

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-29 Cuba
Havana Summer

Havana, Cuba
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I

Ordinarily, the waiting lounge servicing Cubana Aviacion's flight from Mexico City to Havana is not very crowded since the number of visitors traveling is limited both for political as well as administrative reasons. Yet those who do assemble in Mexico City's marble-tiled International Airport, having their pictures taken and passports checked

by Mexican authorities, are always a very mixed group: a few Japanese businessmen, an Indian journalist, a Swedish photographer, an assortment of European diplomats, some quiet Africans and, significantly, a group of Chilean singers going to Cuba on a cultural exchange program. Apart from Mexico City, there are only three other access points to Cuba today: through Prague, Madrid and most recently Chile. This last air-link, begun last week, the 26th of June, is important to Cuba for the obvious diplomatic and economic benefits it will bring.

For the present, however, Mexico City is the principal access point to Cuba in the western hemisphere. And so each week, on Monday and Friday mornings, Cubana Aviacion's four-engine Britannia lands there to take on passengers, most of whom have come a thousand miles out of the way to reach this point. This is particularly so for those who have traveled from the Caribbean. Jamaica, for example, is just 120 miles south of Cuba, and yet visitors from that country are obliged to go 1500 miles west to Mexico City both coming and returning.

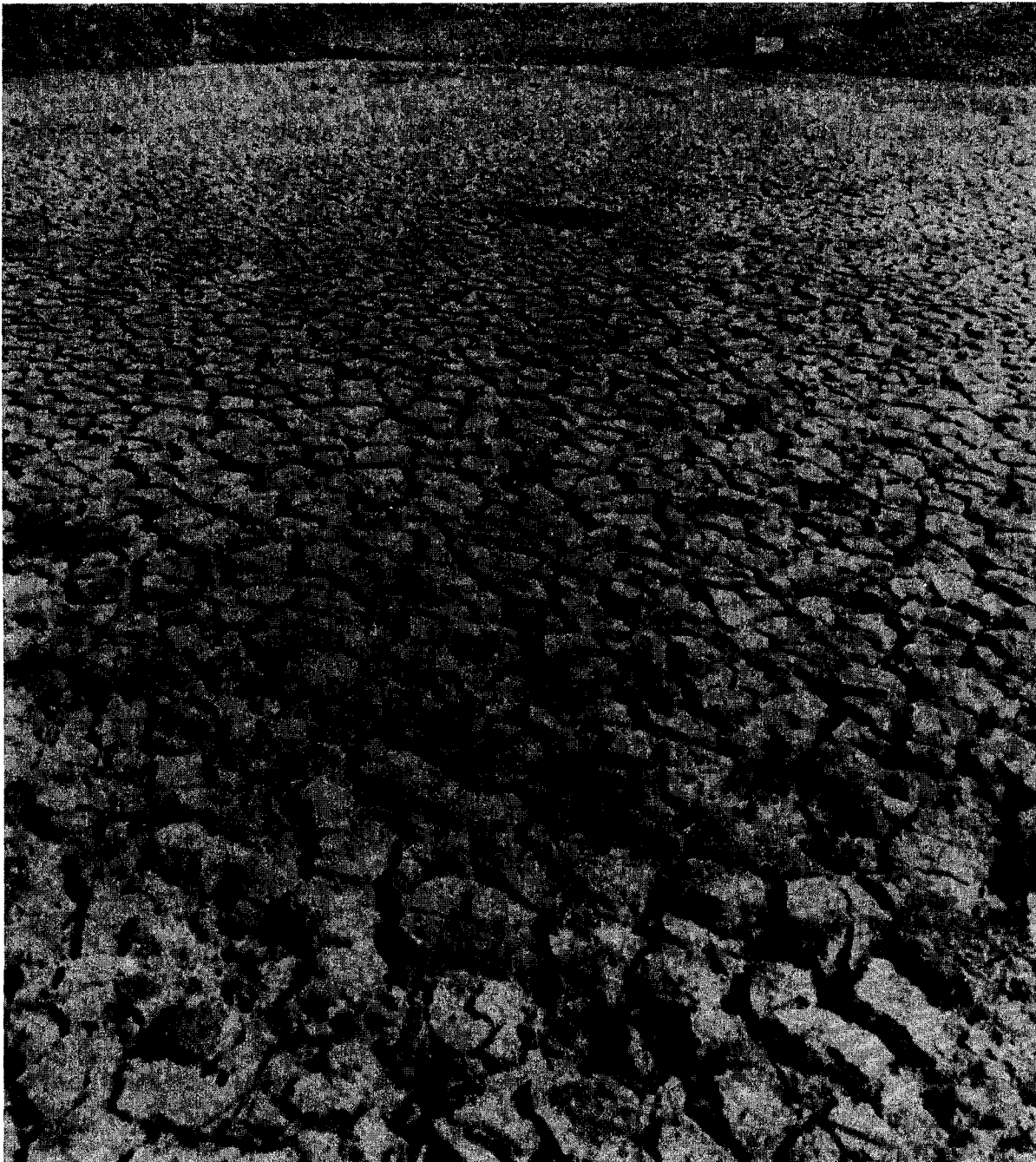
Nevertheless, the inconvenience of the long detour serves to make a paradoxical point. On the one hand, in leaving Mexico City, the visitor to Cuba knows that he is crossing an invisible yet very real barrier separating dramatically different societies. For the Cubans are constructing a socialist system both unique to and almost entirely isolated from the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America. On the other hand, the presence in Mexico City of the Chileans en route to Havana is a small but concrete demonstration of a larger truth: that the Caribbean and Latin American states are beginning to view Cuban society more as a model for, rather than a menace to, their own development. No people are more certain of this than the Cubans themselves.

