

# Castro on Caribbean tour seeks to build pressure against US embargo

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Fidel Castro's six-day swing through the Caribbean has been widely interpreted as a sign that Cuba is breaking out of the diplomatic and economic isolation that US policy has attempted to impose on the island nation for nearly 40 years. Certainly Castro's trip had its share of ironic inroads into what had appeared to be irreversible victories for Washington's policy in the region.

The Cuban leader was welcomed to Jamaica by none other than former prime minister Edward Seaga, leader of the right-wing Jamaican Labour Party, who was brought to power in 1980 in elections dominated by a CIA destabilization campaign that claimed more than 350 lives. Having driven out the left-nationalist regime of Michael Manley, Seaga proceeded to break relations with Havana and promote US policy in the Caribbean. The old anti-communist Seaga embraced Castro and declared that every dispute had to come to an end.

Grenada will soon mark the 15th anniversary of the US invasion and occupation that changed forever that island's political life, relegating the left-nationalist and pro-Cuban New Jewel Movement of the late Maurice Bishop to a pariah status. Yet the island's Prime Minister Keith Mitchell greeted Castro as an old friend.

Havana's assistance in building Grenada's airport, denounced by Washington in the run-up to the invasion as Cuban military expansionism, was gratefully acknowledged and Castro was even allowed to dedicate a monument to Cuban construction workers who died in the unequal battle with U.S. troops.

In Jamaica, Grenada and Barbados, Castro followed a set pattern, meeting with government officials, holding rallies before enthusiastic audiences and finally attending closed-door sessions with businessmen interested in capital investment in Cuba. For Castro, the Caribbean tour was in continuity with Cuban foreign

policy as it has developed in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Havana has directed all its efforts to winning allies, of whatever political stripe, in its campaign to pressure Washington into lifting the economic embargo that it has enforced against the island since the early 1960s.

At the beginning of this year, the Castro regime gave an elaborate welcome to Pope John Paul II. In an unmistakable gesture of accommodation to imperialism, Castro organized huge state-sponsored masses, at which the Pope declared the blockade 'immoral.'

The Pope is hardly alone in expressing qualms about US trade policy toward Cuba. The National Association of Manufacturers in the US and the corporate directors of virtually every major American-based multinational have also publicly opposed a ban on investment and commercial ties with Cuba, on the grounds that European and Canadian capital are being given a free hand in a potentially highly profitable market.

Castro's three-nation tour of the Caribbean has a similar purpose to the Pope's visit to Cuba. Despite the rhetoric about anti-colonialism and regional solidarity in his speeches to crowds in Kingston, Bridgetown and St. George, Castro's main objective is to use the former British West Indies and its international links as a back door to forging closer ties with international capital.

If the tour expresses a long-standing Cuban drive to bury the hatchet with Western imperialism, it also indicates a developing shift within the regimes in the rest of the Caribbean. None of them any longer perceive Cuba as posing any revolutionary threat to their stability. They do, however, see a certain advantage in forging closer ties with Castro.

Grenada's Prime Minister Mitchell summed up the motives of the Caribbean bourgeoisie in its

rapprochement with the Castro regime: 'Cuba, because of its long-standing dispute with the United States, has a special place in the world. Therefore, any relationship with Cuba brings instant international recognition.'

Why do the Caribbean regimes desire 'recognition?' Clearly, they feel that they have gotten the short end of the stick as far as their relations with Washington are concerned. US foreign aid to the region has been slashed by 25 percent in the last five years, from nearly \$200 million in 1993 to just \$137 million in 1997. Aid totals for this year are expected to show another \$3 million drop.

There has not been a compensating increase in US-Caribbean trade. The Caribbean Basin Initiative, promoted by the Reagan and Bush administrations, has become a dead letter due to Washington's concentration on the NAFTA treaty with Mexico and Canada and its possible extension to the more developed economies of Latin America. Washington, moreover, has pursued an aggressive case against the Caribbean banana industry, a vital component in the region's trade, winning a World Trade Organization ruling that the European Union's preferences for Caribbean bananas violated free trade rules.

While the Caribbean regimes may see ties with Cuba as a useful means of attracting attention from Washington and the EU (and no doubt see no harm to their standing at home in identifying themselves with the vaguely left and nationalist rhetoric of Fidel) none of them appear overly anxious to cement closer economic bonds with the Castro government. CARICOM, the region's 15-member Caribbean Community free trade association, has been discussing a proposal to admit Cuba for more than two years, continuously putting off a decision. Another study on the issue is to be discussed at a CARICOM-Cuba joint commission meeting set for December in Havana.

The former British colonies of the West Indies that dominate CARICOM see little advantage to Cuban membership. The largest Caribbean nation, Cuba has a population of more than 11 million, compared with 20 million for all the CARICOM countries combined (Haiti and the Dominican Republic, neither of which are full members, account for two-thirds of that total). The weight of Cuba would be felt in CARICOM, but it is widely believed that the island's economy is in no condition to increase its imports from the rest of the

region. Cuba's aim is to use any Caribbean pact to accelerate its creation of free trade zones and the expansion of foreign capitalist investment.

While the Caribbean bourgeoisie, like capitalists all over the world, recognize the potential for profit in Cuba, they have little confidence that a further opening of the Cuban economy to foreign capital will benefit them or lead to greater regional integration. They see Cuba's most likely path to be a resumption of its economic orbit around the US economy, with investments by American and expatriate Cuban capital in the island's tourist and other industries spelling only stiffer competition for the impoverished economies of the West Indies.

As a right-wing columnist writing in Jamaica's *Daily Gleaner* put it, while 'Cuba under Castroism constitutes no particular addition to CARICOM...a redeemed Cuba could pose a serious threat to our national economy.'

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