicious persons or devices in the places where the incidents have been reported, nor in their surroundings."

No precedent exists in Cuba of events with these characteristics. "Cuban authorities do not possess or have any familiarity with equipment or technology that could be used for the purpose described as an acoustic attack," the same source adds.

Cuba has always been willing to cooperate

After receiving the first the first notifications from the U.S. embassy, Cuban authorities created an inter-institutional committee of experts to analyze the events; they expanded and reinforced protective measures and security at the site, for personnel, and diplomatic residences; and activated new means of direct communication between the embassy and the Department of Diplomatic Security, according to the official statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this past August 9, when the news became public.

Cuba insisted that specialized U.S. agencies visit the country and proceed with investigations onsite, which was in fact done in June. Other visits were conducted in the months of August and September.

"The three meetings held between representatives of Cuban authorities and specialized U.S. agencies were held in a constructive, professional climate," reported a source with knowledge of the exchanges, adding that the U.S. delegation expressed its intention to cooperate "in the investigation of these incidents in a more substantive manner." Likewise, members of specialized agencies who have visited Cuba recognized that local authorities have acted in a timely, professional fashion.

"We consider the continuation of these visits positive. Cuban authorities are very much interested in accelerating and concluding the investigation, for which the cooperation of U.S. authorities is essential," the source stated.

Given the innumerable variables in the case, marked by the long history of conflict between the two countries, cooperation is essential. Reporting incidents immediately; supplying evidence; sharing information that facilitates characterization of the events or the identification of possible suspects, if they exist; providing access to those affected and the doctors who diagnosed their health problems; and interacting with experts with knowledge of the incidents and the alleged technology used would be basic elements of such cooperation, and would produce results in any situation.

Not even in the worst moments

Another major inconsistency in the saga is the moment when the incidents allegedly began. In November of 2016, the governments of Cuba and the United States were rapidly advancing in the establishment of a series of important agreements that would benefit both countries.

After a long history of aggression and attempts to force surrender on the Cuban people with hunger and deprivation, with the goal of transforming its political system, the Barack Obama administration recognized, on December 17, 2014, that the blockade was a failure and had ended up isolating the United States itself.

The climate between the two countries changed significantly. Diplomatic relations were established and 22 agreements were signed on a variety of subjects, ranging from environmental protection and the reopening of direct flights to cooperation on security matters. Who could be interested in sabotaging relations with Washington?

Moreover, if, as a question of revolutionary principles, the government of Cuba has never resorted to aggressive methods against U.S. diplomats, even in the moments of greatest tension, what reason would there be to begin to do so after making the sovereign decision to reestablish relations with Washington?

This past May, the State Department requested that two Cuban officials leave U.S. territory, as a consequence of the acts that allegedly damaged the health of its diplomatic personnel in Havana, a measure that Cuba described as "unjustified and rash."

It is now known that, precisely when this occurred, Cuban authorities were undertaking investigative action and showing their full disposition to collaborate with their U.S. counterparts.

The official statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates that Cuba is fulfilling, and has always fulfilled, with "all rigor and seriousness," its obligations as established in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961, in terms of protecting the physical integrity of diplomatic staff and mission sites.

"The impeccable record of our country in this area is internationally recognized, and Cuba is universally considered a secure destination for foreign visitors and diplomats, including those from the United States," the statement reads.

In this same tone, a high ranking Cuban diplomat reaffirmed, "The Cuban government has not perpetrated, nor will

it perpetuate, attacks of any kind on

accredited diplomatic officials or their families, nor has it permitted, nor will it permit, that Cuban territory be used by third parties for this purpose."

Given the lack of evidence and the complexity of the case, Cuban authorities are keeping the case open, and are ready to collaborate with their U.S. counterparts to clarify the events.

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