II

Cuba is three and one half hours flying time from Mexico City. Divided into six provinces, the island extends for 550 miles in an arc something like the shape of a fish-hook. In all, the six provinces -- Pinar del Rio, Habana, Matanzas, Las Villas, Camaguey and Oriente -- incorporate 105,000 square kilometers and a population of 8.5 million. Of this population, it is important to note that 3 million are under the age of 17.

Coming from Mexico City, one first sees Pinar del Rio, the most western of Cuba's provinces. This is tobacco country. The area has almost 100,000 acres of carefully cultivated tobacco, most of the acreage privately owned (89 percent). It is from these farms that 70 percent of Cuba's total crop comes each year. This past winter, however, there was a severe drought in the western end of the island, some say the worst in 30 years. As a result, the tobacco has dried up and, according to local press reports, nearly 10 million pounds of tobacco may be lost.

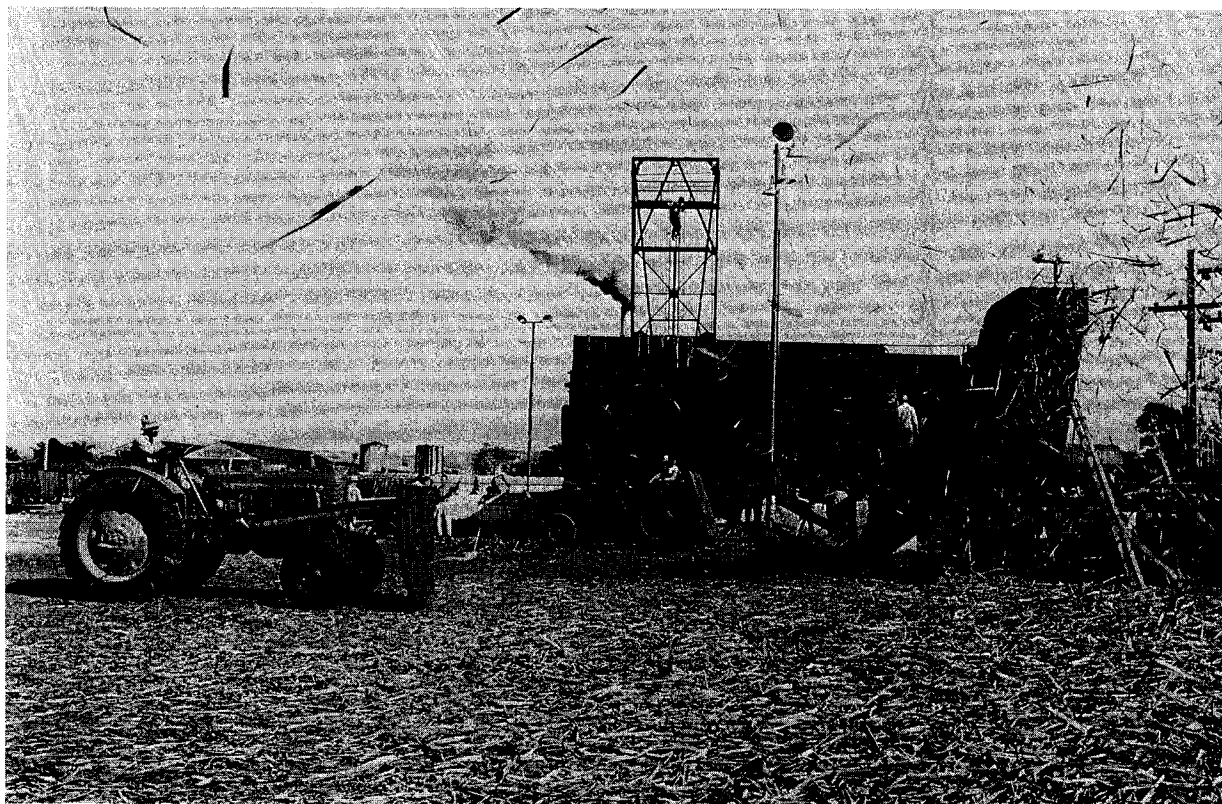
In an effort to save as much of the crop as possible, special agricultural teams have been dispatched to the west. Domestic consumption will, however, have to be reduced. Each Cuban will be limited to one pack of cigarettes each week instead of the two he had been rationed previously. All this may have moved the Prime Minister, Fidel Castro, to quit smoking, for that is what he has quietly done in the past few months. Either to set an example, or because he agrees that smoking is hazardous to health, he will no longer be seen holding a cigar in his hand.



The drought of Pinar del Rio

The next province east, Havana, is the island's most urbanized, containing 26 percent of the island's total population. Besides being the administrative center of the Revolution, this province is important economically as a sugar producing region. Outside the metropolitan area of Havana, thousands of acres of green sugar cane have just been cut for the 1971 sugar harvest or zafra. From the fields, the cane is carted and transported to one of the island's 153 sugar mills or centrales. There, the cane is crushed in giant machines, the juice extracted and then crystalized into sugar.

For all but a few mills, however, this process is practically over for the year. The 1971 sugar harvest is ending this month. According to daily announcements from the Ministry of Sugar Production (MINAZ), it is certain that this year's total production of sugar will not reach the 6.5 million ton level that had been the Revolution's minimum objective. Instead, the year's production will just barely be over the 5.9 million ton mark.

