



Cuba's tears

There is an island that must be seen: a model that is being phased out. Hurry to visit before the last traces are obliterated, for the victors will not put up with any leftovers — and in Miami, people are already fighting over the spoils.

GÜNTER GRASS pays his respects

OUR TRIP TO CUBA BEGAN AT East Berlin's Schönefeld Airport; from German Democratic Republic days the airport still has that penetrating Prussian-socialist odour of Lysol that no Western chemicals have been able to dissolve. Someone asks us to take two packages of medicine to Havana; the intended recipient, a doctor, is identified by his address on the packages. Such medicines are lacking on the isolated island. The blockade imposed by the US decades ago, and recently tightened, includes a ban on medical supplies. This is supposed to be a humanitarian measure, intended to promote human rights in Cuba at long last.

We will soon witness the results of this get-tough policy: the pharmacies with bare shelves, the desperate resort to the natural methods of healing espoused by "green" medicine, the pitiable condition of old people especially, who show the marks of the rationing of all foodstuffs — which is barely keeping famine at bay.

Dependence

Of course it can be shown — the evidence is plentiful — that the isolated island's dependence on the Soviet Union (forced not least by the blockade) left Cuba with a centrally-planned economy whose chronic tendency toward shortages cannot respond to the present emergency. But there is no mistaking the fact that the winner of the cold war wants to starve out Cuba, which means 11-million people. The allied countries stalwartly support this stupid and inhumane goal. Deliveries of powdered milk, begun in the days of the GDR, have been cancelled, while Ger-



■ **GLORY DAYS:** Late 1958, and Fidel Castro — cigar firmly in mouth — teaches a new recruit how to use his rifle

The new blockade: How Cuba handles Aids sufferers

One of the most controversial aspects of Cuban health care — and a direct result of the US blockade of the island — is its approach to Aids sufferers.

Since October 1992, 150 Aids cases have been diagnosed in Cuba. Extensive testing revealed 850 HIV-positive people. Compared to most third world and developed countries, these statistics are phenomenally low.

But Cuba's way of dealing with Aids — to quarantine HIV carriers in a sanatorium — has stirred controversy throughout the western world. The US (which implemented the blockade 33 years ago) has slammed it as a violation of human rights.

Because of the blockade, the Cuban government had to assess its ability to contain the spread of Aids. And the shortage of medical supplies, plus the lack of knowledge on the island about how to treat Aids victims, called for drastic measures.

A national programme was launched to test all people likely to have come into contact with HIV — in particular, people who travelled outside Cuba, or who had contact with tourists, and soldiers who had returned from battle in other parts of the world. Acting on the premise that Aids is a sexually-transmitted disease, and that HIV-positive people are potentially contagious, the Cuban government then ruled that those who tested HIV positive should be isolated in sanatoria to protect the unaffected population.

Although the government has emphasised that the quarantine programme is not intended to be permanent, and has already made several amendments to conditions in sanatoria, the policy remains controversial.

Not prisons

The western media image portrays the sanatoria as prisons with high fences and guards. This was not the impression I gained from visiting the Los Cocos sanatorium in Havana and from speaking to families of HIV-positive individuals in Santiago.

Los Cocos is situated in pleasant surroundings with extensive grounds and recreational facilities, including a swimming pool. Residents do not live in dormitories but in small individual or couple units. Couples who are both HIV-positive live together. It was pointed out to me that many couples met and married in the sanatorium. Four hourly daily visits from friends and family are permitted.

The sanatorium, and all it has to offer — including meals and medical care — are free of charge. Residents who had to quit their jobs to move to the sanatorium continue receiving their salary and others receive allowances.

Residents expressed different views about the sanatorium. A few middle aged men and women said they were thankful to the government for providing them with comfortable surroundings and medical care which their families would not have been able to offer.

But younger residents spoke of restlessness and a feeling of being trapped. "I want to live with the people, with my family. I want to dance and swim with my friends. Sometimes I think I'll die tomorrow, so I want to get away from here and enjoy the time I have left," J, a 27-year-old man, told me.

Health officials pointed out that conscious efforts were made to ensure that the sanatoria are not places of death. Once patients become very ill they are sent to the Institute for Tropical Medicine for treatment — and it is here that most patients die.

Gentle persuasion

Not all HIV-positive Cubans go to a sanatorium willingly. However, "extreme methods of force" — although sanctioned by the government — are avoided, according to health workers. After much discussion and psychological support, patients who initially refuse to go are "gently" persuaded to do so.

This aspect of Cuba's Aids policy is particularly controversial and has raised strong criticism in the west.

Deputy health minister Hector Terry stresses that the government "spares no resources to make sure our people get the best health care. This is what we are trying to maintain in our battle against Aids..."

Cuban health workers are particularly proud of the fact that the government pays full salaries to sanatorium inmates, and that health care is provided free of charge.

They compare this to the US, where Aids treatment costs several hundred dollars a day and is way beyond the reach of many Americans.

"An Aids sufferer in the US could die of hunger after losing his job, or die prematurely because he could not afford a hospital bed and medicines," one health-worker pointed out. "We will not abandon our people like that." — *Shereen Singh*

man chancellor Helmut Kohl has chosen to provide that model democracy Indonesia with a number of leftover warships from the GDR fleet. The hypocrisy of the victors knows no bounds.

Wretched

Yes, it's true. The triumphant reports in the Western press are quite right when they tote up the successful outcome. Havana looks wretched. Shop windows are empty or else they display a few dreary wares, testimony to the growing shortages. Bookstore shelves do not groan under letteristic overproduction. Where foodstuffs are sold for ration coupons, people have to stand in line. These people do not express any particular faith in communism, yet a few days later they will participate, albeit reluctantly, in something called an election.

