

BOB-07

LIFE IN CUBA DOESN'T GET MUCH EASIER

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Peter,

Although I left Havana four days ago, I am still thinking very much about Cuba and the agonizing living conditions of its people.

A few things there continue to worry me- that is, the growing economic hardships, which (I think) is already having some drastic effects on the social and economic life of people (and it is possible that the situation may even lead to some undesirable effects on people's health as well). Shortages of food, medicines, fuel and other consumer goods have increased lately and this is causing much uneasiness and worry for many Cuban families.

"La vida no es facil" or life is not easy, is the usual depressing answer, which I often got from my friends, whenever I asked them, how things were going? "Resistiendo" or resisting and "luchando" or struggling, are other common expressions which people here use to describe their anxieties and desperations in the "special period"(a euphemism for an economic state of emergency). The special period started in 1989 when Cuba lost her trading partners after the collapse of former East European Socialist countries and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, and since then she has been doing business in the international markets, but the economic situation at home was not making good news and it was marked by increasing shortages, especially, of food imports. In the special period, Cubans have been told to "tighten their belts", as the country tries to seek alternative ways of improving the economy. But the going has been "real" hard and the struggle for survival getting tougher.

But what does "tightening of belts" mean to ordinary citizens? It means that citizens must learn to live with decreased food rations (which are regularly) distributed monthly to all citizens from government-owned stores. For example, under the rationing system (using ration cards), each person should receive every month: 2.5 kg of rice, 0.5 kg of black beans, 0.5 kg of lentils, 0.25 kg of cooking oil, 2 kg of sugar, 5 eggs/person/week, 3 cans of condensed milk, 1.02 kg of chicken and 0.34 kg of beef. The trouble is, that nowadays, not all of these food items are distributed to citizens. Beef, chicken, and condensed milk are not easily available in public food stores (!) and so quite

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often, they are missed from the monthly food quotas and people are getting lesser and lesser amounts of food than they are actually supposed to receive. What seem to be in sufficient supply are fruits, for example, grape fruits, bananas, oranges, lemons, etc, and tubers like cassava and yam. But these alone can not substitute for losses (in both quantity and quality) of important food substances (e.g. protein from meat) from the main family diet. And this may lead to some nutritional health problems now or in the future. Already malnutrition was found to be one of (many) possible causes of the recent outbreak of optic neuritis (a disease affecting vision and may cause blindness) which affected more than 30,000 people in Cuba. Many people who have been affected by the disease are said to have recovered after vitamin and other therapies.

But I am still wondering, for example, why one of my teachers (of public health and who I expected to be nutritionally fit) was affected by the disease-optic neuritis! Could there be other non-food-shortage causes? When the first cases of the disease were reported from Pinar del Rio (a province on the west end of Cuba), I was (at the time) in Santiago de Cuba province in the east where no cases were reported then. But eventually the disease engulfed the whole country. However, I still can recall the family doctors in Santiago telling me that mal-nutrition was not a health problem in that province. And when I visited some campesino (farmer) families in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra, I thought they had enough to eat because they just looked health to my eyes. But still optic neuritis reached them, anyway. How? I don't know. Nobody seem to know. "It may be this or that," said some health experts, who visited Cuba to investigate the neuritis epidemic. Anyway, let's get back to the shortages thing once again.

In addition to food shortages, other basic/essential consumer goods are also missing, for example, non-food items for personal use such as: soap (for bathing and washing), tooth paste, razor blades for shaving, deodorants (needed in sweaty summers), hair shampoo (especially for ladies), and even hygienic tissue paper, etc. All these products are not available in shops where Cubans can buy in the local currency-the peso. These products, however, can be found in tourist-only shops (which require payment in U.S. dollars, of course) or in the black where prices are high, even though sale is in local currency. The thing is, not many Cubans are able to afford the black market prices. Average salaries range from 120-400 pesos per month (or 3.7 dollars at black market rate). The cheapest essential thing which they badly need (soap, for example) cost 70 cents (U.S.). So the happy guys in the illegal business are the black marketeers themselves. I am told that black marketeers do make some huge profits from their trade and because of that they have more possibilities than other Cuban citizens of getting U.S. dollars (which they buy from tourists- 70 pesos for one U.S.dollar). After that they are able to tip their way in to the tourists-only

shop and happily obtain anything they wanted to buy with their money. They buy cheap (shoes, clothes, soap, etc) and re-sell them at high prices in the black market.

The difficulties caused by the economic situation of the country also appears to be affecting the professional sector of population, who are working full-time on government jobs and earning only a fixed monthly salary without any possibility of supplementing their income by taking up a second job, for example. It is not legal for government employees to engage in more than one type of employment at a time. And the situation seems to frustrate some professionals who throw up their hands when they see that black marketeers on the street are able to live a better life through their illegal trade and (they) professionals who have spent long years in higher education (and now fulfilling important duties) faced more difficulties in securing just basic things necessary for decent life.

However there are exceptions. For example, I realized that some professional people who have cars (and are able to get gas legally or otherwise) do drive their cars as taxi after working hours (or sometimes even during working hours when there is electricity cuts and there is no light in offices) in order to earn some little money to supplement their incomes. Sometimes they would prefer to carry tourists who would pretend to be their friends if the police asked. Usually they charge small amounts of money, in hard currency, of course. So a distance which would normally cost 12 dollars by official metered-tourist-taxi would just be under 4 or 5 dollars or so. But at the end of the day, 5 bucks is worth the effort- it's about a month salary of a professional anyway, and if converted to Cuban pesos, the return is good enough for buying things (more fruits) in the local market. It is good business.

