



EL OBSERVADOR



Cuban President, left, signs a document at a special session to consider amending the Cuban constitution to make the socialist system "untouchable."

Special Parliament Session Begins in Cuba

(AP) — Millions of workers across this communist island were given Monday and Tuesday off to watch a televised special parliamentary session to consider amending the Cuban constitution to make the socialist system "untouchable."

The communist leadership's decision to close all offices, factories and stores for two full days during its current cash crunch underscored the importance it places on the proposed amendment that would make Cuba's economic, political and social systems unchangeable.

The constitutional change was the subject of a campaign by the communist system's national support groups, which say they

gathered 8.1 million signatures—more than 99 percent of the island's legal voters aged 16 and older.

Opposition leaders say the signature campaign was the government's response to their own petition, which collected more than 11,000 signatures. They have also questioned whether all of those signing the official petition did so of their own free will.

Known as the Varela Project, the opposition's petition seeks a referendum asking voters if they favor reforms such as freedom of expression, the right to own a business and an amnesty for political prisoners.

Most Cubans first heard of Varela Project last month in a

speech by former President Jimmy Carter when he visited the island. But the majority do not know what it proposes because it has not been published in the state media.

Organizers of Varela Project campaign delivered their petitions to the National Assembly on May 10 and have received no response. It still remained unclear what impact the government's own constitutional amendment would have on the Varela Project.

Varela Project supporters say that the official campaign to declare Cuban socialism "untouchable" is the government's response to their own drive to force a democratic opening in this closed society.

Oregon Hispanics Faring Better

(AP)—Willamette Valley migrant workers are less likely to live in rural farm camps today, but they still have a tough row to hoe.

Gaps remain in services provided to many documented farm workers, while those without papers struggle to find affordable housing.

But in general, the move to urban areas means better times and more opportunities for Hispanics, and more are leaving the fields for work in other areas.

Crowded housing is apparent near labor-intensive farms.

Statistics show some of the state's highest housing densities in Marion County.

In Woodburn, 10.7 percent of all housing units had 1.5 or more occupants per room. The figure was 16.1 percent in Gervais, nearly eight times the state average.

Median rent in all three cities was lower than the state average.

Jerry Croft of the Salem Housing Authority said undocumented farmworker families still double up in private apartments and homes because their illegal status makes them ineligible for federal rent subsidies.

In 2000, about 17 percent of the authority's 3,522 units were occupied by families with at least one undocumented relative. That figure fell to 8 percent in 2001.

Croft theorizes that many undocumented workers live in private housing, where application procedures are less strict.

Hainley said the demand continues to be high for that housing, especially in the Willamette Valley, where six of every 10 Oregon farmworkers are employed.

Urbanization has been a blessing for political organizations, according to Ramon Ramirez, president of the PCUN farmworkers' union.

Ramirez said he's seen a steady settling trend during the last decade as the union has gathered support for a collective bargaining agreement with Mid-Valley growers.

"For PCUN it's been really good because we've been able to educate and politicize farmworkers," he said. "We don't have organizational problems that we used to have."

The urban shift may also explain recent employment trends for the Hispanic population, which makes up a large share of the state's 150,000 farm workers.

From 1990 to 1997, seven occupations saw Hispanic employment grow by 100 percent or more, including construction, service, sales and machine operation and assembly.

Agriculture, with 67 percent growth, was near the bottom of the list.

Pain Reliever Popular Among Hispanic Immigrants Found Harmful

(AP) A pain killer banned in the United States two decades ago because of potentially fatal side effects is still being sold here, often to Hispanic immigrants who are unaware of the danger, researchers said.

Metamizole, or dipyron, is a fever and pain reliever sometimes called "Mexican aspirin." It was removed from the U.S. market in 1979 by the Food and Drug Administration but is available with-

out a prescription in Mexico, other Latin American countries, parts of Asia and Africa.

Writing in the June edition of the journal Pediatrics, University of Utah researchers said that Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking parents of children evaluated in a University of Utah clinic last fall were interviewed, and more than a third of those surveyed said they had used metamizole.

Of those who used it, one-

fourth said they had bought it in the United States, researchers said.

The drug's most serious side effect is a reduction in disease-fighting white blood cells, making the person susceptible to life-threatening infections.

The drug has been banned so long in the United States that many doctors here haven't been taught about it in medical school, she said.



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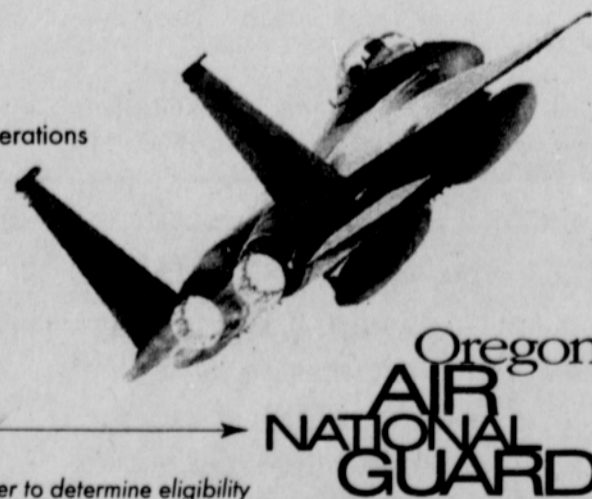
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