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Cuba Banks On Totally Integrated Defense

by Mike Leffert

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A week after an ailing Cuban President Fidel Castro delegated powers within the Cuban state (see NotiCen, 2006-08-03), the Bush administration has done little to clarify its intentions with regard to "transition," (see NotiCen, 2006-07-20) other than to caution members of the Cuban-exile communities to tone down cries for a return to the island to press their property claims. The administration has said these claims would have to wait, as would the exiles' exercise of economic power to buy, or invest in, everything in sight on the island. Cuba, however, appears to have no need for Washington's clarifications.

The country has been planning for US intervention for many years. Cuba's development strategies are so thoroughly integrated that it is difficult to separate defense from ecology, environmentalism from economics. As a result of almost two decades of strategic preparation, the region is now a stronghold ready to deal with invasion. The country's Plan Turquino, in effect and ongoing since 1987, is illustrative of this point. The purpose of the plan was to develop the mountainous regions of the country to achieve, said the Agencia de Medio Ambiente, "a substantial increase in the quality of life of the people who inhabit these territories and their principal economic output, conserve soils, water, biodiversity, ecosystems, as well as to diminish the exodus of populations, principally of the young."

Cuba was aware of the consequences of mass migrations of populations to the cities to escape poverty that had occurred elsewhere in Latin America. The mountainous regions of Cuba occupy about 18% of the country and include eight provinces and 46 municipalities. The population is about 6% of the more than 11 million people of Cuba. The region comprises most of the watershed and the most important basins. This is the lifeblood of the agriculture and population centers of the coastal flatlands. Included in this geographic area are the Cordillera de Guaniquanico in the west, the Guamuhaya group in the center, the Sierra Maestra in the southwest, and the Nipe-Sagua-Baracoa group in the northeast.

Through the years, the Ministry of Agriculture and many other agencies have seen to a transformation of the region that has produced a programmed reduction of about 40% of the area devoted to coffee production at the same time that agronomists worked to double the quality and production of the remaining coffee lands. Conversion to other crops, including fruit and forest products, occurs as coffee is reduced. Cuba is interested in timber self-sufficiency as well as food security, according to the Agriculture Ministry. These regions supply most of the timber.

At present, about 63% of the timber comes from plantations, about 37% from natural forest. In 2004, 74,000 ha of trees were slated to be planted on lands previously dedicated to sugar-cane production. Uncontrolled logging, slash-and-burn farming, soil erosion, and pollutants are major problems the plan addresses. The region has suffered reduction of plant cover, poor soil management and

cultivation practices, and poor management of water basins. Water catchment has taken on greater importance as Cuban climate experts predict more arid conditions in the future.

Reforestation of the river basins is part of the plan to protect water sources. Reforestation has resulted in about a 1.3% increase in forest area in the past decade, but drought has hurt recent efforts in some areas. Other efforts have concentrated on breeding more ecofriendly animal species like goats, pigs, and poultry to replace cattle. As these environmental programs have gone forward, the Ministry of Culture has kept pace by bringing to these remote areas theater groups and shows and has improved or built facilities for these events. Solar-powered television has been brought in as well, both to provide local people access to the wider culture and to diversify energy sources.

These accomplishments are not just exercises in environmentalism and food production. They are also part of a national-defense system built around the possibility of a US invasion. The territories covered by Plan Turquino are also those that figured prominently in the birth of the Cuban Revolution. It was from the Sierra Maestra that the revolution overthrew the Batista dictatorship on New Year's Day, 1959. Now these same mountainous regions figure in preserving and defending that revolution. Plan Turquino has been supported and nurtured by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR).

War of All the People

The populations who live in these regions are not just farmers. They are also members of the Milicias de Tropas Territoriales (MTT), schooled in the principles of "War of All the People," a defensive doctrine for countering an overwhelming invasion. The MTT was created in 1980. Fidel Castro called the MTT a necessary part of being "ready for combat operations not only using regular troops, but with the participation of the entire people." The roots of the strategy go back at least to the French Revolution.

In a 1985 speech, Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro explained, "The models for the creation of the MTT and the doctrine of the War of the People were said to be the Soviet partisan movement during World War II in German-occupied regions of the USSR and especially the Vietnamese concept of guerrilla struggle against superior forces of foreign occupiers, that is, France and the United States." Preparing the mountains in this integrated fashion is just one part of Cuba's overall defensive strategy. In December 2004, a nationwide exercise, Bastion 2004, was launched with only a week's public notice. It involved 100,000 people in its first five days of strategizing and attack simulations, and, by its end, more than 4 million people were mobilized. For the first time in a decade, heavy tanks and MIG fighters were employed.

Raul Castro said then, "For many years our principal objective has been to avoid war. And we know that the only way to avoid an invasion is to make it clear that, if it happens, Cuba will be converted from one end to the other into an enormous wasps' nest that no aggressor can conquer, no matter how strong he is. In the end, the invader will have to retreat, bloody and defeated, because this would be a war of the entire people." Under the slogan, "Better to spill rivers of sweat now than rivers of blood later," the MTT, the FAR, and the reserves all went into action in response to simulations of bombings, incidents of sabotage, or the landing of US troops. Those rivers of sweat

have produced, through the years, an elaborate system of tunnels for refuge and resistance all over the country.

It is reported that hundreds of kilometers of these tunnels have been dug. They are underground fortifications complete with ventilation, electrification, water, medical facilities, and classrooms. These are supplemented with field hospitals and strategic facilities in natural caves in several locations on the island.

Bastion 2004 tested this defensive infrastructure, along with systems for guaranteeing delivery of food, water, and medicine to the population. The exercise also tested continuing industrial and agricultural production utilizing plans drawn up by every national industry to protect or move equipment and supplies under invasion conditions. Undoubtedly, much detail of Cuba's elaborate defense plans are known to US strategists through the debriefing of the many thousands of Cuban exiles who have come to the US with first-hand experience in their development.

Raul Castro has said, however, that this is counterbalanced by endless hours devoted to "dispassionate analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of our likely enemy." For the moment, Cuba's best hope for peace may lie in one of those weaknesses. A recent editorial in The Salt Lake Tribune noted, "The fact that the United States military is pinned down and being rapidly depleted in Iraq and Afghanistan may be the only way that our government's promises not to invade Cuba in the wake of the power vacuum left by Fidel Castro's indisposition will be believed. Or be true."

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