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Long Cuba drought hits crops, food supply, economy

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, July 12 (Reuters) - A halving of normal spring and early summer rainfall attributed to El Nino has seriously affected Cuba's crops, already uncertain food supply and fragile economy.

Only 56 percent of the average seasonal rain has fallen on the long, narrow island, with eastern Cuba being hardest hit, central Cuba faring somewhat better and western Cuba best off, according to an article in Sunday's Juventud Rebelde newspaper headlined "Dry Earth."

It quotes Braulio Lapinel of the National Meteorological Institutes as saying rainfall this year from April through June has been the scantiest since 1941. These three months usually bring heavy downpours that are essential for cattle production and crops including sugar cane.

Sugar production has dropped steadily in recent years, from over 7 million tonnes in 1989 to only about 3 million in the recently completed harvest. Government plans to begin recovering this year have received a serious setback.

In some regions, as much as 14 percent of the sugar cane planted last year was lost because of the drought, and spring planting fell short of the goal without the rain needed to germinate the seed cane for the 1998-99 harvest.

Cubans visiting the eastern third of the island speak of below-normal production of root vegetables, beans, bananas and rice, all staples in the Cuban diet. The government's severe shortage of hard currency prevents it from importing enough food to make up for shortfalls in farm production.

The drought has also hurt livestock, poultry and egg production, according to Cuban sources. They said availability of eggs and milk products would be severely diminished in the dry summer months.

Even before the drought, the amount of food sold at low prices to every family under a 35-year-old rationing system provided only enough food for half a month. The rest must be obtained in the open market, where prices are high.

Last week U.N. officials here said they were studying the possibility of giving assistance to the Cubans to help offset the effects of the drought. Jessica Faieta of the U.N.

Development Programme in Havana told Reuters "there are clear indications that El Nino has affected crops and agriculture in general, especially in the eastern provinces."