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havana, june 21, reuter -- cuba's recently harvested tobacco crop suffered +substantial but not critical damage+ when hurricane alberto and torrential rains hit the island's renowned tobacco growing region, pinar del rio, a cuban official said.

hurricane alberto, accompanied by record rain^{fall}, hit western cuba on june 3 and 4 causing damage to the tobacco leaves hanging in curing sheds while new torrential rains last friday and saturday brought further damage and a setback to recovery plans.

according to the official, preliminary estimates indicate that about 950 tonnes of tobacco leaf were lost and 1300 tonnes damaged when the sheds were destroyed or flooded by rampaging waters.

the official said that pinar del rio's estimated production during the recently ended campaign was more than 37,000 tonnes of tobacco leaf out of a national total of around 50,000 tonnes

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about eighty-two per cent of cuba's tobacco is produced by small, private farmers and cooperatives.

total damage in pinar del rio, according to jaimé crombet, top communist party chief of the province, will amount to approximately 50 million pesos (63 million dollars).

crombet announced that farmers who lost their crops will have their debts to the national bank cancelled, will receive new credits and will be granted a fifty per cent discount on products needed to replace household and farm items lost in the hurricane and floods.

a cuban tobacco farmer said that tobacco leaf salvaged from the flood waters can be used for filler tobacco but in most cases is not fit for the outer leaf of quality cigars.

in the low-lying hoyo de monterey tobacco growing area which produces world famous leaf for havanas+ of the same name, rivers overflowed their banks and covered tobacco fields with sand and debris which must be removed before the planting season begins later this year.

==reuter/lem