

Castro Spurs Campaign To Settle Rural Regions

By Michael Arkus
Reuters

CIEGO DE AVILA, Cuba— Prime Minister Fidel Castro is championing the countryside against the city in a re-population campaign on the rolling plains of Eastern Cuba near here.

By providing housing and attractive working facilities in rural as opposed to urban areas, he hopes to settle tens of thousands of people in Cuba's countryside to provide the necessary agricultural manpower for the goals which he has set for the island's economy.

More especially, the Prime Minister's "national population policy" is directed at the often proclaimed target of producing 10 million tons of sugar by 1970.

Must Exploit Region

For this, the full exploitation of the rich sugar belt of Camaguey Province, of which the Ciego de Avila region forms a part, is essential.

Castro intends to settle 50,000 people in the rural areas of Camaguey alone to fill the "demographic deficit."

The cities will have to take a back seat in the country's restricted building budget.

Partly owing to the drift from the countryside to the towns and partly because some country regions were always sparsely inhabited, some 60,000 civilian volunteer cane cutters and 20,000 soldiers have to be mobilized to harvest the sugar in Camaguey.

This province suffers from the greatest agricultural manpower shortage in the country. But, on a smaller scale, the story is the same in Oriente Province, to the east, and Las Villas, to the west.

Even with a big influx of volunteer cutters, who leave their city jobs for months on end, it has proved impossible to cut all the cane.

Castro fears that the 1970 sugar target will not be reached unless a large number of agricultural workers live permanently in the sugar bearing areas.

A re-populated countryside is also vital to Castro's general agricultural plans for producing much greater quantities of meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables.

Laborers Required

All these plans require the continual attention of permanent agricultural laborers.

As a first step in the population campaign, Castro has ordered that at least 5000 houses be built in rural areas of Camaguey this year. This represents a high percentage of the building industry's general annual average of 18,000 houses throughout the island.

Outlining his policy in a recent speech, Castro called for a fair deal for the interior of the island.

Referring to the excellent economic prospects offered by the plains of Camaguey, not only for sugar production but also for general agricultural purposes, he asked:

"Where must we concentrate our efforts to resolve the housing problem? In the cities?"—and gave his own answer:

"No, however great our needs may be in the cities. Nothing will be solved by investing our resources in the cities.

Cities Must Wait

"The cities will have to wait until the general development of the building industry will permit mass construction.

"The resources which we have for housing must be concentrated essentially in the countryside, for it is in the countryside that the best immediate prospects for the country are to be found, the best possibilities for solving our economic problems . . .

"Camaguey needs a working force for 50,000 men, so we must try to create there living conditions that will make life attractive in the interior. We must create facilities for those who live in the countryside and work in the countryside."