

Cuba examines food production problems

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HAVANA --

Hundreds of trucks overflowing with plantains, sweet potatoes and onions converge on the Plaza of the Revolution each month as farmers sell produce to tens of thousands of people.

Here's where Cubans come seeking affordable food. While they may not be able to find everything they want, they are increasingly getting what they need, even as the island's communist leaders grow more worried about drops in food production and prices that remain frustratingly high for many Cubans.

One man in his 60s trundled through the plaza with a rusty wheelbarrow loaded with two huge branches of plantains he said he bought to feed his five grandchildren. A middle-aged woman pushed by with more plantains, braided strings of garlic and a huge slab of pink-and-white frosted cake balanced on top of her banged-up supermarket cart.

"Onions! Strings of onions!" a young man cried out, holding six strands of red and white bulbs on each arm as consumers carted away other fresh produce in baby strollers, luggage carts and plastic milk cartons fastened behind bicycle seats.

The quantity of goods sold at the monthly government-organized produce fairs demonstrates how Cuba's food situation has eased 15 years after widespread shortages were sparked by the Soviet Union's collapse and an end to economic subsidies from the Kremlin.

But communist leaders and producers aren't satisfied. They want changes to get more affordable goods to market, and they're disturbed by a 7 percent drop in the nation's food production last year.

Lawmakers under acting president Raul Castro's leadership are examining the issue this week before the full National Assembly debates it Friday.

Cuba's food production "is insufficient and commercialization is deficient," Vice President Carlos Lage told municipal leaders this month.

Cuba spends about \$1.6 billion annually for food imports, about a third of it from the U.S. It even imports about 82 percent of the \$1 billion worth of food it sells at subsidized prices to all Cubans on the ration system, including rice, potatoes, beans, meat and other goods.

Raul Castro, the 76-year-old defense minister leading the government while his 80-year-old brother Fidel recovers from intestinal surgery, has long considered food a national security issue. "Beans are more important than cannon," he told the 5th Communist Party Congress in 1997.

He argued for the farmers markets in 1994, and earlier created the Youth Work Army, a military branch that produces food for the nation. At the last parliament session in December, he demanded that agriculture officials increase production and make overdue payments to small farmers and cooperatives.

Lage later said the payment problem was resolved, but farmers complain they need more government help.

Orlando Lugo, president of the National Association of Small Farmers, told the state-run magazine Bohemia this year that farmers need tractors, farm equipment and fuel. "There are cooperatives around Havana with the potential to double and even triple their production," he said.

Much potentially productive government land is not being used, including former sugar cane fields now infested with a fast-growing, thorny bush called marabu, Lugo added.

Many perishable crops, meanwhile, spoil because of scarce transportation or faulty coordination by state agencies contracted to pick them up, the Communist Party newspaper Granma reported Monday.

State economist Ariel Terrero says Cuba should produce more of its own food to save on import costs. Between 2002 and 2005, Cuba increased rice imports by 36 percent but paid 105 percent more for them because of rising international prices.

"The perpetual bleeding conspires against the possibilities of the nation's economic development," Terrero wrote in Bohemia earlier this year.

The cooperatives and small farming enterprises were created in 1993 when the government restructured its centralized food system, breaking up big state farms into smaller worker-owned and managed units. Smaller parcels went to individual farmers.

Less than 15 years later, more than 150,000 individual farmers and agriculture cooperatives now produce two-thirds of the country's food using just a third of the island's workable land. State farms work the rest.

The cooperatives and small farms produce most of the nation's beans, corn and root crops - all once produced by state farms. They also produce a third of Cuba's rice, 42 percent of its milk and more than half of all meat, including pork, beef, goat and sheep.

After meeting state quotas, the farmers can sell the rest of their goods at the farmers markets. More than 300 such markets now operate nationwide, including about 50 in Havana, according to a study by Cuba specialist Phil Peters at the Lexington Institute, a Washington-area policy group that supports free enterprise.

The state and Youth Work Army also sell vegetables at much lower prices at small neighborhood stands.

An urban agriculture program, another pet project of Raul Castro, created an additional important food source in the early 1990s. Today, more than 350,000 gardeners in a nation of 11.2 million people grow fruit and vegetables in and around cities, selling produce directly to the public.