

# The 'Worms' Become Butterflies

**Cuba:** Now Castro is reaching out to the exiles he used to revile



LES STONE—SYGMA

**Cuba's real welfare system:** A Havana woman shows pictures of her relatives in Miami

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**F**OR CUBANS IN THE UNITED STATES, every letter from home now is a painful ordeal. Relatives, friends and even mere acquaintances back in Cuba are frank about their desperation—and don't hesitate to beg for help. "I am ashamed to send you this, but you have no idea what circumstances are like here," reads one letter. "If you don't have The Dollar, you don't have anything... I'm sending you everybody's shoe size." Another asks for soup concentrate, vitamins and antibiotics. "The girl has a bad throat," it says, "and there's nothing available."

Cuban-Americans are being pulled in opposite directions by the plight of their brethren on the nearly bankrupt island. They're one of the most politically implacable

exile groups in the world, and most of the more than a million Cuban-Americans still want Fidel Castro to fall. But they're also helping to prop up Cuban society by supplying food, medicine and cash to desperate friends and relatives back home. One by one, thousands of Cuban-Americans are getting around the U.S. embargo of the island by lugging duffel bags full of consumer goods onto charter flights that fly 11 times a week between Miami and Havana. This people-to-people supply line has made Castro's government nearly as grateful as the recipients sobbing for joy in the Havana airport. Remittances from abroad may now exceed \$500 million a year, or about one fourth of all the hard currency Cuba will earn in 1994. Wooing the exile community has become one of the regime's top priorities. This week Havana will host a confer-

ence of 240 Cuban émigrés, a group Castro used to dismiss collectively as *gusanos*, or "worms." Now, says Jorge Domínguez of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, "the worms have become butterflies."

A rare visit to Havana shows how much survival in Cuba now depends on the butterflies. The peso buys practically nothing, and Cubans say dollars are their only salvation. "I'm so lucky to have my family [in the States]," says Victoria González-Longoria, 42, an unemployed single mother; she says it's not worth working for a peso salary that works out to less than \$2 a month. "Without the dollars they send, I couldn't buy anything at all." In the old days, Cubans could expect prison terms for holding "enemy" currency. Last summer, partly to lure exile money back to the homeland, the regime made it legal to hold greenbacks. Special hard-currency stores, stocked with imported food, clothing and electronics, have sprouted all over the country. Even local products, no longer available with ration cards, sell for dollars now. A leading Havana musician tells how she was forced to pawn her gold jewelry for dollars to buy two plastic jugs of cooking oil.

**Stolen goods:** The island's stubbornly socialist regime appears powerless to stop "dollarization." Drove of prostitutes now haunt the hotels and restaurants that cater to foreigners. Selling stolen goods, especially cigars and music cassettes, can be a highly lucrative business. With a \$1 bribe to the hotel bouncer, María, 27, can sell a box of expensive Cohibas cigars in the lobby for \$30. The old guard has no such recourse. A middle-ranking government official, once a man of privilege, complains of walking two hours to work in the morning because the buses hardly run anymore (when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did gas supplies). An elite orchestra can hardly complete a four-hour rehearsal, because the musicians are, quite simply, hungry.

The Cuban government hopes that overseas Cubans may perform the same miracles for the fatherland that Overseas Chinese have performed for socialist China. That's not likely. "Cuban exiles could perform the same role—but not under a regime led by Fidel Castro," says Cuba-economy expert Carmelo Mesa-Lago of the University of Pittsburgh. Hard-liners even want to limit charity. "We urge people to send only things that their families really need," says Domingo Moreira, a board member of the Cuban-American National Foundation. Most exile groups oppose this week's conference; oth-