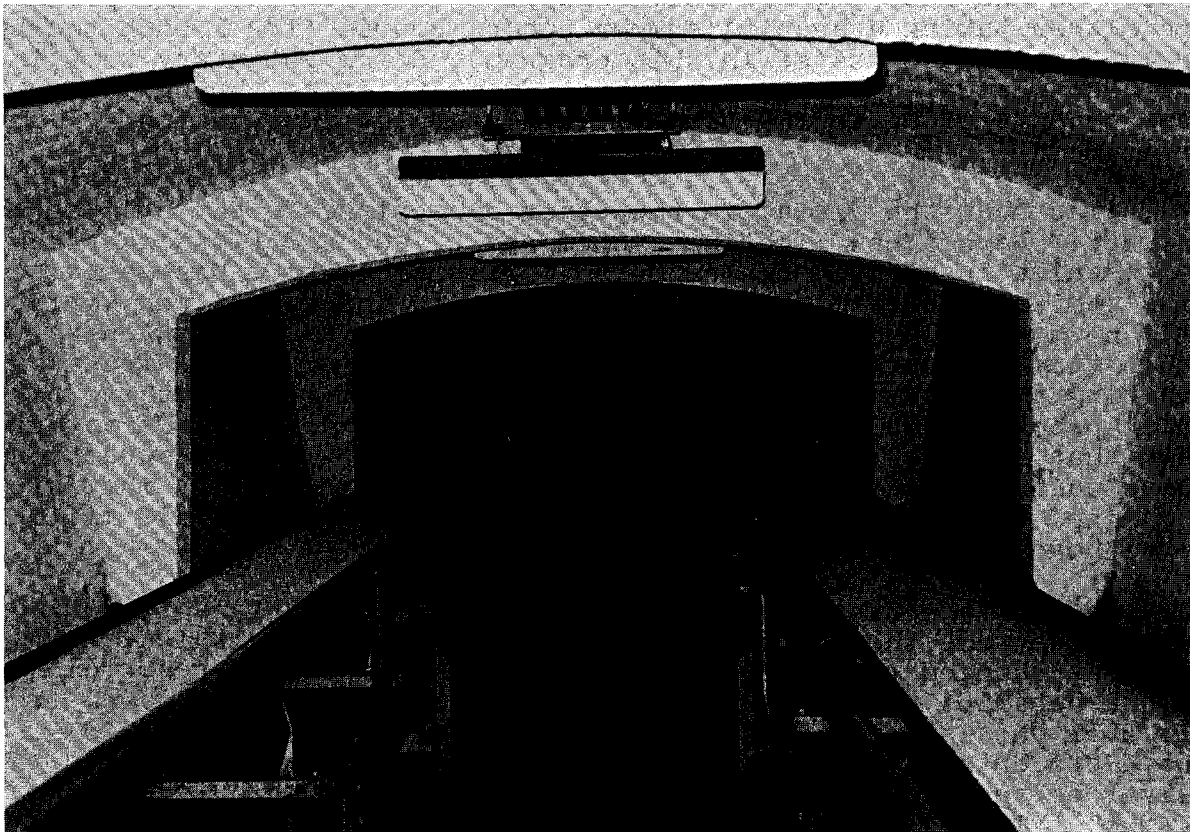


Grinding a part of the 5.9 million

The crucial problem this year has been the same one the Cubans encountered last year during the campaign for ten million: manpower. As is the goal of any sugar producing country, Cuba's primary objective has been to cut and grind the maximum amount of cane in the shortest

possible time. Ideally, the greatest portion of the crop should be harvested and sent to the mills within a period of four months, from January through April. But there are not enough men to cut the cane within this period of time, Cuba's labor force being very small in proportion to the total population. For every three Cubans who work there are seven who are either too young, old or, in some other way, unproductive. This manpower shortage, coupled with the need to maintain high production in other sectors of the economy, has forced the Cubans to extend their sugar harvest to eight months, from November through June. This is both arduous and, as time goes on, more and more uneconomical.

The solution to the problem is, of course, mechanization. Yet this takes time and much research because of the technical difficulties of developing a machine that adapts to the terrain as well as the cane. Until such machines are built and placed in the fields, the Cubans will have to rely not only on their cane-cutters, but also on volunteers from the schools and other production sectors. This is why so much emphasis is placed on the mobilization of every Cuban during the sugar harvest.



Sugar being stored -- Zafra 1971

III

Havana, situated on Cuba's northern coast, is a 20 square mile city of 1.7 million. Irregular in design, the capital of the island is divided into 20 zones, all of them extending south in haphazard patterns away from the Gulf of Mexico.

