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11Jun89 CUBA: CASTRO'S LAND REVOLUTION - STILL UNDER WAY 30 YEARS ON.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, June 11, Rester - Thirty years on, the revolution in land ownership that made President Fidel Castro a hero to most of Cuba's peasants and a foe to big landholders is still in progress.

He has made it clear the state-run farms he set up in his first sweeping land reform are the future of his country's agriculture - even though many private family farms are acknowledged to be more productive.

Cuba's government says the priority now is to improve the efficiency of state-run and cooperative farms.

"We don't accept the supposition that socialist farming is doomed to failure," one official said.

"It is true that our limited farm output forces us to maintain our system of food rationing but we are confident that we can increase production in the future," he said.

Shortly before last month's anniversary, Castro said that unlike the Soviet Union, Cuba had never used force to collectivise the nation's farmers.

In a speech during a visit by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in May, Castro said:

"We didn't have the problems of forced collectivisation; nothing like that happened here," Castro said.

With his first land reform, in May 1959 - almost two years before Cuba declared socialism its goal - the government claimed ownership of 40 per cent of the island's agricultural land.

United States-owned properties were nationalised. Many say that eventually led to Washington's decision to impose a trade embargo on Cuba and to break off diplomatic relations in January 1961.

Farms of over 400 hectares (1,000 acres) were nationalised. The 28 enterprises which alone controlled 83 per cent of plantations growing sugar - Cuba's biggest export - were also hit.

The law signalled the death knell for big land holdings, including those that belonged to United States corporations like the United Fruit Company.

The first land reform gave title to land, free of charge, to some 100,000 former tenant farmers, farm labourers and sharecroppers.

Another 100,000 farmers were allowed to keep their farms.

Four years later, in 1963, in a second land reform that was aimed against what Castro called "the remnants of the agrarian bourgeoisie," the maximum size of private farms was limited to 67 hectares (170 acres).

For the past two decades the number of private farmers has been declining steadily. By 1989 the number of family farms had shrunk from 200,000 in the early 1960s to only 71,000.

Cuban officials say that the disappearance of well over 100,000 private farms over the past three decades had nothing to do with forced collectivisation. According to them, the decline was due to small farmers voluntarily working under the umbrella of state and cooperative farms.

Since the mid-1960s tens of thousands of farmers have sold their land to the government. They have been given jobs on state farms and apartments in new villages where they enjoy running water, electricity, schools and health care.

Since the 1970s tens of thousands of other farm families have chosen to incorporate their land into farm production cooperatives, officials say. The coops' growth has been spectacular.

In 1977 there were only 44 agricultural production cooperatives with a total area of 6,106 hectares (15,265 acres), according to Orlando Lago Font, president of the Cuban Association of Small Farmers. Now, he says, there are 1,398 covering an area of over 900,000 hectares (2.25 million acres).

Unlike the Soviet Union, where force was used to collectivise farms, the Cubans offered incentives - such as retirement pensions for farmers who joined coops.

Lago Font estimates 92 per cent of Cuba's agricultural land now belongs to the socialised sector - the state farms and the production cooperatives.

Private family farmers still own a sizeable 650,000 hectares (1,625,000 acres) of land. On it, they produce five per cent of the island's sugar cane, 48 per cent of its tobacco, 24 per cent of its vegetables, 16 per cent of its bananas and 22 per cent of its root plants.