

Cubans fret over food ration cuts

Peas and potatoes have become the harbingers of change in Cuba as President Raul Castro chips away at some of the Cuban revolution's most hallowed social programs.

Without a word, the two vegetables were removed this month from the subsidized food ration Cubans have received since 1963 and prices shot up in what people fear was a glimpse of the future. Many view it as the first step toward the end of the ration program, known here as the "libreta," and possibly other government subsidies that Castro has complained are too costly for the cash-strapped government and discourage productivity.

"There's a lot of silence from the country's leaders about most of the things that are affecting us Cubans. The libreta is slowly disappearing without explanation," said Marco, a retired lawyer who did not give his full name.

Cubans say the libreta only gives them enough food for about two weeks, but at least guarantees part of their monthly diet. In a country where the average monthly salary is equal to about \$20, losing it would be a blow.

"People are not very happy about it. It's not that what you get lasts for the whole month, but it's a help because you can get those things at a price that's not too high," said Havana housewife Yuliet Cruz.

The libreta gives Cubans subsidized prices for set quantities of basic foods like rice, beans, sugar, salt, coffee, eggs and meat.

If they need more food than the libreta provides, they have to pay regular market prices that are much higher, although generally low by international standards, or find it on the black market.

The newly unleashed prices for peas and potatoes gave Cubans a jolt.

Potatoes more than doubled in price to 1 Cuban peso, equivalent to 4.5 US cents, for a pound, while the price of peas increased 20-fold to 3.5 pesos, or 16 US cents per pound.

Government insiders have said the libreta is unlikely to be eliminated for people such as retirees living on fixed incomes or those who for legitimate reasons are unable to work.

But the Cuban government is in the midst of a deep economic crisis brought on by the global recession, three damaging hurricanes last year, generally low productivity and other factors.

President Castro has hinted at broad changes to get rid of subsidies and has a trial program under way in four government ministries to eliminate daily free lunches given to 3.5 million workers.

Instead of free food, they are getting 15 pesos a day, equivalent to 68 US cents, to buy their own lunch. If the trial saves money, it is expected to be applied throughout the state-dominated economy.

"Social spending has to be in accordance with real possibilities, and that means eliminating those (programs) that can be done without," Castro said in an August speech.

The challenge for Castro is to implement the changes without causing problems in a population where complaints about economic circumstances are common.

"Cubans are worried that potatoes and peas may be the equivalent of the canary in the coal mine," said Cuba expert Dan Erikson at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington.

"Raul is playing a risky game by cutting back on long-standing social safety nets without offering new economic alternatives," he said.

The prospect of losing handouts has made some Cubans long for the days when Fidel Castro, not younger brother Raul, was in power, said housewife Cruz. Fidel Castro, 83, resigned the presidency last year after 49 years in power.

"They say if the comandante was in charge, none of this (stuff) would be happening," she said.