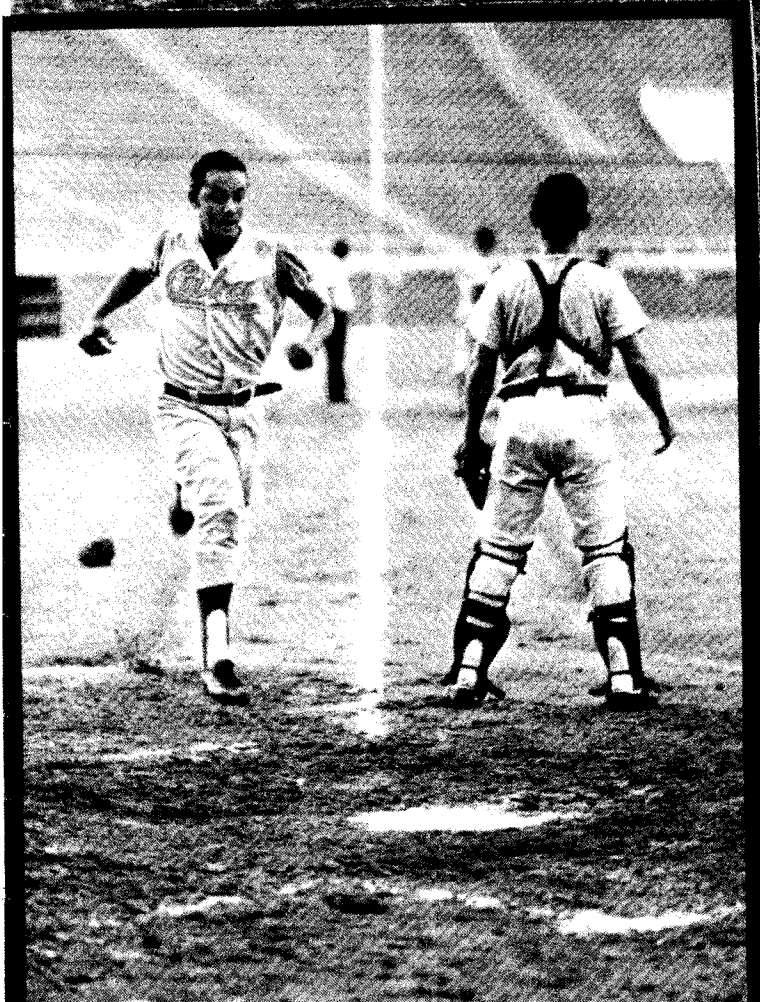
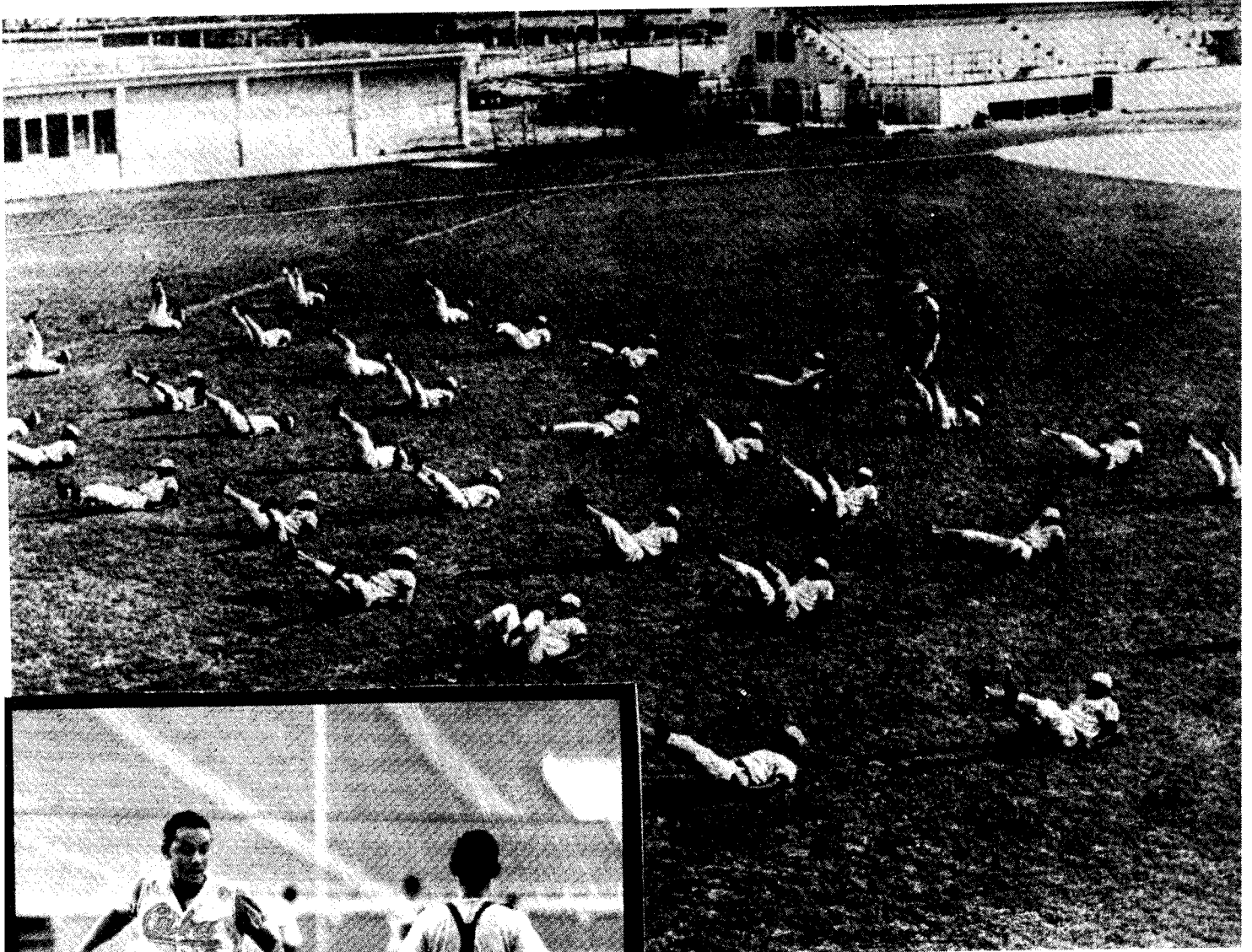
At the city's center, both geographically and symbolically, is the Plaza dela Revolucion. Here, before a 200-foot monument to Jose Marti and surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Cubans, Fidel Castro annually delivers his most important public address. This always takes place on the 26th of July, the anniversary of an attack on a Santiago de Cuba police barracks in 1953. For Cubans, this date marks the beginning of the Revolution and so it is celebrated each year. This year's address will certainly focus on production, most likely drawing comparisons with last year's situation.

