

# Cuba Goes All Out to Bring

BY AL BURT

Chicago Daily News Service

**BAHIA HONDA, Cuba** — A man with a flashlight walked between the barracks with a flashlight and began calling, "En pie, en pie" "On your feet, on your feet!"

The men who stumbled out of their hammocks with stubbles of beard on their faces were some of Cuba's diplomatic and foreign experts, who

have served in places such as Russia, Viet Nam, Bolivia and Yugoslavia.

These men are part of Cuba's all-out effort to save its economy. They nurse fresh calluses and newly discovered muscles, and each day whack away at their country's money crop like any group of field hands.

**ROBERTO LaSalle**, a minister consultant on Latin

America whose latest assignment was as charge d'affaires in Bolivia, came out in the dim light in his undershirt, already wearing his straw hat.

"The first two weeks were the hardest physically," he said. "For a while, I hurt all over. Now it's no problem. We just get tired.

"This is my first time to cut cane. I have been out of the

country. Most will stay here and cut for about four months, but some stay only two."

When the sun came up, this special group and about 40,000 other volunteers were slashing away at the cane.

They would cut near the ground, clean the stalk with swipes of a machete, and then chop it in two or three parts. These are thrown into piles, which later are trucked to the mill.

**THE CUTTERS** work until 11, when the sun is high and hot, and then quit to go back for a hot meal and a siesta.

The average day is eight hours, and the pay is equal to what the men earn at the foreign ministry. They work 13 days in the field, then take two days off, usually in Havana.

Regular cutters usually begin earlier in the day and often work later, because they are paid on a production basis, earning a minimum of \$4 a day.

## Cannibalization Closes 9 Mills

The mill, called Central Harlem, is said to be one of 152 in Cuba. There used to be 161, but the other nine have been cannibalized for parts to keep the others running.

Central Harlem is run by tanned Felipe Sanchez, 37, who has to do a lot of improvising. Instead of oil for fuel, he

## In Vital Sugar Crop



Cuban "volunteers" from Havana offices find cutting sugar cane is hot, tiring work.

father had once owned a small plot of sugar cane.

"During the fighting against Batista, a big sugar owner ran cattle over my father's farm and ruined it," Sanchez said, in the manner of a man presenting credentials.

**ON A TOUR** of the mill, Felipe traced the course of cane from juice to brown molasses to yellow granulated sugar ready to be bagged. He dwelt particularly on the utility of bagasse, the waste stalk left after the juice has been squeezed out. He stressed use of bagasse as fuel in the mill, and also research being conducted on its use as a building material.

He was not specific whether bagasse was used only as an emergency substitute for oil as fuel, but did say some mills run on oil. This one, apparently, runs primarily on bagasse and wood.

Neither would Sanchez comment on mill production, sugar content of the cane, acreage remaining to be cut or length of the harvest, which began last December and apparently will run to June.

When the spring rains come, usually by middle of late May, transportation becomes a greater problem on the muddy rural roads.

### **How Much Sugar Can Be Harvested?**

Ironically, the future of the new Cuba hinges on a task done expertly for decades by

the society it overthrew. How much sugar can it harvest?

Slogans pop out like measles here, and this is the most frequent: "To win the battle of the harvest is to win the battle of the economy."

Most agree this year's harvest should be better than last year's (estimated at about 3,800,000 tons). The critical point is what the improvement will be.

Most guesses range from 4,000,000 to 5,000,000 tons. Premier Fidel Castro has said Cuba needs 5,500,000 tons to meet its foreign obligations.

**A VETERAN**, non-Communist foreign observer said the possibilities for Cuba are excellent.

"There is better organization, the production looks better and there appears a good chance of making 5,000,000 or more, barring sabotage or unforeseen accidents," he said.

The U.S. Agriculture Department has estimated the crop will be 4,100,000 tons.

Any of these figures would produce the best harvest since 1962, when Cuba's economic bungling began to put the country on the skids.

**THE IMPORTANCE** of sugar, which produces an estimated 80 per cent of Cuba's foreign exchange, was outlined by Castro this way:

"If it were not for the exchange we obtain from sugar cane, no boat would enter Cuba, not one train would move, not one plane, not one transport.

"Without sugar, neither would we have light, we could not import resources we need. . . . Sugar supports the immense majority of the country's imports."

Much (an estimated 2,100,000 tons) of Cuba's output will go to the Soviet Union, as payment on the huge debt (about \$500,000,000) built up in recent years to strengthen the island militarily and keep its economy afloat.

### **The Turning Point For Fidel -- Maybe**

A good sugar crop this year might be the turning point for Castro. It could mean a gradual improvement in island living conditions, a cushion against any possible reduction in Soviet aid.

A poor crop might severely

uses the sugar cane refuse and wood.

In place of fresh water to cool the boiler rooms, he runs in sea water from the nearby ocean.

If something breaks, his mechanics patch it. If they can't do that, the government tries to borrow or buy the needed part. If this doesn't work, the mechanics make a replacement.

"We will beat the blockade," Sanchez said, a bit grimly.

**HOW MANY** home-made fly wheels or other spare parts might be in the spinning machinery of the sugar mill, Sanchez would not say. Next to military information, facts about sugar production are the most precious secrets in Cuba these days.

Nothing makes the government more nervous than rumors of possible sabotage to its sugar industry.

Sanchez said he had been working in sugar mills for 13 years, but has been manager here of only one. He said his

test the government's ability to survive.

The results will be influenced by these factors:

● **Price** — From a high of nearly 12 cents a pound in November, 1963, the world price has dropped now to less than 3 cents. Russia continues to pay about 6 cents under the terms of its long-term agreement, however, and some other nations, like Spain, also have trade agreements that call for a premium price.

● **Workers** — A season-long, all-out effort by the cutters is necessary, and Cuba has had a problem with worker incentive. A new pay scale for the regular cutters is geared more closely to production than last year's. Some 5,000 prizes, including motorcycles, refrigerators and trips to Socialist countries, go to the best cutters.

● **Organization** — Observers say a more careful organization is apparent, and that a move toward decentralization has allowed more local decisions, which may prevent some of the foul-ups of previous years.

● **Mechanization** — For the third year, mechanical lifters are being used to load trucks. In addition, some 500 Soviet mechanical cutters are being used, but apparently on an experimental basis.