

# The 'Worms' Become Butterflies

**Cuba:** Now Castro is reaching out to the exiles he used to revile



LES STONE—SYGMA

**Cuba's real welfare system:** A Havana woman shows pictures of her relatives in Miami

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**F**OR CUBANS IN THE UNITED STATES, every letter from home now is a painful ordeal. Relatives, friends and even mere acquaintances back in Cuba are frank about their desperation—and don't hesitate to beg for help. "I am ashamed to send you this, but you have no idea what circumstances are like here," reads one letter. "If you don't have The Dollar, you don't have anything... I'm sending you everybody's shoe size." Another asks for soup concentrate, vitamins and antibiotics. "The girl has a bad throat," it says, "and there's nothing available."

Cuban-Americans are being pulled in opposite directions by the plight of their brethren on the nearly bankrupt island. They're one of the most politically implacable

exile groups in the world, and most of the more than a million Cuban-Americans still want Fidel Castro to fall. But they're also helping to prop up Cuban society by supplying food, medicine and cash to desperate friends and relatives back home. One by one, thousands of Cuban-Americans are getting around the U.S. embargo of the island by lugging duffel bags full of consumer goods onto charter flights that fly 11 times a week between Miami and Havana. This people-to-people supply line has made Castro's government nearly as grateful as the recipients sobbing for joy in the Havana airport. Remittances from abroad may now exceed \$500 million a year, or about one fourth of all the hard currency Cuba will earn in 1994. Wooing the exile community has become one of the regime's top priorities. This week Havana will host a confer-

ence of 240 Cuban émigrés, a group Castro used to dismiss collectively as *gusanos*, or "worms." Now, says Jorge Domínguez of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, "the worms have become butterflies."

A rare visit to Havana shows how much survival in Cuba now depends on the butterflies. The peso buys practically nothing, and Cubans say dollars are their only salvation. "I'm so lucky to have my family [in the States]," says Victoria González-Longoria, 42, an unemployed single mother; she says it's not worth working for a peso salary that works out to less than \$2 a month. "Without the dollars they send, I couldn't buy anything at all." In the old days, Cubans could expect prison terms for holding "enemy" currency. Last summer, partly to lure exile money back to the homeland, the regime made it legal to hold greenbacks. Special hard-currency stores, stocked with imported food, clothing and electronics, have sprouted all over the country. Even local products, no longer available with ration cards, sell for dollars now. A leading Havana musician tells how she was forced to pawn her gold jewelry for dollars to buy two plastic jugs of cooking oil.

**Stolen goods:** The island's stubbornly socialist regime appears powerless to stop "dollarization." Drove of prostitutes now haunt the hotels and restaurants that cater to foreigners. Selling stolen goods, especially cigars and music cassettes, can be a highly lucrative business. With a \$1 bribe to the hotel bouncer, María, 27, can sell a box of expensive Cohibas cigars in the lobby for \$30. The old guard has no such recourse. A middle-ranking government official, once a man of privilege, complains of walking two hours to work in the morning because the buses hardly run anymore (when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did gas supplies). An elite orchestra can hardly complete a four-hour rehearsal, because the musicians are, quite simply, hungry.

The Cuban government hopes that overseas Cubans may perform the same miracles for the fatherland that Overseas Chinese have performed for socialist China. That's not likely. "Cuban exiles could perform the same role—but not under a regime led by Fidel Castro," says Cuba-economy expert Carmelo Mesa-Lago of the University of Pittsburgh. Hard-liners even want to limit charity. "We urge people to send only things that their families really need," says Domingo Moreira, a board member of the Cuban-American National Foundation. Most exile groups oppose this week's conference; oth-