Within sight of the monument to Marti are the pink-stucco walls of the University of Havana. There, the first semester's classes (the reverse of the North American system) have just ended and preparation for the second semester, to begin in September, is being made. In the interim, the University's 25,000 students and professors are either taking a special summer school course (182 French teachers arrive in July to assist in this program), doing voluntary work in the countryside (every Cuban student from 7th grade through university does 45 days of agricultural work each year) or just taking a month's vacation.

Also near the Plaza, in the other direction, is Havana's baseball stadium. Here a new lighting system and 52,000 additional seats are being built in prelude to the World Series of amateur baseball. This series, the culmination of games played throughout the world, will be hosted by Cuba in November. Always a consistant winner, the Cuban team and particularly the Habaneros (the people of Havana) are awaiting these games with great expectation. There is nothing the Cuban people would like more than to host and then beat the powerful team that represents the United States. As for the reconstruction of the stadium, this too has been done with voluntary labor, most of it organized at neighborhood level. To date, more than a half million hours have been donated by the people of Havana to this work.

West of the Plaza are the zones of Miramar, Mirianao and Ciboney. Once these were the luxurious suburbs of Havana's wealthiest. Now, much has changed and these areas are almost completely reserved for 80,000 becarios or boarding school students who come to Havana from all over the island (In all there are a total of a half million Cuban students in boarding schools like these). The "becas" in turn only represent 25 percent of total enrollment in Cuba's educational system. Figures for 1969-70 show that there are 2.3 million attending Cuban schools.

