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Cuba honors five spies who served long prison terms in U.S.

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By [Daniel Trotta](#)

HAVANA (Reuters) - Cuba President Raul Castro on Tuesday pinned medals on five spies, declaring them national heroes for infiltrating right-wing exile groups that plotted against Havana and for then enduring long prison terms in the United States.

The final three of the "Cuban Five" returned home in a prisoner exchange on Dec. 17 - the same day the United States and Cuba announced they would restore diplomatic ties and seek to end more than half a century of confrontation.

The two others had been previously released.

All five received a standing ovation from Cuba's top political leaders, military officers and hundreds of dignitaries gathered in parliament.

Besides being named Heroes of the Republic, the Cuban government's highest honor, they also received the Order of Playa Giron, the Cuban name for the Bay of Pigs invasion, in which Cuba defeated a U.S.-organized exile force in 1961.

While U.S. President Barack Obama's reversal of Cuba policy dominated U.S. headlines following the Dec. 17 announcement, in Cuba, the government emphasized the release of its intelligence agents, which became a cause célèbre after their 1998 arrest and 2001 conviction in U.S. courts.

Absent from Tuesday's ceremony was former President Fidel Castro, 88, who has not appeared in public in more than a year, but was honored in a video presentation and in speeches.

"Commander in chief, this decoration that we proudly receive today belongs to you as well," said Gerardo Hernandez, 49, the leader of the spy network who had received a double life sentence.

Hernandez called on fellow Cubans to support government attempts at modernizing the socialist economy and re-establishing ties with the United States.

"The honor that we receive today also demands that we rise to the challenges facing the revolution," he said.

The Cuban Five were convicted for spying on Cuban exile groups in Florida at a time when the anti-Castro extremists were bombing Cuban hotels and staging acts of sabotage meant to destabilize the Communist government.

Hernandez and two others were freed on Dec. 17 in an exchange for a Cuban man who had been jailed nearly 20 years for spying on his own country for the Americans.

That same day Cuba released American aid worker Alan Gross in a humanitarian gesture after he had been held five years for bringing banned telecommunications equipment into Cuba.

(Reporting by Daniel Trotta, editing by G Crosse)



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