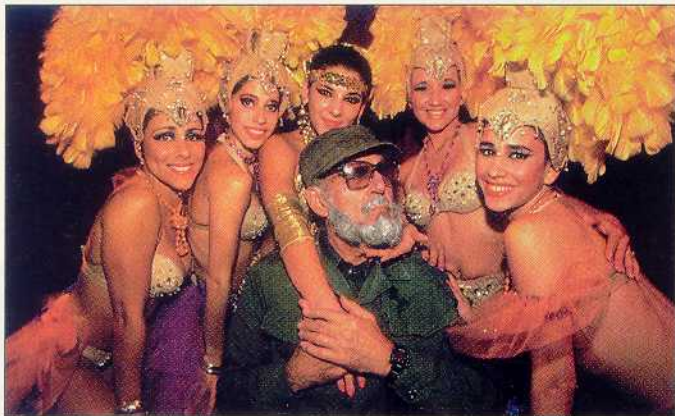
**Supply line:** *Precious greenbacks in Havana; shoe shipment in Miami*

ers, such as the new group Cuban Change, argue that the agenda should include human rights and economic reform, subjects Castro doesn't want to talk about. Still, says Cuban Change founder Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, who spent 22 years in prison for publicly opposing Castro, "This is a small step that could lead to something bigger."

**Slight thaw:** The exiles want to see political reform, and so far Castro has allowed virtually none of it. Intellectuals note a slight thaw in cultural life—one daring movie, a magazine article or two—but they are still frightened enough that none of them would go on the record to NEWSWEEK. Incredibly, Cuba's staggering economic hardships have produced little organized protest. A few riots have broken out during the long electricity blackouts that plague the entire island. But Havana's dissidents are a lonely few.

Despite his political intransigence, Castro appears to be unsure of how to proceed. "The government is vacillating and indecisive," says dissident Elizardo Sánchez. "I have not seen that before." Castro still rails occasionally against foreign capitalists, but tries to lure their investment at the same time, with some modest success. He's hoping to revive the agricultural sector by turning state-owned farms into cooperatives, where workers can earn more if they work harder. But private ownership of land—or even farmer's markets, where growers could sell fresh produce at free prices—appear to be out of the question, at least for now.

Castro's view of small business is equally schizoid. Last year the government legalized self-employment, allowing people to



PHOTOS BY LES STONE—SYGMA

**Implacable hostility:** *Cuban exiles in Miami poking fun at Fidel*

undertake petty trades such as shoe repair or hairdressing, as long as they didn't employ anyone else. For Victor, who has run a tiny private restaurant in his living room in Havana for the last eight years, the change was long overdue. With his wife and sister-in-law helping out, he can make more money at the restaurant in 40 minutes (charging in dollars, of course) than he makes in a month at his state office job. Last December, Castro tried to put the private restaurants out of business. No dice. "People are hungry, and they need a place to eat no matter what Fidel tells them," says Cuba expert Wayne Smith of Washington's Center for International Policy. Still, at least one proprietor was arrested last week in a crackdown on economic "crimes" timed for the anniversary of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.

Restaurateur Victor is eager to become legal. Asked if the May session of the National Assembly will decide to introduce Cuba's first-ever taxes, he answers, "I hope so." Imagine a country in which businessmen beg to pay taxes. But the National Assembly may not have the guts to levy them, since hard-liners believe that such a measure would take Cuba one step closer to a market economy. They're right. Carlos Lage, who directs economic policy, and

Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina, two bright young up-and-comers, want to discuss cutting state subsidies and raising controlled prices. Many of their colleagues fear compromising Castro's revolution. "We don't want to turn the country into a den of wolves, where everybody eats everybody else," says Raul Taladrid, deputy minister of the State Committee for Economic Cooperation. "We have achieved equity and justice, and we have to maintain it."

**Hollow promises:** Cubans see little justice in their daily struggle to survive. Loyalists talk of

maintaining the achievements of the revolution, such as free medical care. But drastic shortages of medicine have already made that a hollow promise. "What if your grandmother has a heart attack in the middle of the night?" asks one Havana resident. "There's no gas for an ambulance. What are you going to do, strap her onto the back of your bicycle?" The only effective health-care system operates out of Miami, where Cuban-Americans have prescriptions filled for eyeglasses, anticancer drugs and asthma inhalers, and send them to relatives in Cuba.

Courting these exiles could be risky. The last time Fidel invited them home, in 1978, he regretted it deeply. "It was the first massive distribution of foreign goods after the revolution," remembers a leading Havana intellectual. "It was a great ethical catastrophe, a political shock." Within a year Castro had shut down the pipeline from *la comunidad*. Soon thereafter, 125,000 Cubans floated over to Florida in the Mariel boatlift. This time around, Cubans are even more anxious to get off the island any way they can. "They have no values left," says the intellectual. "They are totally cynical." The Miami-based welfare system is enough to sustain them—but not enough to keep them home. ■