Fuel shortage is one of the greatest problems of the country during the "special period". Cuba now is importing less amount of fuel than it used to do in previous years. As such, some industries which use fuel for their running have been closed down and their employees have been laid off. Sugar harvesting which is carried out by fuel-run mechanized harvesters is increasingly being affected and the amount of sugar-cane harvested each year is said to be getting lesser than those in previous years.

Public transportation also has been seriously affected. There are now less buses (but more bicycles) on the road in cities, as well as, between the provinces. (I think, Havana may be gradually turning into a Latin American Peking. For now many Cubans are ridding bicycles and bicycles are becoming the hallmark of public transport.) But less buses in cities spelled a lot of problems for workers as well as for school children who have to use the public transport system to get to their work places or schools. The problem is, that waiting for buses can go on for hours on end (1-3 hours), and so in order not to arrive late, some commuters

must brave it to walk on foot to their work places. Unfortunately, young school children are unable to do the same. And even when the always-full-to-capacity buses do arrive, it is still a difficult task for these children to succeed to get inside them (for their small bodies can not compete against the big ones who may push them aside and thus prevent them entry), so their attempts fail and they wait again and again for other buses to come by, with the hope that the buses will stop, and take them to their schools. Sometimes they are lucky to get on buses if some good Samaritans came to their way help. Poor little kids. They want to go to school, but what a life!

Another problem caused by fuel shortage is the frequent cuts of electricity which could last for 8 to 16 hours in some residential areas and for 2 hours in some work places. Again people must adjust to the cuts. So, for example, if the electricity cut happens during working hours, offices windows are opened to allow in sun light (and keep on praying it would not be a cloudy day) and routine office business continue as usual. But, of course, not all windows in a big building, for example, a government ministry, would open to the outside and allow in sunlight. Some open into dark corridors within same building and do not allow in sunlight. In such cases, some offices may become deserted and workers might be seen having some time out chatting with their colleagues outside their offices waiting for the lights to come. A surprising coffee time.

How do electricity cuts impact households? Well, I am told housewives are not happy about that. Housework is becoming more tedious and demanding more physical energy. For example, washing and house cleaning must be done by hand (as washing machines and vacuum cleaners are useless without electricity). More troublesome is the problem of food keeping since refrigerators won't work without electricity too. It is a pity, because the scarce rationed food which families receive monthly ought to be kept "really" well to last for the month and it could be really a dear loss to the family should the food go bad. And if this happens, the unfortunate family will have real hard time trying to make ends meet (food prices in the black market are high), and instead, it will be hunger that will find refuge in the family.

Once a university teacher whose son is studying engineering told me that his son could not study at night and I asked him why? And he answered, "because there is no electricity." This is really bothersome to parents, since their children need to study or do their homeworks at home. It may happen that it is examination time and students have to study at home at least the day before they sit for their tests in the next day. However, the teacher later told me, that he is trying his level best to buy a kerosine lamp for his son to use for his night study. And it is not easy. Even finding Kerosine.

Evidently, the special period has had some far reaching consequences on many fronts. And although the brunt has fallen on the economic and social aspects of life, the health system may be feeling (I think) some of the pressure of the special period as well- it is not being spared either. It appears that no sector of the economy is spared, anyway.

Although free health services continue to be granted to the whole population, there are shortages of some essential medicines (e.g. antibiotics and others) from the local pharmacies (where one could easily recognize that some drug shelves are empty of medicines). Surprisingly, some medicines not available in local pharmacies could be found in Tourist-only shops where they are sold in hard currency but which the local people don't have.

In hospitals, however, medicines are still available for in-patients but ambulatory sick people must buy their medicines from local pharmacies outside hospitals. Sometimes prescribed medicines may not be available. The increased prescription of herbal medicines for patients by family doctors and the increased selling of medicinal plants in local pharmacies, can only tell of the degree to which pharmaceutically produced medicines are in short supply. (You will probably recall from my previous letters, that many family doctors in Cuba now have small botanical gardens in the backyards of their clinics, where they grow medicinal plants.)

Medicinal plants are increasingly used in urban centers, but their use is even more widespread among the campesinos (farmers) in rural and mountain areas. For example, in Chivirico (a small rural town in Eastern Cuba), I discovered that one pharmacy was almost half-stocked with dried medicinal plants packed in small well-labelled boxes. People who need them must produce prescription papers from their doctor before they are given these medicines. Herbal medicines are now considered as "the" medicines for the special period.

But now let's shift gears from herbal medicines to the big question; how are people coping with life in the "periodo especial"?

Certainly, the answer is not easy, but I think that living conditions (and coping for that matter) are harder now for many people than when I first arrived to Cuba just 9 months ago! Though food continue to be distributed, monthly rations are not sufficient in quantity or quality; and people can't buy food from dollar shops because it is not legal for Cubans to possess dollars and even when they do, they must seek help from foreign friends who are willing to take them into the dollar shops to enable them buy things. Black market prices are not affordable by many. Transport remains difficult, electricity cuts more frequent and some essential medicines are in short supply. Where can salvation come from? It is difficult to say. But yesterday July 26, 1993 I read from newspapers that new economic reforms have been announced by the Cuban government and it is hoped the reforms will give a new life to the struggling Cuban economy.

Sincerely,
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