

World & Nation

Miami bishop settles siege at Oakdale detention center

By Stephenie Overman
Washington (NC) — For Auxiliary Bishop Agustin A. Roman of Miami, settling the siege of the detention center at Oakdale, La., was a "moment of peace."

Cuban detainees took hostages at the center and in the Atlanta federal prison after hearing that the United States and Cuba had resumed an agreement that could have meant their deportation.

But after hearing a videotaped message from Bishop Roman, who was forced into exile from Cuba in 1961, the Oakdale detainees reached an agreement with the government November 29, and released the 26 hostages they had been holding for eight days.

According to a translation of his message, Bishop Roman said, "This is a moment of peace. It is a day which must be a beginning for you. This is what I desire. I want you to release the prisoners who are in your custody and I want you to demonstrate to the world the good will that every Christian should have in his heart."

Bishop Roman said he had reviewed the agreement with the government "and I can tell you there is nothing missing in it."

"Sign the document," the bishop said. "You can be sure that what you will have done is good."

The government's agreement with the Cubans stated that decisions would stand in the cases of detainees whose parole had

already been determined, and who had families or sponsors in the United States. It also agreed to give individual hearings to the detainees.

The Oakdale agreement had no immediate effect on Cuban detainees in Atlanta, but Jesuit Father Edward Salazar, who has conducted prayer vigils outside the prison, said November 30 that the Cubans there had been asking for Bishop Roman.

"I've heard from the Cubans themselves that they wanted Bishop Roman," he said. "The situation at Oakdale should not be misread — there's still a long way to go — but there's hope (in Atlanta) because of what the Church has been able to do."

"The mood now is they want to know there will be a follow-through on the promises" made in Oakdale that were "signed before a representative of the Church and a Cuban," he said.

Father Salazar said Masses were celebrated outside the prison on Thanksgiving, November 26, and the following Sunday, Nov. 29.

The November 29 Mass was moved so that family members could see the detainees inside the prison. Some were able to talk to them through loudspeakers, according to Father Salazar.

"Some children came to me and said, 'I saw my daddy,'" he said, adding that he was worried about the detainees' families. "I'm worried about it dragging on. They're so



A charred shell is all that remains of buildings at the Oakdale, La., detention center where Cuban prisoners took prison workers hostage.

tired. I try to give them hope."

Among the 100 hostages held in Atlanta was Father Raymond G. Dowling, a priest of the Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., who has been a chaplain in Atlanta since May.

Father Dowling, 57, previously worked in parishes in Mexico. A native of Neenah, Wis., he worked in parishes in the Green Bay Diocese and was a college chaplain.

The Cuban detainees had said they feared death if deported to their homeland but "family is the key," Bishop Roman said in a telephone interview before he left for Oakdale.

Although some of the inmates had criminal records or histories of mental illness before they fled Cuba in 1980, many are being held for minor offenses committed in the United States. Of the latter group, many have families in the United States.

"To drive with alcohol is not a good thing, I understand," the bishop said in the interview, citing a possible offense, but it should not mean that a Cuban will "be in prison forever."

They should be able to serve their sentences then "go back to work for their families."

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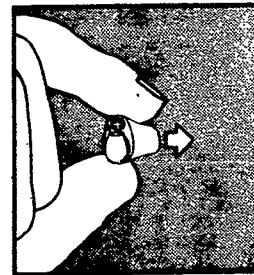
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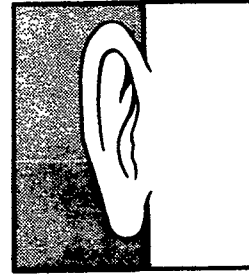
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