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Castro Holds Peasant Allies With Education

By Norman Gall

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MINAS DEL RIO, Cuba, July 12 — The Cuban revolution has penetrated the abrupt and twisted terrain of the Sierra Maestra Mountains with a politically-oriented rural education program that has kept the Sierra peasant an ally of the Castro regime.

Since he seized power nearly six years ago, Premier Castro has invested much of his government's budget and sent some of his most dedicated followers into this remote region at the southeast end of the Island.

They are providing its backward inhabitants, who supported Castro during two years of guerrilla warfare, with a battery of education, health and transportation services heretofore unknown in the mountains of Cuba.

These services have come in simple but effective form. One is passenger transportation in converted trucks fit to climb up and down the steep mountains. Another is the doctor or nurse on horseback operating from small clinics in areas where professional medical care was unknown.

But the biggest campaign has come in education, for which more than 4000 classrooms have been built in the Escambray and Sierra Maestra mountains since 1959.

Education Ministry officials say there were fewer than 300 classrooms in these mountain regions before the 1959 overthrow of Dictator Fulgencio Batista.

"Today we can proclaim that the Cuban Revolution has fundamentally resolved the problem of rural education, one of the most difficult in countries like ours," said Education Minister Armando Hart this week at a meeting of "Vanguard Teachers," resembling somewhat the United States Peace Corps, who have lived in these isolated mountain communities since 1960.

There are several members of the United Party of the Socialist Revolution (PURS), the Castro regime's official political organization, among

the 1200 young men and women in the Frank Pais Brigade of Vanguard Teachers, from which, according to Hart, many of the nation's future educational leaders will come.

But whether members of the party or not, all of the many Brigade members when interviewed showed strong Marxist-Leninist convictions

and a missionary zeal to carry the revolution to the remotest parts of the nation.

"No, I have not yet had the glory of being chosen to belong to the party," said Zaraida Vinas, a chubby, reserved, former Santa Clara schoolteacher whose present one-room school stands beside one of those narrow but direct roads which rise and plunge through the steep ravines of the Sierra Maestra.

In Zaraida's schoolroom, as in virtually every Cuban school, is a plaster head of Jose Marti, the national poet, over which is displayed a large Russian flag flanked by two smaller Cuban ban-

ners.

The school was built by peasants using government materials. In recent years attendance has been bad during the rainy season, so the Frank Pais Brigade, named for an anti-Batista resistance leader killed in 1957, has invented "Operation Umbrella," by which peasants alternatively station their horses in streams to enable pupils to cross. The teacher doesn't start lessons until the cloud-burst stops.

The schoolteachers in these isolated communities teach 12 hours daily, conducting the first grade in the morning, the second through sixth in the afternoon, and adults classes of peasants at night, following up Cuba's 1961 literacy campaign.

Schoolbooks are larded with political content. The teacher also helps in the "orientation" of the national mass organizations operating in every community.

With roads and communications poor, one of the teacher's functions in the Frank Pais Brigade is to see that the Committees for Defense of the Revolution, the Cuban Women's Federation and the Young Communists Union function well in their locality.

Last week the Frank Pais Brigade held a three day conference on the special problems of educating mountain children and raised \$13,000 to pay for the meeting.

"In their first year of life, the city child and the mountain child develop at the same speed," said Elena Freyre Andrada, director of the Education Ministry's psychology department, at the conference. "But when the mountain child reaches school age he is poorer at talking and socializing and just sitting still than other kids.

"Most of them, when they get to school, don't know how to use paper and pencil," she said. "First grade has to be kindergarten at the same time and this is why last year about half our six-year-olds were not promoted the first time.

"We are doing much better now since we began spending the first few months of each term teaching the kids good classroom habits, but we are fighting in a tough environment."