The results, after a turnout alarmingly close to 100%, cannot but confirm the existing power structure, which has undergone only slight and all-too-cautious changes.

No, these were not democratic elections following the Western model. To be sure, they were carried out properly, as we observed in the town of Trinidad. There were election booths and a folded ballot. But nothing like a recognisable opposition was allowed to present itself to the voters. Instead — as was stressed again and again — for the first time voters had a choice of candidates, among them surprisingly many who did not belong to the ruling party of this one-party regime: doctors, scientists, artists. Take, for example, the writer Miguel Barnet, who won 98% of the vote in his electoral district, yet received the news of his landslide diffidently, saying this represented too great a responsibility. It was his first time running for public office: he had always been an outsider, not only as a Christian, but as someone who had not been allowed to publish any of his books in the 1970s — those had been the worst years. Now all this recognition! He felt crushed; so much was expected of him.

Barnet has often travelled abroad. His books are now widely distributed. The difficulties he experienced at the hands of the party and the Writers' League did not lead him to turn his back on his country and escape animos-

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ity by going into exile. He sees what cannot be overlooked — that the established revolution is painfully attempting to free itself of its inherited dogmatic rigidity and no longer wants to be confined to patterns imported from the Soviet Union. Instead, the revolution is harking back to its origin and finding the beginnings of its tradition in the example of the liberal bourgeois revolutionary José Martí. (Even Fidel Castro was not a communist when he, along with a few other men and women, and eventually with popular support, launched the revolution and in 1959 overthrew the dictator Batista.)

Nobody — not Miguel Barnet, nor anyone else with whom we spoke in Havana, Trinidad, and Pinar del Rio — wants a second Batista. They suspect that one is just waiting in Miami to hop on a plane. And they all alluded, more or less tentatively, to the need for reforms. But no-one, I was told, could be allowed to turn the results of the revolution into its dreaded opposite. I heard this from older men and women working in the tobacco fields around Pinar del Rio. The revolution had given these people a self-respect and a measure of social security, and they were less likely to notice the absence of liberal rights than would foreigners on a brief visit or those Cuban intellectuals who, more than two years ago, wrote an open letter to Fidel Castro in which they rightly demanded full freedom of expression.

The intellectuals were dealt with harshly. Poets Maria Elena Cruz Varela and Jorge Pomar were condemned to two years in prison. Shortly before Pomar was arrested by the police, he was beaten up by the infamous “rapid commandos”. Today he is out on parole, forbidden to leave the district in which he lives until his sentence is up (some time this year). Varela is in a prison hospital. Her term, too, is scheduled to end this year.

Health care

The units by which the West measures democracy have become questionable. Now that capitalism alone, with all its liabilities, remains, it should become evident that in many areas Cuba not only stands up well in comparison to capitalist countries but that it has accomplished some exemplary things

through its revolutionary transformation. The health care system available throughout the country provides one general practitioner, whose services are available at no cost, for every 800 families. No other third world country offers such coverage. In each village we saw a two-storey house (usually the only one), which had living space upstairs for the doctor and a nurse with their offices on the ground floor. The results are reflected in reports issued by the United Nations and the statistics compiled by other respected international organisations: the low infant mortality rate and high life expectancy could provide a model, not only for the so-called underdeveloped countries but perhaps even for the US, whose new president, responding to the scandalous conditions in his country, has begun a search for reforms. I am referring not to showy things like high-tech model clinics or organ transplants — Cuba has those, too, by the way — but rather to a socially equitable system of care, of a sort Mexico has not even begun to realise.

We had no sooner left the isolated island than we witnessed unmistakable deprivation in the Maya villages of the Yucatan Peninsula, and the slums of Mexico City, which seem to spread further every day.

I know an exemplary health care system means little in a period when ideological stubbornness insists on the elimination of social safety nets. In their stupidity, the cold war’s victors keep looking for reassurance that the enemy has been rooted out. But who would be helped by the restoration of Cuba’s old power elite? Surely not the Cuban people. I would think that the

powerful US has enough misery at its own doorstep — whether in Mexico or Haiti — not to mention the rising curve of social distress within its own borders.

The world has no shortage of wars and civil conflicts, but it has a desperate need for socially-equitable distribution. If it has learned anything from the most recent calamities and from the tragedy in the former Yugoslavia, Europe might take the first step and lift a blockade that will result in untold hunger and suffering. If political insight is in short supply, perhaps Christian neighbourly love — a term not much in evidence nowadays — will come into play: pity for Cuba!

Quality of life

After a short visit, I know this pitiable and lovable island has something to offer besides shortages and a nice climate. For example, there was the 94-year-old woman who still sorts tobacco leaves, as she has since she was 10, right next to the little platform in her cigar factory, where they still read aloud to entertain and instruct the workers, as they once did for Hamburg’s cigar-wrappers. Or there are some of the 30 000 Cubans who studied in the GDR, learned German and now look after tourists, who flaunt their prosperity with their hard-currency dollars. And something that remains unforgettable: on this so fortunate and unfortunate an island, descendants of all those who came over the ocean, whites, blacks, and *mulattos*, know how to live together without the aggressive racism that results in daily killing in Cuba’s neighbour.

To put in a word for Cuba also means bringing up the unavoidable figure of Fidel Castro. Perhaps, although his rhetoric still has vitality, he has outlived himself. People said that about Yugoslavia’s Marshall Tito as well, until one day he was no longer there. Today, Europe’s shameful failure teaches us to judge Tito’s accomplishments more generously. Anyone who wants to see Castro gone should think carefully about how to fill the vacuum that this large and flawed man (like Tito) would leave. ■

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