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Christmas and
New Year Celebrations
in Cuba

by Lionel Martin

havana, dec 24, reuter -- judging by outward signs, a tourist arriving in cuba wouldn't know it was christmas.

there are no christmas trees with flashing lights in stores or public places, no salvation army on the corners collecting for the needy, no signs of sant clause, no christmas advertising and no yuletide carols on radio and television.

+it's a non holiday here,+ a cuban office worker said and added, +i myself plan to go to church, but most people don't even celebrate christmas anymore.+

christmas is being celebrated in private homes, in churches, in homes run by religious institutions and, of course, among foreign diplomats and news correspondents.

+the government doesn't make propaganda for or against christmas,+ the office worker said. +but,+ he continued, +christmas day is a regular working day and most people will go to work.+

while christmas is not celebrated, new years is and it happens to coincide with the anniversary of the victory of the cubanan revolution which is a national holiday.

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while cuban officials often receive +merry christmas+ cards from western diplomats or news agencies, they invariably reply with +happy new years+ cards.

in a discussion about christmas, one cuban official said: +leaving aside the religious implications, the christmas celebration, that is, the festive atmosphere, the drinking, eating and dancing, has now been moved up to july.+ +in fact,+ he said, +some cubans call it +christmas in july.++

the official was referring to the fact that the cuban government announced a decade ago that christmas would no longer be a holiday because, among other things, it seriously interfered with the cuban sugar harvest, the source of the lion's share of the island's hard currency income.

+during the first years of the revolution, when christmas was celebrated, absenteeism in the sugar mills would zoom upward, not only on the day after christmas but during christmas week and then right on into the first week of the ^{new} ~~first~~ year,+ the official said.
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the cuban government has now institutionalised the july celebration by distributing rationed toys during that month on what is officially decreed as +chidren' s day+. since these toys are not available during the rest of the year, their availability and the giving of presents creates something akin to the christmas stocking mentality of children visited by santa claus.

with the sugar harvest ended, the nation relaxes a bit and in july, the carnival season begins. carnivals are held in the major cities of the island. in some they are simple, with people dancing in the streets to blaring music during three or four weekends of the month. in havana, the carnival is more elaborate, with floats that could compete with those in the rose bowl parade in los angeles and with numerous orchestras and dancing groups, many of them with an afro-cuban style.

during the july festivities, the price of alcoholic beverages is cut in half and beer is sold in bottles and on draught from huge stainless steel refrigerated tanks located along the carnival's right of way.

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the july events culminate in the official july 26 holiday which comemorates the day in 1953 when twenty-six year old fidel castro led an attack on cuba' s second largest army barracks in an attempt to bring down the government of dictator fulgencio batista.

despite the non recognition of christmas as a holiday by the cuban government, christmas services at the cathedral of havana attracts a standing room crowd. according to a seminary school student who participates in the service +we don't know how many of the people who attend the service are religious since we don't see them around during the rest of the year.+ +i think many of them come to hear our small chorus and to soak up the exquisite atmosphere in this church where christopher columbus' bones were once desposited.+
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