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31Dec95 CUBA: CASTRO IN FIRM CONTROL AS CUBA MARKS ANNIVERSARY.

By **Lionel Martin**

HAVANA, Dec 31 (Reuter) - Cuba celebrates the 37th anniversary on Monday of the revolution which brought Fidel Castro to power with no sign of any serious challenge to the charismatic communist leader or to his communist one-party system.

The irrepressible revolutionary can afford to feel optimistic -- economists say the Cuban economy grew during 1995, marking an end to years of decline. Gross domestic product (GDP) rose 2.5 percent after a drastic drop of almost 35 percent between 1989 and 1994.

The white-bearded Cuban leader, who came to power after dictator Fulgencio Batista left a New Year's party to flee into exile, declares his revolution will not give up its one-party system.

Human rights activists who demand a multi-party system are sometimes jailed for such crimes as "illegal publishing" and are viewed as enemies of the revolution.

When Cuba lost its eastern European communist allies between 1989 and 1991, many believed the island's communist government would go the way of East Germany and Romania.

But Castro braved the economic decline over the past half-decade, maintaining his unwavering faith in socialism although he was forced to make some concessions to capitalism by inviting foreign investment and allowing small and family-run businesses.

Castro's victory in Cuba was welcomed at first by groups as diverse as Catholic societies, the local Hebrew association and even major U.S. companies such as Coca-Cola and Sinclair Oil.

But the honeymoon did not last long. Castro immediately established a revolutionary army and police force and began making deep social and economic reforms, clashing with powerful national and foreign interests.

His first laws lowered rents and the price of medicine by 50 percent and only five months after taking power, he decreed an agrarian reform that confiscated land from U.S. and Cuban companies and handed it over to 100,000 small farm families.

Before the second anniversary of the revolution, Castro had nationalised all big and medium-sized businesses including the sugar mills and their plantations, oil refineries, factories and apartment houses.

The United States clamped an economic embargo on trade with Cuba as Castro strengthened his ties with the Soviet Union, which began buying the island's raw sugar providing it with oil and supplying weapons and military advisers.

In 1960 U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to begin preparing an invasion that would bring down Castro. His successor John Kennedy inherited the plan and he gave the go-ahead to the Bay of Pigs invasion which turned out to be a humiliating U.S. defeat.

During the 1960s the CIA hatched several plans to assassinate Castro. To date Cuba has faced nine hostile U.S. presidents, each of whom has upheld the embargo on trade.

Only Jimmy Carter made a short-lived attempt to normalise relations with Cuba, lifting a ban on travel by U.S. citizens to the island.

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