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Cuba: Molding Revolutionary Spirit on the Isle of Youth (U)

Only a revolution is capable of totally transforming the structure of education in a country because it also transforms the political, economic, and social structure.

--Fidel Castro

Havana's ambitious foreign assistance program for Third World countries involves the educational and ideological training of several thousand African and 600 recently arrived Nicaraguan students on Cuba's Isle of Youth. Known as "work-study," the program inculcates "revolutionary" habits through traditional schooling, political indoctrination, and cooperative agricultural labor. In return for its efforts, Havana gains political influence and whatever is produced by the students' labors.

Background

Cuba's decisionmakers have favored the Isle for years, and through budget allotments and tax benefits, they have turned it into a showcase for Havana's highly respected educational system. The island is a regular stop on the tour of the "new Cuba" for official visitors, some of whom are accompanied by Fidel Castro--who takes obvious pride in Cuba's educational achievement.

Castro inaugurated the first junior high farming school on the Isle in 1971. Today there are 44 such schools with a capacity for more than 26,000 students. Plans call for 80 schools by 1985, with a total enrollment in excess of 40,000.

Program

The curriculum is rigorous and regimented--students wear uniforms at all times and march to and from classes--and includes basic studies, political indoctrination, sports, and work in the citrus groves

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The African students have been isolated from the 14,000 to 19,000 Cuban students on the island, probably to lessen the chance of disagreements with the Cubans as well as to help preserve their cultural identity. Moreover, this arrangement keeps the grateful Africans away from large numbers of Cuban youths who may not be as enamored of the revolution as Castro would like.

The 600 Nicaraguan students who arrived on the Isle last month will spend several years in Cuba. Part of a comprehensive education cooperation plan between Managua and Havana announced in August, the Nicaraguans are the first group of non-Africans to be provided their own school. Nicaraguan teachers accompanied the students both to assist their Cuban counterparts and to learn from them. Managua apparently intends to draw heavily on the Cuban experience in developing plans for its own literacy campaign.

Outlook

The work-study program appears central to Castro's Third World strategy, for international graduates of the Isle will return home as technicians and teachers bearing Havana's socialist message. Indicative of its long-term policy, Havana recently has renewed education agreements with Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique that call for increased Cuban assistance.

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