

30Nov97 CUBA: CUBANS DRILL AND PRACTICE ON NATIONAL DEFENSE DAY.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, Nov 30 (Reuters) - Hundreds of thousands of regular army troops and male and female militia volunteers engaged in military and civil defense exercises across Cuba on Sunday, National Defense Day.

"The training today will involve millions of Cubans from one end of Cuba to the other under the concept that we are not a war threat for anybody except those who intend to put an aggressive foot on this land," Sunday's *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper said in a front-page display featuring a drawing of an AK-47 automatic rifle flying the Cuban flag.

In Havana, the day began with air-raid sirens sounding. An estimated 400,000 men and women, young and old, took part in target practice, infantry drills, weapons classes and civil defense preparations, as well as practicing food distribution procedures and medical assistance techniques for emergencies.

Exercises like Havana's took place in Cuba's 13 other provinces and on the Isle of Pines to the south of the main island.

At a stadium on Havana's seaside boulevard, the Malecon, Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina, wearing a camouflage-style T-shirt, joined in throwing dummy hand grenades and Vietcong-style caltrops, pointed metal anti-personnel devices. He watched with Havana's party chief, Esteban Lazo, and military officers as soldiers staged hand-to-hand combats and a mock battle.

Robaina, quoting Cuban President Fidel Castro, said ironically that "the dinosaur (the United States) is being threatened by little ants (Cuba)."

Despite the end of the Cold War, the Cuban government maintains its defense forces in a state of readiness. Defense Minister Raul Castro said last December that Cuba must never rule out the possibility of direct military action by the United States.

Raul Castro charged that "right-wing" Cuban exiles and non-Cubans who followed their lead hoped to choke the island's economy through an airtight embargo, provoking civil disorder and providing a rationale for U.S. military intervention.

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