

Block Clubs Oversee Cuba's Daily Life

Second of a series

By Terri Shaw

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HAVANA—On every city block in Cuba there is one house or apartment that displays a large photograph of Fidel Castro or Salvador Allende, a neighborhood bulletin board and a sign with the initials CDR.

The initials stand for Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, and more than 4.7 million of Cuba's 9 million people have joined their local CDR.

The CDR is the largest of several "mass organizations" which inform Cubans about government policies, organize volunteer work projects and help distribute rewards to "good revolutionaries." They also give millions of Cubans a sense of participation in

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the 16-year-old government of Fidel Castro, which everyone here still calls "the revolution."

Most Cubans seem to belong to several such organizations, all meeting two or three times a month, and re-

quiring various types of work from their members.

Narciso Nodaz, a 32-year-old Communist Party official from the port of Cienfuegos on the southern coast, is a member of his local CDR and the cultural workers union and is an officer in the military reserves. His wife, a school teacher, is a member of the CDR, the women's federation, her union and the women's branch of the militia.

A farmer living outside Cienfuegos would belong to the peasants' federation. High school and college students have their own mass organizations, and school children are encouraged to join the Pioneers, which is something like Boy and Girl Scouts.

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The Young Communist League and the Communist Party are not considered mass organizations because their membership requirements are stricter. They are called "vanguard" organizations and are designed to develop leaders rather than to mobilize the masses.

Mobilization is a key role of the mass organizations. Unions organize city workers to cut sugarcane during the yearly harvest. The women's federation sponsors sewing courses so women can get jobs in clothing factories. The Pioneers guarded the ballot boxes during the local elections in Matanzas Province last June.

Opponents of the Castro government often describe members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution as "neighborhood spies"—middle-aged women with nothing better to do than listen at keyholes for criticism of the government.

The CDRs were founded, at Castro's suggestion, in 1960, to provide "revolutionary vigilance" and head off plots against his young and shaky government. When CIA-backed Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the CDRs rounded up tens of thousands of suspected

"counterrevolutionaries" in what Castro admitted later was excess zeal.

CDR members still watch for activities that might be "counterrevolutionary." For example, one family recently received a visit from a CDR member, accompanied by two policemen, after a foreigner had visited its home.

As the government has become more secure, the CDRs—while remaining available to block any anti-government activity—have turned to doing civic work in the neighborhood and

instilling enthusiasm for Castro's programs.

The organization now admits anyone who even vaguely supports the government's goals. In many neighborhoods the only people who are not members—on paper at least—are the very old.

It is difficult to determine how much pressure there is for residents of a block to join and participate in the CDR. Membership in the CDR and other mass organizations is certainly a factor in assessing whether a person has "revolutionary merit."

Under the Cuban system

of incentives, an individual's neighbors and co-workers decide, on the basis of his "revolutionary merit" whether he can buy a refrigerator, move into a new housing project or become eligible for a free vacation. Sometimes the parents' merit is weighed to decide

whether a child should be admitted to a particularly good school, although grades are probably more important.

CDR members are expected to be available for night patrol every four or five weeks. In Havana, women patrol from 11 p.m.

