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11Aug95 CUBA: FIDEL CASTRO CELEBRATES BIRTHDAY IN TRANQUIL CUBA. [CORRECTED 21:46 GMT]

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, Aug 13 (Reuters) - Fidel Castro celebrated his sixty-ninth birthday on Sunday in a more tranquil Cuba, where beaches full of sunbathing families were in marked contrast to last year's exodus of would-be refugees fleeing Cuba's shores.

There are usually no organised public celebrations of the event but Cuba's Young Communists said they had mobilised tens of thousands of youth volunteers to weed sugar cane fields, throughout the island, including Guantanamo province near the U.S. military base entrenched on the communist island, in honour of the occasion.

(Corrects to make clear Guantanamo is just one of the provinces involved)

Cuba's national Sunday newspaper, Juventud Rebelde, ran a portrait of a smiling Castro with a weather-beaten straw hat, protective goggles and work shirt taken years ago during one of his periodic stints as a volunteer sugar-cane worker.

The cane field weeding was part of a drive to increase sugar production, Cuba's main source of hard currency. The past 1994-95 sugar harvest was one of the lowest in the past half century.

Cuban families enjoying the Caribbean island's renowned sun, sea and sand packed the beaches near Havana and the small bathing spots on the city's north shore.

Others, hampered by the shortage of public transport, stayed home to watch television and the two Hollywood films that are broadcast every Sunday in a government drive to increase TV air time during the long, hot summer.

A year ago, the beaches were crowded with Cubans setting off in their rafts and hundreds of peoples who had come down to watch the spectacle, some of them hoping to catch a ride.

Dozens of foreign journalists and TV crews sent out vivid stories of the exodus of more than 30,000 people that made Cuba one of the world's major news centres.

Under an agreement signed by Washington and Havana earlier this year, Cuba agreed to prevent would-be rafters from leaving its shores and the United States agreed to return to Cuba rafters picked up in the perilous Straits of Florida.

Cuba, suffering from an economic crisis sparked by the collapse of its former donor the Soviet Union and deepened by a long-running U.S. trade embargo, has also instituted steps to reduce tensions, particularly among the youth, which could build up during a long, hot summer under economic austerity.

In 1994, nerve-wracking electrical blackouts reached almost 35 hours a week, day and night. This year, the government, despite severe fuel shortages, has worked hard to cut scheduled blackouts to five or six hours a week.

Television transmissions last year began at 5 p.m. This summer, Cuba's national television network begins broadcasting at noon with a varied fare of films, many of them American, for children and teenagers.

Last year, there were few places along the Havana's long waterfront boulevard, the Malecon, and at the small beaches where young people could buy refreshment or food. This year there are many more fast food stands set up in the areas where the city's youth gather.

Since last summer, the Cuban government has legalised agricultural markets where private entrepreneurs can sell their produce. Cubans complain prices at the markets are high but they have allowed the average family to supplement limited amounts of food reserved under the nation's rationing system.

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