

Inside Report . . . By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Guerrillas Return

IF ALL goes according to schedule, battle-hardened guerrillas soon will start tormenting Fidel Castro in mountain country some 225 miles from Havana.

Working with as much secrecy as possible, plans are set for a return of "The Second Front of Escambray" to the hills of Los Villas Province. This was the guerrilla band that bedeviled Dictator Fulgencio Batista five years ago while Castro's "First Front" on the other side of the island was getting the headlines.

The return of the guerrillas to Los Villas by no means signals the beginning of the end for Castro. But the reconstituted "second front" poses the only physical threat to Cuban communism today. As such, it warrants examination.

ON THE PLUS side, the "Second Front" deserves applause for avoiding the drum-beating publicity tactics of rival exile groups. A nucleus of officers from the anti-Batista days has been quietly training new recruits. Its leaders are known as fighters, not talkers.

Eloy Menoyo Guitierrez, the "Second Front" commander, disappeared two months ago and may well be in Los Villas today. Dr. Armando Fleitas, a surgeon who is second in command, slipped in and out of Washington last week for talks with U.S. Government officials and Latin American ambassadors.

These "Second Front" leaders know full well what won't work against Castro. They have no interest whatever in another foreign-backed Bay of Pigs invasion attempting conventional war against Castro's big army. They know revolt must come from inside—not outside—Cuba, beginning with guerrilla action.

Finally, they realize that Castro cannot be deposed without massive defections inside his armed forces. They hope that veterans of the old "Second Front" who now are Castro army officers will become a spearhead of subversion.

BUT NONE of this is possible today—or even tomorrow. In sorry contrast to the 3000-man "Second Front" guerrilla army that battled Batista, Menoyo now



Novak

Evans

have a mere handful in Los Villas. In the beginning at least, his activity will consist of scattered sabotage rather than full-scale guerrilla war.

This is because the Castro terror is the most efficient in Latin American history. Though anybody could start his own guerrilla gang under Batista's relatively easy-going dictatorship, the Castro repression is complete.

In fact, the "Second Front" leaders don't expect much help from terror-stricken peasants in Los Villas—usually a prerequisite for successful guerrilla operations. Doubtful that they could live off the land under Castro's iron rule, they are now establishing secret caches of food in the hills.

But the most telling defect of the "Second Front" may be its lack of ideological content. To topple a government, guerrilla action should be political in large part. The "Second Front"

wasn't in 1958. That's one reason why Castro, not Menoyo, took power after Batista failed.

MORE THAN five years later, the "Second Front" still shows more emphasis on midnight raids than ideology.

While opposing a return to the great landed estates of pre-Castro days, the "Second Front" would denationalize sugar refineries and public utilities and return them to their previous U.S. owners. Obviously, this program has little appeal for the leftist Cuban army officer who feels Castro has betrayed revolution.

In this respect, Manuel Ray—an anti-Communist leftist—is one Cuban exile leader who might attract substantial army defection. But Ray today stands humiliated as a result of his comic opera capture by the British in a ludicrously unsuccessful effort to enter Cuba.

This sort of humiliation almost surely won't befall the "Second Front" leaders. Whatever their ideological shortcomings, Menoyo and Fleitas are impressive fighting men. And if they do get a guerrilla foothold in Los Villas, they could—some time in the dim future—spark a broader-based revolt.

This is a slim hope. But because it is the only realistic hope in Cuba today, it is worth nurturing.

© 1964, Publishers Newspaper Syndicate