

# No More Carnivals



## *Cubans struggle to survive their economic crisis*

by Ivor Miller

**T**AKE A WALK in the clear Caribbean light, photographing government slogans. In the heart of Havana, by the sea, stands the faceless US Interest Section, the unofficial embassy in Cuba. As if an outpost on the edge of a frontier, at the edge of its property is a plaque which reads: a government should be created to serve the common needs of its people, and elections should be the basis of that government.

Directly across the street, on Cuban turf, stands a huge mural that reads "Mr. Imperialists: We have absolutely no fear of you," and portrays a growling Uncle Sam facing a confident Cuban soldier across a body of water. On the next block are many painted slogans saying "Socialism or Death," "100% Cuban," or "Pa'lante" (forward). They are painted in bright colors and often phrased in slang, as if they were sprayed at night by guerilla painters risking their lives in a popular struggle.

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*Funded by a Henry Hart Rice Foreign Residency Fellowship, Ivor Miller lived in Cuba for six months in 1991. While living and associating solely with working Cubans, he compiled these observations. He would like to thank Jill Cutler for her support throughout the writing of this article, and for her editing.*

Since Cuba nationalized US investments in the early 1960's, Cuban socialism and US imperialism have been declared enemies. In response, the US began a trade embargo that has kept US business out of Cuba for 32 years, and has effectively driven Cuba into the Soviet camp. To this day the embargo makes it illegal for food or medical supplies to enter Cuba from the US, and makes it difficult for US citizens to visit Cuba. This, along with US pressure on countries within the OAS to stop aid and trade with Cuba has isolated Cuba from capitalist countries. The political battle between the US and Cuba, has a direct impact on the daily life of all Cubans.

**W**HILE VISITING a young man in Havana who lives in a small apartment with his grandmother, I am told the food supply is worse and worse every month. Now in June, bread can only be bought with ration books; in March, it was sold without restrictions. He, like everybody else I meet, comments that I look fat, implying that I have been eating well. He doesn't say it bitterly, just notices it acutely. He says the government is saving huge amounts of food for the upcoming Pan-American games to feed the interna-

tional community, but after that, he fears Cubans themselves will have nothing.

Since September of 1990, in response to cuts in aid in the form of food and oil from the Soviet bloc, Cuba has been in

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what Castro calls the "special period". During this time, all Cubans face severe food, gas and oil shortages, and daily life has become a struggle to survive. In an attempt to raise money, the Cuban government has begun selling percentages of its industries, including hotels, perfume and soap manufacturers, and sugar products industries, to foreign companies, mainly in Canada, Spain, and Brazil.

# En la Capital seguimos en combate



Poster linking Castro's revolution to that of José Martí, martyr in the revolution for Cuban Independence Ivor Miller

Cuba has also established stores, restaurants and hotels for tourists only, thus establishing a class system based on buying privileges. At the top of this system are tourists, then foreign technical workers, then Party officials, and finally the average Cubans themselves. This situation is alluded to in the popular expression "en el país de los ciegos, el tuerto es rey" (in the country of the blind, the one-eyed person is king), meaning those with a foreign passport have many more privileges than Cubans do in Cuba.

Visiting another friend, I become hungry while waiting for him. His refrigerator is empty except for jars of water and a plate of white rice. I put some oil in a pot and light the stove. Surprisingly, there is gas, but it burns for only thirty seconds and then flickers out.

Opening an unmarked can that contains spam-filled hot dogs, I mix it with yesterday's rice. This can, I learn later, had been bought for a high price on the black market. There is absolutely nothing else. As I learn during the next two months in Cuba, the lack of food is a situation com-

mon to millions of Cubans.

At a cafe on 23rd street, hamburgers made with meat substitute are served on a bun with ketchup and nothing else. A flat Cola drink is also served. Tonight I join the line, yet before long the supplies begin to dwindle. People start scrambling to get hamburgers on the sly, by getting friends already seated to buy them food, or by bribing the workers. Soon the place runs out of food. People who had waited for over an hour are left with growling bellies. One man can not contain his frustration. He picks a florescent bulb from the trash and smashes it into the pavement, sending an explosion through the quiet street. In Cuba, violence like this is uncommon, and people are a little shaken.

Ration books have been used in Cuba since the early 1960's as a way to control the distribution of food and other products. All food except certain vegetables are bought with ration books: bread, milk, rice, beans, beer, chicken, and fish. Rationing ensures that if there is food, all will get some. This is dramatically different than the system in the US and other coun-

tries throughout the Americas, where some live and die on a starvation diet, and others have more than they can possibly eat.

Yet Cubans often receive less food than they are allotted. According to their ration books, they should receive red meat twice a month. None has been distributed since April of 1991.

