

By LIONEL
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HAVANA: President Fidel Castro lamented last December that revolutionary vigilance was declining in Cuba and observed, "Maybe what our people are lacking is an enemy."

The enemy today is the estimated 10,000 Cuban men, women and children crowded into Havana's Peruvian embassy compound awaiting the chance to take advantage of the Castro government's pledge to let them leave the Caribbean island as soon as other countries are willing to accept them.

As the Peruvian embassy episode developed over the past two weeks, supporters of Dr Castro's government began to see it as an affront to his revolution.

Last week, after an editorial in the official newspaper *Granma* gave the government version of events, the country's social and political organisations began voicing condemnation of the embassy crowd and support for the revolution.

The official position now echoed by many Cubans is that many of the refugees are "bums, delinquents and trash."

'Delinquents'

Trade unions and local neighbourhood clubs linked to the committees for the defence of the revolution issued the appropriate declarations.

By last weekend it was difficult to ignore all the people marching in the streets with their signs and slogans.

"Let 'em go to Peru," the marchers shouted of the people at the embassy or simply: "The delinquents to Peru."

All in all, some people felt that the orchestrated reaction had united pro-revolutionary people around Dr Castro. For the moment at least, an enemy had been found.

The episode began on March 28 when a bus carrying six Cubans crashed through a police guard post into the Peruvian

embassy compound. One of the Cuban guards died in the gunfire that followed.

The six on the bus brought to 25 the number of refugees granted asylum in the embassy. Such grants are part of Latin America's diplomatic tradition and are widely honoured, usually being followed by grants of safe conduct from the embassy out of the country concerned.

The Cuban government keeps guards around all embassies here, denying access to people without a specific invitation to enter.

The Castro government's response to the bus incident was to remove its guards from the Peruvian embassy and announce later that all the Cubans who subsequently flooded into it seeking asylum would be free to leave this country once accepted elsewhere.

There was an exception however — those who had used force to enter the embassy.

The announcement, made on April 5, was an unexpected twist in a row President Castro had

been having with Venezuela as well as Peru over Cubans seeking political asylum in their embassies here.

The quarrel began recently after several carloads of Cubans crashed past Cuban guards into the Venezuelan and Peruvian embassies. Cuba accused both countries of encouraging its dissidents by giving them asylum.

Cuba's latest action — including allowing the would-be refugees in the Peruvian embassy to come and go as they liked pending emigration — angered the Lima military government.

Fence patrol

A statement there accused Cuba of leaving the embassy exposed to danger. One Peruvian politician complained that "the Cubans know very well that we are a poor country which cannot cope with such a flood of refugees."

Last weekend the would-be emigrants, mostly young, were waiting for Peru and other countries in Latin

America and elsewhere to make good on their promises to accept some of them, though complete numbers were not immediately available here.

It has been a saga for the people in the Peruvian embassy compound.

During the first few days after the Cuban guards were pulled out some 350 would-be refugees entered the embassy, often by climbing the fence. They lounged around the spacious garden. By the afternoon of April 5 the total may have been 1,500.

Word spread on Havana's *Radio Bemba*, the grapevine, that anyone wanting to leave Cuba could go to the Peruvian embassy.

The stampede came after the sun went down. Thousands of people milled around the embassy, many going over the fence. A fence patrol was organised by those already inside in an effort to keep the number of entrants down to manageable numbers. It failed.

There was violence, including stone-throwing, between would-be emi-

grants and Castro supporters who also turned up outside the compound.

The melee continued through the night. By dawn the compound was a seething mass of humanity.

At 6 o'clock that Sunday morning, a tight police cordon was put up, isolating the compound and the refugees.

Outside it people wandered around, sometimes with food, looking for relatives inside.

Inside, there was elation and defiance. But after a day in the burning sun the 8,000 to 10,000 people were thirsty, hungry and tired.

Health conditions were abysmal. People battled to reach the water taps outside the embassy building. The water finally gave out.

The embassy house was occupied by mothers with small children. The others were outside. The two inside toilets were the only ones available. The stench of urine, faeces and sweat filled the air.

Then, at sunset, the Cuban authorities took action, bringing in water for the refugees and installing portable toilets and a small hospital near

the compound.

In a bizarre touch, waiters from the top-class Nacional Hotel, immaculately dressed in black trousers and white shirts, appeared with cardboard boxes of food packed at their establishment and handed them over the embassy fence.

A minority of those inside ostentatiously threw the full boxes back.

Such was the mistrust that there was no stampede of takers for the hospital and portable toilets or for the official offers of safe-conduct passes allowing people to visit their homes or even remain there until ready to emigrate.

During the past week conditions worsened in the compound, jammed as it was with people who had come there unprepared for a long stay.

There was one birth, and one death, and a few of the minority who accepted the chance to visit their homes came back telling of being insulted and beaten by angry neighbours. But, reports said, gangs inside the compound were busy scaring people into refusing the safe conduct offer. — Reuter.

Found — an enemy for Cuba

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