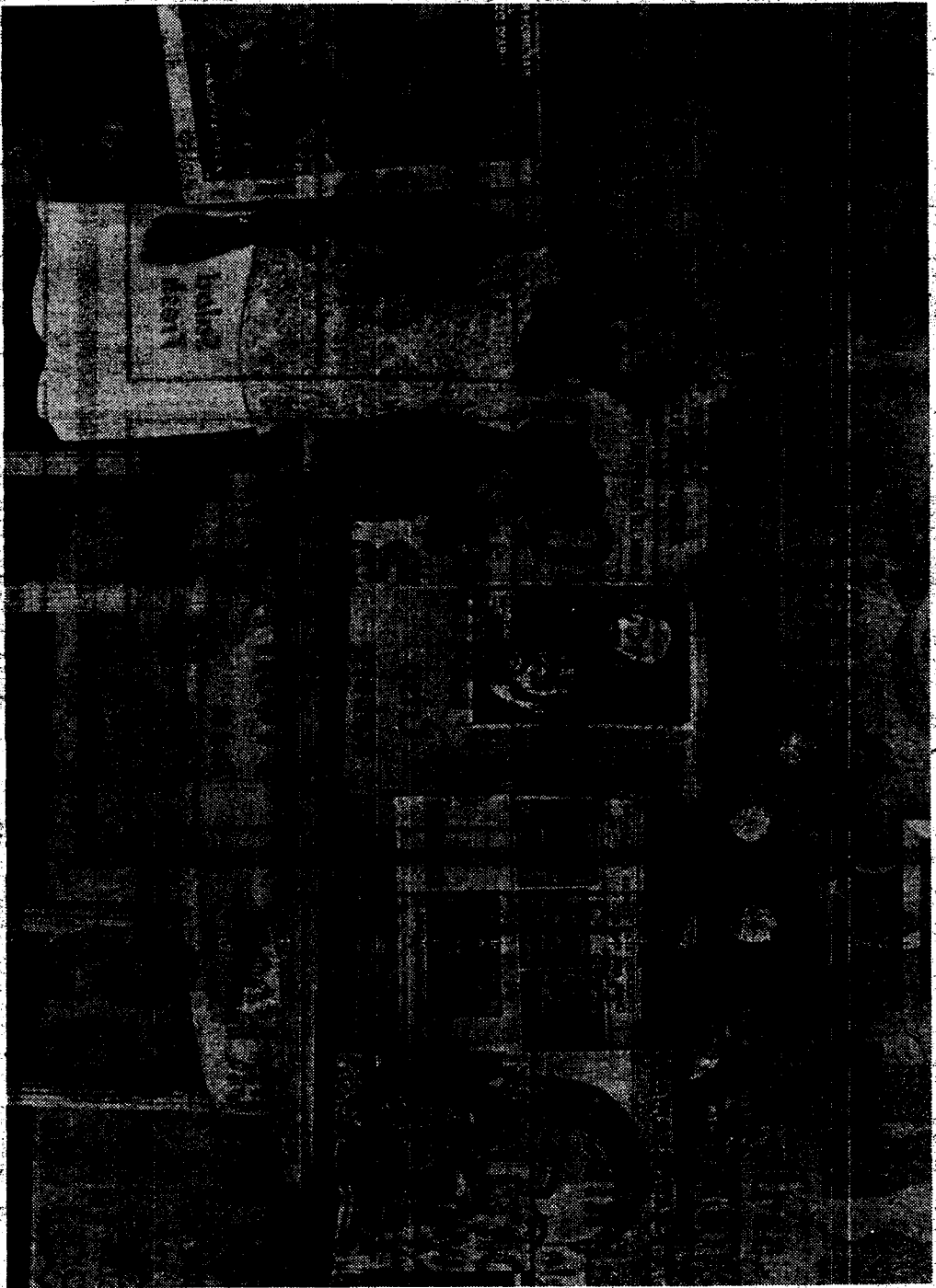
to 2 a.m. and men from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m., and their presence is said to contribute to Cuba's relatively low crime rate.

"The patrols used to be to protect against sabotage," a patrol leader said, "but now we just watch out for criminals."

Asked to recall the last

Candelaria Garcia stands on the porch of her house, the headquarters of the ODR for her block in the Miramar section of Havana.

By Terry O'Shea—The Washington Post



crime committed in his neighborhood, the man thought for a while, then said he thought there had been an attempted robbery at a supermarket about six months before.

Every CDR has an education secretary, usually a woman, who keeps a list of all the school children in the block.

"I see that they go to school clean and well-disciplined," explained Candelaria Garcia, education secretary of a CDR in the once-elegant Miramar section of Havana.

Children participate in CDR activities, such as the Click Patrol, which goes around the neighborhood at night checking to see that residents do not leave too many electric lights on.

The CDR tries to exert a moral influence, discouraging certain types of behavior, such as homosexuality.

A homosexual musician who considers himself a revolutionary was for many years an officer of his local CDR.

"This year when they had the election of officers, I was re-elected unanimously," he said. "But then a military officer got up and said he had orders that I could not be an officer. Everyone else just sat there silently." The musician is still a CDR member.

The CDR headquarters in each block is a repository of revolutionary icons, with posters of Castro, Che Guevara and Allende, as well as diplomas the CDR has been awarded for its activities.

CDR No. 4 in the Vedado section of Havana meets in a basement room, once a garage, dominated by a portrait of Pedro Portuondo Bouly, a solemn-looking youth killed fighting to repulse the Bay of Pigs invasion. The CDR, named after Portuondo who lived in the neighborhood, commemorates each anniversary of his death.

About 50 of the CDR's 158 members met recently for the annual election of officers.

The members, most of them middle aged, sat quietly on wooden benches or folding chairs while the president read a call from the national leadership for a "revitalization" of the local organization. The statement ended with the revolutionary slogan "Fatherland or Death," to which the members responded with a hearty "Venceremos" (We shall overcome).

The president then read a long report of the year's activities, which included decorating the block for revolutionary holidays, turning out a large percentage of the membership to welcome foreign dignitaries visiting Havana, the addition of 12 new members, collections of used bottles, paper and cardboard, and a census of diabetics for the Public Health Department.

The president ended his report with fervent appeal for "honest criticism" of his work and the floor was opened for nominations.

After an uncomfortable silence, a woman rose to commend the president for his work and move his re-election. The motion was quickly passed by a show of hands followed by enthusiastic applause. The procedure was repeated for the other officers, all but two of them men.

Two young women were nominated for positions on the district level CDR, and accepted the posts after being assured that the work was not overly time-consuming.

The meeting was adjourned about one hour after it began with a reminder from the president that the CDR was responsible for making 16 posters to put up on the block for the 16th anniversary of the revolution Jan. 1.