While yogurt, butter, cheese, and cream cheese are produced in Cuba, Cubans never eat cheese. It goes to the hotels.

In order to survive, many Cubans supplement their rationed food with supplies from the black market. The food there is expensive, but available. Most of this food is stolen from government farms, trucks, or storehouses.

I have been hearing a lot in August about 'option zero,' and now that the Soviet Union is leaving Cuba farther and farther behind, people are seeing that their worst fears may become reality. "Option Zero" is just what it says: no option, a time when there is nothing left in the island to eat, nor oil or gas to cook or drive with.

During "Option Zero" Cubans will eat locally grown food in collective kitchens, they will cook with wood and coal. Yesterday I saw a bucket of coal in the kitchen of a friend. It had cost them dearly on the black market.

In the Havana Libre Hotel (previously known as the Havana Hilton), one can find a shoe store with huge glass windows that display glittering shoes from all over the former Soviet bloc—from Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba; and somehow, even from the USA. If one has a tourist passport one may enter, even bring a Cuban friend, and if one has US dollars one may buy.

Professional Rumba dancers in Havana Ivor Miller





Ivor Miller  
Slogan at a Cuban facility for jamming American-broadcast TV Martí: "They will not penetrate!"

Inside there are usually many shoppers from the Soviet Union, Angola, Puerto Rico, Guinea Bissau, and Germany. Yet for the majority of Cubans who have no foreign contacts, there is only the chance to look through the glass windows at what they cannot have. From inside the shoe store, I watched streams of Cubans looking in at the merchandise. They don't look glumly; they chat, point at what they like, and enjoy the air conditioning that is found in few other places besides tourist hotels.

### *The trade embargo and the political battle between the US and Cuba has a direct impact on the daily life of all Cubans.*

Outside the shoe store in the hotel lobby, one often finds young Cuban men and women looking for dates. A sad effect of the tourism industry is the reemergence of prostitution. Young Cubans can now be found throughout the touristed areas of Havana, searching for meat to eat, fine clothing to wear, and hoping to enjoy an evening at a discotheque they cannot enter without the accompaniment of a foreigner. Cuba was once known as the brothel of the Caribbean, yet the Revolution ended prostitution, giving men and women an education and a chance to find other jobs. Regrettably, during the 'special period,' this has changed.

**S**TARING IN DISBELIEF at the scene before me, I see about 400 people in a line that goes beyond the length of a city block. It will take three or four buses to load all these people, yet not one has come for over an hour. There is no pushing, no shouting—only an ocean of people, waiting for something to come. And finally something does come, a huge, double sized, Hungarian-made bus that stands while people rush its doors and force them open from all sides, not bothering to pay the small fare. About half the people waiting cram in, and the bus takes off, blowing streams of diesel fumes through the city.

At the next stop, nearly as crowded as the first, the driver refuses to open the back doors, forcing people to get on in the front and pay the small 10 centavo fare. But the crowds rush it again and pry open the back doors, cramming in and not paying.

We continue riding for a short while through Havana, weaving in and out of small streets, and suddenly a loud explosion is heard. People immediately scream and shout, and the bus tilts to one side like a lame elephant. After the shock is over we laugh, long and loud. We all dismount, and walk to the nearest stop to catch the bus all over again.

Cubans were very gracious about the catastrophe of their buses. They seemed to be apologizing to me for the sorry state their country is in. On one ride a woman, who saw that I was a foreigner, kept shaking her head in disgust, saying "no es facil" (it's not easy).

I had always heard that one of the distinct strengths of the Revolution is that

## CUBAN RATIONS

Current as of August 1991:

- 20 oz. of black beans per person each month.
- One liter of yogurt every two weeks, shared by five people.
- One six ounce block of cream cheese every two weeks, shared by two people.
- Milk:
  - 0-13 years: one liter of milk daily
  - 13-60 years: receive no milk
  - 60 years till death : one liter daily
- There has been no butter for two years. Before that there was one bar per person every 2 weeks.
- 4 eggs per person each week since Nov. 1990.
- One loaf of white bread (submarine style) per person daily.
- Each person receives less than one pound of meat (chicken) per person per month. This means that every 11 days, one small whole chicken is distributed for 4 people.
- One pair of shoes, and one pair of sneakers, each year is rationed per person.
- One bottle of deodorant per person every three months (Since 1980, but often there is none).
- Since 1961 one bar of soap per person per month.
- Before September of 1990 Cubans received one razor blade per month. Since then there has been no shampoo, no razors, and little toilet paper.

