



Cuba at 30

by Alistair Croll

At the recent Cuban conference, which took place over four days at the Halifax Sheraton, people from all sides of the Cuban revolution came together to discuss the last thirty years of Cuban life.

The conference, *Thirty Years of the Cuban Revolution: An Assessment*, was criticized by some Cuban exiles as being one-sided, biased, even pro-Castro.

Martha Martinez, a professor at the University of Ottawa and a native Cuban, said the conference didn't cover certain important issues well enough. In her opinion, "If the idea of the conference

cal turmoil for the island.

The fact that the meeting was largely academic concerned some of the human rights activists who attended the conference. At the last minute, however, organizers managed to show *Nobody Listened*, an award-winning documentary about Cuban human rights violations.

Protesters have every reason to be alarmed: human rights in Cuba leave much to be desired.

Martinez said families are kept from leaving, freedom of expression is almost nonexistent, women have almost no legal rights, political prisoners have been incarcerated for many years, and torture and isolation are not

anyone who wanted to speak could do so. 175 papers were delivered, with time for discussion afterwards, and only 6 presenters refused.

The protests and division existed, however. Security at the conference was heavy, with members of the CIA, CSIS, RCMP and local police present. Cuban delegates and expatriates were spread throughout the city's hotels so as not to provide any potential terrorist targets. Recording devices were prohibited throughout the conference. "If you invite all sorts of dissidents and administrators, there will be a lot of tension," said Kirk.

Martinez had several complaints about the administration of the conference. "I suppose the most important dialogue needs to be made by Cubans outside Cuba and Cubans inside," she said.

Kirk thinks this attitude is common among Cubans in exile. "Any exiles who have burnt their bridges are embittered because they can't go back," he said.

Martinez would like to have seen more discussion of human rights. "The only two places Cubans can defect to are Spain and Canada. In the conference, I raised the point that violations of human rights in Cuba are now affecting Canadians." She cited the case of Dr. Guillermo Delmonte, a Canadian doctor who left Cuba illegally ten years ago and has been separated from his family ever since.

Perhaps the most realistic complaint about the conference concerned the attendance. Many dissidents wanted to see more Cuban expatriates in attendance, but said these people often cannot afford to travel to Halifax and pay conference fees and the cost of a hotel.

Kirk said the conference was run on a "shoestring budget" and called the accusation "a legitimate beef except for one thing — nobody requested funding".

Martinez also challenged the administrators of the conference, saying of the nine decision-makers involved, only two were Cuban and one of them left. "There were two Cubans in the committee, out of about eight or

nine, and Mesa Lago resigned."

In fact, there were twelve people organizing the conference, and seven of them were Cuban by birth. While it is true that one person left the committee because he felt the conference was too one-sided, Kirk said he found the resignation hard to understand. "We invited all the people that (Mesa Lago) suggested. All his suggestions were implemented," Kirk said.

However, Martinez did think the conference was useful. "A group of Cubans in exile (at the conference) sent a message to the Cubans: You need to change. We need to have a change, to have a dialogue," she said. "More people in exile need to be invited. When you organize a conference, you not only need to invite, you need to ensure participation."

Martinez would like to see change and openness in the next few years. "Cuban natives need to realize they don't have the whole truth," Martinez said she would have to wait and see if the conference was useful. "You need to start opening and you need to start to talk," she said.

The goal of the conference was to promote discussion, and it reached this goal admirably. There were heated arguments over between members of the U.S. State Department and Cuban officials over the Cuban Missile Crisis. There was a frank discussion of the "machismo" that takes away women's rights. There

was also a great deal of criticism, not just of Cuba, but also of the United States for foreign policies.

Many of the topics covered had never before been discussed so openly. "To say the controversy is one-sided is to miss the entire point," said Kirk. "Hopefully, Cubans and exiles will see that it is possible to talk."

The big division between the organizers and dissidents seemed to centre on who needs to talk. While the conference was clearly international, (organizers hailed from as far away as Sweden, and papers were presented from around the world), the protesters felt most of the discussion should be between Cuba and its exiled former citizens.

Some people attending the conference complained about the language barrier — some lectures were delivered entirely in Spanish, others in English — and the heckling of some speakers. They did, however, feel that Cuba was "discussed as well as it could be in three days".

In all, the conference was a success. While some people were bound to be upset that they were misrepresented, any discussion is a good start to softening the tension between Cuba and the rest of the world.

"It is ironic," said Lee Lorch, who attended part of the conference, "that people from Havana and Florida, who live only 90 miles apart, have to travel this far to talk openly."

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is to get Canadian, American and Cuban governments together for a discussion, you don't have a title like that."

John Kirk, a professor of Spanish studies at Dalhousie University and one of the conference's chief organizers, said the conference was "intended for academics to get together to discuss the good and the bad of thirty years of the Cuban Revolution." Kirk, who has been organizing the conference for over two years, said it was the first of its kind, and that by not attending, scholars were "shooting themselves in the academic foot."

Some of the people who attended the conference praised it for not presenting an opinion. "It was a personal assessment," said one man. "The object was to get the audience to learn, rather than to tell them what to think."

The conference comes at a crucial time in Cuba's development. The gap between Cuba's government and the relaxing *glasnost* of European socialist governments is isolating Cuba from the rest of the world. It is a period of politi-

uncommon. Cuba has the longest sentences for political prisoners in the world. One political prisoner at the conference spoke of how he had been kept in solitary confinement for over a year in a cell too narrow to sit down.

Cuba's AIDS policy consists of isolation of HIV-positive people in concentration camps.

One tenth of the population has no electricity, and almost one tenth of Cubans live in political exile. The number of people who want to leave the country is alarming, and increasing steadily.

Martinez likened the situation in Cuba to apartheid. "There are special stores where you can shop if you are a tourist, special hotels, special beaches."

Kirk says human rights issues are important and were widely discussed at the conference. The meeting, however, was a general overview of Cuban history in the last thirty years — from human rights to economic relations, from literature to political scandals. Kirk and the other organizers made every attempt to see that

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