

# Castro Criticizes Anti-Hunger Efforts

11/17/96  
By Charles Trueheart  
Washington Post Foreign Service

ROME, Nov. 16—Cuban President Fidel Castro, arriving in Italy today for a historic meeting with Pope John Paul II, told a world forum on food and hunger that its pledge to cut in half the number of the world's 850 million starving people was pitifully inadequate.

"The very modesty of these goals is shameful," declared Castro, who is a vice chairman of the U.N.-sponsored World Food Summit being held in Rome and had been its most eagerly awaited speaker.

Among Castro's leading purposes in attending the U.N. conference is to meet the pope for the first time, an uncertain event until Vatican officials today confirmed that the pontiff would receive the Cuban dictator Tuesday morning.

Their encounter anticipates a visit to Cuba next year by the pope, who has traveled to every country in heavily Catholic Latin America except Cuba. John Paul, who is regarded as having been instrumental in bringing down communist regimes in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe a decade ago, is determined to bring his message to Cuba, one of communism's last redoubts.

Castro's address to thousands of delegates and scores of presidents and prime ministers gathered here was uncharacteristically brief. But it was characteristically savage in its condemnation of "capitalism, neo-liberalism, the laws of a wild market [and] the external debt" that are re-



BY LUKI SPAVENTA—REUTERS

Fidel Castro, right, meets the Vatican's Cardinal Angelo Sodano.

sponsible, in Castro's eyes, for the misery of the world's poorest and hungriest, some 10 million of them Cubans.

"Why is it that in the developed countries olive groves are being torn down, cattle herds are being sacrificed and large amounts of money are paid to keep the land unproductive?" he asked.

Castro, the world's longest-serving chief of state, was greeted with enthusiasm on his first visit to Italy by Communists and others still enamored of the "maximum leader" and his crumbled plans to create a worker's paradise in Cuba. Posters plastered on walls in Rome said "Welcome, Commandante Fidel Castro."

In his speech at the headquarters of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, host of the food summit, the Cuban leader delivered salvos against the arms trade and against economic embargoes that he said perpetuate poverty and hunger.

Castro was equally scornful about the United Nations's decision this week to intervene in the refugee crisis in Zaire that appears to be resolving itself.

"Intervention forces are organized to prevent the death of hundreds of thousands of people in eastern Zaire," Castro said. "What are we going to do to prevent the starvation of 1 million people every month in the rest of the world?"

In many of its particulars, Castro's address gave vigorous and scalding form to sentiments that the pope had expressed more mildly when he opened the food summit Wednesday.

In their meeting Tuesday, Castro and the pope may discuss the terms of next year's papal visit to Cuba. Squaring the pope's requirements for public access with Castro's sensitive political predicament is likely to consume many meetings between Cuban and Vatican officials in the months to follow.

For Castro's public relations purposes, a papal visit would legitimize his claim that religious freedom is a reality on the island. But it also could backfire badly if the pope is allowed to hold open-air masses and meet with pro-democracy dissidents on the island.

Castro, whose regime long ago decreed active piety to be incompatible with membership in the Communist Party and the benefits that go with it, recently has begun easing the restrictions that over the years have emptied Cuban churches of priests and parishioners alike.