One of Mirianao's schools, Cubanacan, is located on the grounds of the old Havana Country Club; a portrait of Frederick Snare, the



Cuba prepares for the
World Series

Club's founder, is still hanging in the front hall. Mario Cruz, a bartender at the "HCC" for 38 years recounted that John Kennedy came to the Club as a young man. "So did many other very wealthy Cuban and North American capitalists," Mario explains while rubbing his thumb and index finger together to show exactly what he meant. Now Cubanacan is a school for Cuban arts and music, with more than 800 resident students ranging from 6 through 18 years of age. They study modern dance, ballet, art, drama and music. And as for Mario, he is in charge of a student restaurant in another school, Escuela Atleticos (ESPA). ESPA is located in Ciboney in what used to be known as the Habana Biltmore Beach Club. The "Biltmore," once one of the five most prestigious clubs in Havana, became a school for Cubans in 1964. Since then, taking advantage of its fine pool, basketball courts, and track and field facilities, ESPA's 750 students have learned how to teach physical education or have participated on the national athletic teams.

This month, all becarios are closing for the summer. Taking examinations, packing their belongings and attending graduation ceremonies, most of the students are about to leave for home. Usually, there is a long program prepared by each school for graduation, each class presenting some sort of entertainment for their parents and other visitors. One such program featured poetry, folk-dancing, puppet shows and even a song dedicated to Angela Davis presented by a teenage graduate and several of her friends. Their song was entitled "Angela Davis" and was very popular with the audience. Later in the afternoon, in the middle of one of the puppet shows presented by the primary school children, all the lights in the theater went out. This was what the Cubans called an apagon or black-out. And so the rest of the graduation ceremonies were cancelled. "Maybe this wouldn't have happened under capitalism," one woman said, "but then, under capitalism we would never have had this school and the children graduating in the first place."

To the east of the Plaza is "Old Havana," once the most important part of the city because it was the administrative center of all pre-revolutionary governments of Cuba ever since colonization by the Spanish. Today, however, the Capitolio (modeled on the United States Capitol building) is being used by the Revolution's Academia de Ciencias. The elegant, tree-lined Prado, formerly the commercial heart of the city, is quiet and unused. The only private entrepreneurs in the area are a few old photographers using their portable box cameras to take an occasional picture. And in the Plaza de la Catedral, the center of the Roman Catholic Church in Cuba, only lightly attended services are still being held.

The people of "Old Havana" are far from dormant, however. They are preparing for Carnaval '71, (the first in many years) to be held in conjunction with the annual July 26 celebrations. As part of this, the residents of the area have managed to acquire plaster, paint and brushes and are in the process of giving the old buildings a badly needed face-lift. It has been ten years since this part of Havana

has been given any attention at all, basically because the Government has devoted all of its resources to the countryside. The policy has been based on the notion that the gap between urban and rural Cuba must be closed before expending further efforts on the cities.



Along the Prado, workmen are constructing platforms for the many shows and group entertainment that will come with Carnival this July

Further east, accross a small bay from Old Havana, is Havana's port around which the old barrios of Regla and Guanabacoa were built. Before the Revolution, these areas, like most other Water-front docks, had become the core of the city's slums where the people were the poorest, mostly unemployed and predominantly black. Today, these sections of Havana are still inhabited by Afro-Cubans, but now there is no unemployment and each family, along with everyone else in the city, has equal access to whatever food, clothing and public services are available. Educational and health facilities are free to all Cubans.

The port itself, meanwhile, has become one of the most modern installations in the country. It is the base for the Cuban fishing industry, one of the most successful sectors in the island's economy. From a small number of mostly wooden boats, the Flota Estatal de Pesca

has expanded into a fishing fleet of 275 ships, 170 of them steel-hulled; the other 105 are primarily of the Lambda class, 75-foot wooden ships that operate as mother ships to smaller boats that fish the Caribbean and Gulf coast waters. Last year these ships caught, processed and sent back to Cuba more than 80,000 tons of fresh fish, some of which was exported to the Soviet Union. This new fleet has been a principal reason why fish is fast becoming the mainstay of the Cuban diet.

Finally, directly north of the Plaza toward the Gulf coast is Havana's beautiful Malecon, a grand avenue that runs along the sea. This drive and the surrounding area is Vedado and was once the city's pre-revolutionary playground. This was where the famous resort hotels were built, the Hotel Nacional, the Hilton and George Raft's Riviera. The hotels are still functioning, only their clientele has changed. Now the Nacional and Riviera and the dozens of others that dot the coast provide rooms for hundreds of vacationing Cubans instead of supporting, as once they did, a high-priced tourist industry catering almost exclusively to foreigners. The same holds true for the city's 94 theaters and cinemas.

