

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

c/o Universidad de Costa Rica  
Escuela de Medicina  
Departamento de Salud Publica  
San Jose, Costa Rica.

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Peter Bird Martin  
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4 West Wheelock Street  
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Dear Peter,

I was back in Havana two weeks ago for a conference, on health education. A lot has changed since I left Cuba in July.

The use of U.S. currency, the dollar, has been legalized. So, now Cubans can happily keep some U.S. dollars in their pockets without any problems with the police. The used-to-be tourist-only shops, restaurants and hotels are now open to Cubans. Those who have dollars are happy (of course), but those who do not have, maybe (and I am not sure, but just guessing), a little bit upset.

In Hotel Neptuno, where I was accommodated by the conference organizers, I saw young people, many of them teenagers, come to the bar place, to enjoy a drink of Coca Cola, a cool beer or just listen or dance to some nice tunes of the-full-of-rhythm, Caribbean Salsa Music. I also noticed that they have a taste for Western music too, especially Rock music! From the way I see them dress, it seemed to me that they would also want to catch up with fashion. But since the legalization of the use of the dollar, prices in the dollar-only-shops have shot up 50%. This limits the purchasing possibilities of the few people who would be lucky to have some dollars come their way. For example, a cheap non-stylish blue-jean cost about 12 or 14 dollars, but a fashionable one (which young people like) cost 18 or 22 dollars. Snickers are not cheap either, cost about 15 dollars or so.

The monthly wages in Cuba range from 120 pesos (Cuban currency) to 450 pesos. Officially, the peso has parity with the dollar, but when I left Cuba last July and again when I returned in September, it was not possible (and still it is not), to exchange pesos for U.S. dollars at the one-for-one official rate. So far, the National Bank of Cuba, accepts dollars from clients, but not selling dollars to clients. In this situation, Cubans are unable

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to exchange their pesos for U.S. dollars in banks. So, the alternative way to get hard currency is to exchange pesos for dollars in the black market, where the selling price of one dollar oscillates between 70 Pesos and 100 pesos. This is tough for many people. For instance, a low-paid worker earning 120 pesos a month would get only two dollars for his/her salary (if he or she decided to exchange their salaries for dollars at the black market rate). But even so, what can two dollars buy? Perhaps, only two pieces of soap, that's all!

I was told, soap and cooking oil have been missing, since July, from the regularly distributed, monthly rations, which all Cubans receive from the government. But the month of August was the roughest of all. It was mid-summer, the warmest season all over the country, very hot, humid and sweaty. The frequent cuts of electricity (from 8 to 16 hours/day) only made matters worst. Relaxation in the home was an uncomfortable thing to go for, since electric fans would not work, without electricity. Refrigerators were no longer useful for keeping food from going bad and became part of house furniture. But that was not the end of it. Even more, strange things, not commonly known (I was told) to Cubans for many years, appeared from the blue, to test the widely known endurance of the Cuban people. These are, delinquent acts and street violence!

A story making the rounds in Havana goes like this. It is typical summer night and it is dark. A number 84 public transport bus, with full capacity, was on routine round trip, taking commuters from downtown Havana to a sub-urban area. One of five young men hijack the bus, holding the bus driver hostage at knife point, threatening to cut open his throat, if he (the driver) was not going to listen to what they were going to tell him to do. The bus driver obeys and he is told to drive high speed and not to stop at the regular bus stations. Meanwhile, the other four hijackers, begin asking all passengers in the bus to take off, as soon as possible, their clothes, shoes, watches and anything of value. First they begin with passengers who they suspect were foreigners (or looked like foreigners). No one is spared, men or women, just all. Later on, they landed on their own brothers.

