

THE 1980 CANIMAR RIVER MASSACRE BY THE CUBAN COMMUNIST REGIME

**56 assassinated, including four children, on July 6, 1980,
in Cuban territorial waters.**

The Canimar is a scenic Cuban river that flows into Matanzas Bay, near Varadero beach. In 1980, a tourist excursion service was inaugurated using a large boat, the "XX Aniversario," with two decks of chairs and capacity for 100 passengers. It was to navigate for approximately 5 miles inland along the Canimar river.

On 6 July, 1980, the excursion boat was hijacked by three youngsters who wanted to flee Cuba by taking the boat to the United States –Ramón Calveiro Leon (15 years old) and the brothers Silvio Aguila Yanes (18 years old) and Sergio Aguila Yanes (19 years old). Sergio was a Sergeant in the Cuban Armed Forces (FAR). Another youngster involved in the plot, Humberto Martínez Echazabal (19 years old), reportedly never made it when the hijacking took place. Upon taking control of the vessel, the youngsters shouted: "To Miami!" amid screams of approval on the part of the surprised 100 passengers aboard. The boat's security guard resisted and shot at the youngsters, who wounded him with firearms they had brought aboard the boat. Concerned for his health, they placed him on a fisherman's boat that came along, together with a passenger who wanted to leave, and sent them back to shore. Upon arriving, they alerted authorities. Meanwhile, the "XX Aniversario" had turned around and entered Matanzas Bay, heading out to open seas.

Julián Rizo Alvarez, Secretary of the Communist party in Matanzas Province, commanded a chase into open seas. He dispatched two high-speed Cuban Navy patrol boats with orders to not allow the excursion boat to leave Cuba, sinking it if necessary. The patrol boats opened fire on the excursion boat and the youngsters defended themselves, firing back. When the patrol boat withdrew, they left some dead and wounded passengers on the deck of the "XX Aniversario." The boat was then attacked by a Cuban Air Force plane, which opened fire on the passengers on deck, leaving more dead and wounded and the deck covered with blood.

The excursion boat was reportedly very close to international waters when a huge boat rammed the much smaller riverboat in the middle, sinking it. The surviving passengers, now in the water, soon had to contend with sharks attracted by all the blood. Silvio Aguila Yanes dove into the water and saved several survivors from drowning. Ten survivors were taken ashore by authorities.

The government did not allow any communal funerals for the victims. The survivors were ordered to keep their silence about the incident and to never gather in groups in which more than two of them were present. For several years, government agents were stationed to monitor their activities while victims' relatives and survivors were offered gifts of televisions, refrigerators, and other appliances usually reserved for high government officials.

There are conflicting reports about the fate of Sergio Aguila Yanes. The Cuban government claims he committed suicide with his pistol. Others report that Sergio was taken from the water by the crew of the Cuban Navy patrol boats and never seen again. Silvio Aguila Yanes serves a 30-year prison

sentence at "Combinado del Este" prison in Havana. Witnesses to his imprisonment report he has been subjected to psychiatric torture, receiving large doses of psychotropic drugs. 15 year old Roberto Calveiro served time in prison but reportedly was released and lives in Spain. Other witnesses have made it into exile.

The Cuban government's version is that the the "XX Aniversario" was accidentally sunk when waves forced the larger vessel to collide with it.

The toll of this disaster was 56 victims: eleven (11) bodies recovered and forty-five (45) went missing at sea. Among the children assassinated:

LILIAN GONZÁLEZ LÓPEZ. AGE 3
MARISOL MARTINEZ ARAGONÉS. AGE 17
OSMANY ROSALES VALDÉZ. AGE 9
MARISEL SAN JUAN ARAGONÉS. AGE 11

A final, indirect, victim of this tragedy was Haydée Santamaría de Hart, veteran of the 1953 attack on the Moncada Army barracks, Director of the "Casa de Las Americas," the Cuban government publishing house, and wife of the then Cuban Minister of Education, Armando Hart Davalos. Immediately after the Canimar River tragedy, she visited the hospitals in the city of Matanzas, where survivors were receiving medical attention. One month later, on 25-06-80, Haydee, already in despair about the "Mariel" boat exodus, committed suicide.

Sources:

*Official records of the Revolutionary Tribunal of La Cabana Fortress and from the records of the Provincial Court of Matanzas, published by Dr. Alberto Fibla, Barbarie: Hundimiento del Remolcador 13 de Marzo. Miami: Rodes Printing, 1996. "Cuba reportedly sank hijacked excursion boat in 1980," *Associated Press*, Washington D.C., 8 December, 1985. Joseph B. Treaster, *The New York Times* 8 September, 1985. José Pérez-Marat, La Masacre del Canimar, Miami, undated book. Brown and Lago, 1991, Bower, 1995. Sources: *Records of the provincial court of Matanzas (reproduced in Fibla, 1996, p. 256)*. *Testimony of María Julia Hernandez, niece of victim Vicente Fleites Cabrera*. Norberto Fuentes, edited by Modesto Arocha, *Children of the Enemy*, *The International Republican Institute*, October 1996, /www.sigloxxi.org/Archivo/children.htm.*

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