

RB-197

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Its been a hot and humid summer here in Havana. And the streets are full of new bicycles and bikers who know absolutely nothing about the rules of safety.

The bikes are something new for this city of two million. It all began about a year ago when President Fidel Castro announced that Cuba was critically short of gasoline.

He said that we are going to enter the era of the bicycle and since then about 300,000 Chinese-made bikes have been imported and sold at moderate price to workers and students here.

The bikers, especially the school age kids on vacation, seem to be enjoying themselves but the nerves of many drivers of cars are just about shot.

I drive very carefully here in Havana because the kids swerve from lane to lane without warning or zoom across a major thoroughfare in what some call Cuban Roulette. Nights are especially hazardous since many bikes have neither reflectors nor headlights.

Biking is good exercise and it cuts down on pollution but it is also a symbol of the tough economic squeeze in which Cuba finds itself.

More than 80 percent of Cuba's trade was with the former Eastern European communist bloc. Much of the trade was barter. But now the former communist countries want hard currency, that is dollars. And that is just what Cuba does not have. So Cubans have been told to tighten their belts and expect more and more austerity.

Cuba has had to cut down on its purchases of Canadian wheat. That is why strict bread rationing has been instituted here in Havana.

I see my Cuban neighbors go down to the corner bodeguita - the grocery store - and come back, after waiting on a long queue, with their rations. One roll about the size of a hamburger bun for each family member daily, fresh milk for only the very young and older sick persons, for every family member, three quarters of a pound of meat every 12 days, four eggs a week, small bag of beans and a little bottle of oil each month and enough coffee for about four little cups each week.

There isn't too much to buy off the ration. Ice-cream is one of the none rationed products and when the ice cream truck comes around there is a lot of pushing and shoving as people buy a gallon or more to take home.

The Cubans are making a supreme effort to produce more food. Fidel Castro, who was brought up on a farm, is devoting much of his time to leading the effort to produce more food.

At the beginning of the revolution, many country people were encouraged to move to the cities. Now the policy is to get them back to the farms. But many, once they have seen gay Par-ee as it were, do not want to go back. So city workers are being encouraged to work on the farms, permanently or even for a week or two.

There has been a notable decline in revolutionary enthusiasm here since the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe

On Cuba's 1991 Special Period, Bicycles and lack of Food