Then one of the hijackers begin collecting from the passengers all their clothes, shoes, and anything worthy to collect, minus the underwears (thank God they did not take them), and bundled the whole loot into some huge bags which they were carrying with them. But one passenger who the hijackers suspect to be a foreigner refuses to give up anything, his cloth or shoes. They insist that the passenger complies, but he stubbornly refuses. The hijackers become impatient and don't want to waste more time in persuasion. They whisper a few words to each other. In no time, they bundled up the poor man, and without remorse, squeezed him out through the window of the fast moving bus. The man is thrown out and dies shortly from fatal injures. The hijackers then stop the bus somewhere out of town, jumped out it and

quickly disappeared under cover of night into the darkness of a nearby wild bush. The rest of the story is police hunting criminals.

Gossips about food stores being broken into are not uncommon (but they are not easy to confirm either). Mugging and night robbery (especially of bicycles) from lone cyclists were all reported in August. The situation rang alarm bells and the government is said to have taken immediate action in an effort to contain increasing street violence.

But, although it is said that street crime is now declining (because of the said immediate measures taken) important questions are still being asked by people who are concerned, such as, why did street violence occur suddenly, in the first place, when it was almost an uncommon thing, in Cuba, for more than thirty years? What were the likely reasons behind its rapid spread? What is/are the cause(s) of this violence? Could need be one of the problems that is pushing people to do wrong? And how could violence be avoided in the future?

When I left Havana on October 5, Cubans were busy looking for answers to these burning questions, which are (nowadays) topical issues frequently discussed over state-run Television, radio and local newspapers.

However, while the legalization of the use of the dollar by Cubans maybe creating some unhappiness for some people, it appears to be very welcome by those who are blessed with special talents (artists, painters, carpenters, comedians etc.), and of course, this makes them a privileged happy (non-violent) people, as now they are permitted by the authorities to sell their know-how in the market place. So, for example, one Saturday morning on October 2, as I walk along a downtown street (Avenida de los Presidentes), I find on display, many works of arts, from paintings to pottery, being sold by their owners. Some articles are sold in U.S. dollars (specially to tourists), and others in local currency, the peso. Transaction is quick, and sellers pocket their gains with ease (though a small percentage of the gain is paid as a tax to the State).

In the central space of the street, some comedians entertain a group of children. The children are happy with the jokes, the magic tricks and they stick around all morning. It is fun for them.

The experience looks like a new day is just beginning for Cuba. Cubans and foreign visitors rubbing shoulders in the same market place, buying things or selling them. A new economic integration! Could this be a sign of the beginning of a market economy, though, in a (very) small way? I don't know.

But, some people (with important talents too) are not allowed by the new regulations to sell their talents. They are the professionals: university teachers, doctors, engineers, etc. It is argued, that the state (very much) require their services, especially during these trying times, of great economic

difficulties which Cuba is passing through. Moreover, it is also argued that the professionals owe their education (and therefore their professional achievement) to the state, which offered them free education from kindergarten to university. It was now high time for the professionals to pay back (by doing a service) to the state. Although, material need is affecting everyone in the country, the dedication of the professionals to the service of the state, in this particular period, is considered, patriotic action.

New policies, however good they may be, are not immune to problems.

I hear, for example, that the dollar has already reached the countryside. The Campesinos (farmers) who used to sell (in pesos) their products (chickens, pork, rice etc) to town people who needed them, are now requiring payment in U.S. dollars! This new phenomenon is disastrous, especially for Cubans (of low-incomes), who are trying to avoid the high black market prices of goods (in cities).

Before, it was cheaper to buy badly needed food supplements in the country than in towns. Now it is not. So, as the countryside economy goes the dollar-way, how are the low-income families going to supplement their diet (the usual rice and beans)? From where can they get dollars?

Here, the battle for survival gets harder everyday. Families who have relatives living outside the country may be lucky ones, if their relatives send them money, from abroad. For the others who don't have relations abroad, it is just bad luck.

A favorite joke about survival strategy going around these days is: "para sobrevivir, tiene que tener fe".

Fe, in Spanish means faith (in God). But fe, in the joke, stands for Familia en el exterior (or family abroad). In English, the translation reads: "to survive you have to have family abroad!"

That's all for this letter.

Yours sincerely,



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