At the Havana Libre (formerly the Havana Hilton), for example, Cubans from the countryside, factory workers or honeymooning couples are the ones who have priority. None of the Cubans there seem to perceive any irony in English language signs ("Drug Store, Barber Shop, Swimming Pool") placed in strategic locations throughout the hotel. Apart from the signs, however, there are other hold-overs, with minor variations, from pre-revolutionary times. One is Johnny Arango, a fifty year old Cuban who, after a moderately successful boxing career, was hired by the "Hilton" as a bellboy. Today Johnny is still here but now in charge of the hotel's turkish baths. At his table is a copy of Che Guevara's complete works. Johnny is into the second volume.

Adjacent to the Libre is the main street in Vedado, Calle 23, or "La Rampa" as the Cubans have termed it. Here the Habaneros come, particularly at night or on Sunday afternoon, to visit with each other, see a film, queue up for a meal (lines are among the more unpleasant aspects of a system of shared distribution) or simply to be seen. One of the more popular spots right now is an exhibition celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Ministry of Interior. Featuring films of the Bay of Pigs (known here as the battle of Giron), displays of Ministry equipment and captured documents from counter-revolutionary organizations, the exhibition provides a rare glimpse into the operations of one of Cuba's most important ministries.

Just up La Rampa from the exhibition center is the Heladeria Coppelia, a large, open-air ice cream bar that serves 28 different flavors of ice cream. Some Cubans say that Fidel personally designed it, others that he only conceived of the idea. Whichever, it is one of the most popular gathering places in Havana and lines form in front of it from the late afternoon on. It stays open until 2:30 A.M. Apart from films, the next most important source of pleasure for Cubans is eating, and the restaurants of the Vedado area are always full.



The Ministry of Interior (MININT) Exhibition celebrating its 10th Anniversary, June 1971

Essentially, there are two kinds of restaurants, the "tornos" and the "ultimas." The first are the high-priced restaurants where it is necessary to make a reservation or torno in advance, usually the night before. The second are more common, the procedure being to ask for the "ultima," find the end of the line, and then simply wait for a table to be clear. Of this group, the most popular are those that serve ice cream. Cubans love ice cream.

Moving about the city, Habaneros depend almost entirely on the city's bus transport, comprised for the most part of British Leyland buses. These yellow-green "guaguas" (pronounced waa-waa) are always crowded and usually move off from the last stop with a passenger casually clinging half-in, half-out of the front door. On board, despite the crowd and the pressure to move from front to back, Cubans are remarkably considerate of each other. As for service, this year, in comparison to last, the bus system seems to be more regular and more efficient than it was. Complaints of lost time and inefficiency must have produced action by the Ministry of Transport.

There are also more and better running cars on the streets of Havana this year. Noticeably these are new models, principally Alfa Romeos, Volkswagons and French-made, plastic jeeps. Estimating a figure is hazardous in this case, but by far the most numerous imports are the Alfas and they would number no more than a thousand in Havana. Consequently, most Cubans who drive a private vehicle still operate

a pre-1960 model, usually American made. These cars, old Chevrolets, Fords, even an occasional Cadillac, are obviously kept going with an eclectic accumulation of spare parts. Nevertheless, the fact that these cars are still moving must make Cubans the finest mechanics in the hemisphere. As for the new models, they have gone first to Cuba's doctors, then to the Revolutionary leadership, the Ministers, Military Officers and administrators. These and the other fortunate few to have obtained a European import are envied citizens of course; and one would think that possession would put oneself among the "chosen." But the Cuban Revolution is a continuous series of paradoxes: a country with little butter but plenty of ice cream. So it is with the Alfas. Those who have them are usually the ones who feel most uneasy about driving them. As one Cuban cautioned: "It's helpful to have a new car, but even more important not to develop an Alfa Romeo mentality... particularly if you're behind the wheel of one."



Hasta a la Victoria Siempre
Fidel on the offensive

Frank McDonald

Frank McDonald



Voluntary work on the
basketball court