—Ivor Miller

Cubans are informed on current politics. The government keeps them aware of world events and their interpretation, because they all are needed to take part in the revolutionary process and to defend

*When I got to Santiago, the official news came: there will be no carnival this year. At a time when people would normally be excitedly creating costumes and rehearsing dances, there is a strange, empty silence.*

their sovereignty. While there are daily news programs that inform Cubans of world events from a Marxist perspective, the bulk of what I saw on Cuban TV was Cuban and Brazilian soap operas. I also saw many US movies, including "Chitty Chit-

*Cubans waiting in a bus stop beneath a portrait of Che Guevara*

Ivor Miller



ty Bang Bang", "Doctor Detroit", starring Dan Akroyd, and "Rin Tin Tin", a Canadian serial about a police dog that sentimentally describes the wonders of a powerful police force. The main difference between Cuban and US TV, it seems, is that the Cuban commercials are for the Party.

In early June there are rumors circulating about a new Cuban film, called "Alicia en el Pueblo Maravilloso" (Alice In Wonder Town). Apparently it has a scene where certain generals and officials are banished to a town in the countryside, where they are voiceless and truncated. The movie has not yet been released, and may not be, because it is reported to be critical of the Party.

Over a week later the film is released, and everyone is talking about it (behind closed doors, of course). That evening in Old Havana, I pass a line of people three blocks long. They are waiting for tickets to the movie. This, after they have waited hours in line for food and other things. The activity around this film shows the dramatic need for Cubans to criticize the Cuban Communist Party, even in a passive way. Those who wait in line are not there because the film has famous actors, good

acting, a plot, good music or direction, but only because they have heard it is critical of the regime. There are so many people that the police are stationed outside of the theatre to control the crowds.

Usually a Cuban film will run for thirty days, but "Alicia" ran for less than a week. Immediately after this, the cinemas ran "Aliens," a US fantasy film, and then "Aliens II," which has continued to show in the theaters, even though the seats are empty.

**C**ARNIVAL in Cuba is held annually around July 26th. I travelled to Santiago at the end of July because people in Havana say that the real Carnival takes place in this beautiful city. Yet when I got there, the official news came: there will be no carnival this year. At a time when people would normally be excitedly creating costumes and rehearsing dances, there is a strange, empty silence. All money is being channelled into the Pan American Games.

Outside of Santiago in El Cobre, townspeople hold block parties that coincide with the larger Carnival. As the festivities begin on July 26th, I walk through town and people invite me to meet the organizers at each street. We drink beer, rum, and pineapple wine, and eat a wonderful maize soup cooked in huge vats in the open air. All the time people ask, "do you feel well, do you need anything? We want you to think well of us because we know people say bad things about us in the US."

Entire extended families, from babies to great-grandparents are out in front of their homes, drinking, talking, but mostly playing records and dancing. The young folks here have a style of salsa called 'casino' that is both raw and intricate. Feet stomp out rhythms, while arms weave cat's cradle designs and shoulders wriggle. It is beautiful and bold. We also dance to Funk and Angolan pop music until 4 am.

My neighbors tell me that last Saturday, July 20th, about thirty people were arrested for trying to sail to Florida in small rafts. They knew this because one of their friends has been caught and is now in jail. These arrests are not in the news, but are instead passed along the rumor circuit. Another neighbor left on Saturday, and on Sunday morning called home from Florida!

**O**NE CUBAN told me how beautiful it was in the beginning, to overthrow a hated dictator, to belong to a Revolution. But now, he says, the ideals

of romantic revolution are gone; there is only hunger and repression. He wondered—if Fidel were a young and rebellious university student today, as he was in the 1950's, and faced with this regime—what would he do?

While talking to the generation in their twenties, one hears a different view of Cuba's situation than from *Granma*, the Party paper. Many say Castro is hoarding wealth and fooling the people. The young want to enjoy life, like the rich tourists they see, and not to tighten their belts. They ask: Why can't we travel abroad? Why can't we shop in a store, go to a hotel, or talk about politics?

Many who normally would not do illegal things, who hate Capitalism and who support the Revolution, have been forced by desperation to eat from the black market. While all Cubans agree that changes must be made within the Party, few agree on what these changes might be. Whether it's to have an electoral system, to create an open farmers' market to buy food, or to give Cubans access to tourist stores, most agree they want Cuba to remain independent; they don't want to become like Puerto Rico.

At 23rd and 12th Street stands a bronze



Hor Miller

*Slogan opposite the US Interest Section in Havana: "100% Cuban"*

plaque with a relief of Fidel and Che Guevara leading a mass of people waving banners. It reads: "the one thing the US government can never forgive us for is having a Socialist Revolution right under their very noses". The unforgiving attitude of

the US government is a reality, and one of the threads in the weave of Cuba's economic crisis. The US and Cuban governments seem to be locked into unchanging positions that continue to press down hard on ordinary Cubans.



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