

# Sailing on truck tires towards an uncertain future

Cuba is going through its worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet many Cubans blame not the US embargo or the pandemic, but their own government.

**Karin Wenger**

At dawn, in early May, we were stunned as we approached Cuba: men drifting in large truck tires across the bay in which Santiago de Cuba can be seen.

They hold a fishing line in one hand and a small paddle in the other. "For us, Cubans, there's been no fuel for weeks.

Fishermen can't get out to sea, the roads are deserted, and we have almost no gas for cooking," explains Norbert, the harbor operator at the Marlin public marina, after we've moored our sailboat at the docked jetty. But in Cuba, it's not just fuel that's in short supply, as we'll soon find out: in the marina, the doors of the small grocery store are closed, and there's no water in the showers or toilets; the local market in Santiago de Cuba offers only a little cabbage, a few tomatoes, eggplants and papayas, and a scrawny pig that one man wants to sell. What little there is to buy is expensive too, because at The shortage is compounded by rising inflation.

## **The dream of a better life**

Cuba is going through its worst economic crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union in early 1990s. The U.S. economic embargo, in force since 1960, i.e. two years after Fidel Castro came to power, is one reason. The pandemic is another. Substantial revenues from tourism have been lacking ever since, and even after the end of the pandemic, few tourists returned to the Caribbean island. But the reasons are also internal.

"If you want to change money, don't go to the bank, go to Pochito," advises Norbert, the port operator. And so, shortly afterwards, we are to experience at first hand

inflation. Pochito is a young Cuban who is also able to buy a car or a SIM card and exchange money at a better rate. In May, the official exchange rate at the bank in Cuba was 120 Cuban pesos to the U.S. dollar, whereas on the black market, the exchange rate was only 120 pesos to the U.S. dollar, the rate varies between 140 and 200 pesos. As Cubans are not allowed to board foreign boats, Pochito waits for his customers outside the marina. He offers us 160 pesos to the dollar, making 80,000 pesos for the 500 dollars we want to change. A friend of Pochito's has to take care of the practical arrangements in the neighboring town, a matter of half an hour, just enough time for a chat. Pochito tells us that his sister married a Greek yachtsman who also passed through Santiago de Cuba with his boat. The Greek was certainly very older than her sister, but at least she's left Cuba. In the end, leaving is everyone's wish, because who wants to live in a country where there's nothing to buy and no hope of a better future?

## **Empty shelves**

Twenty minutes pass without the money-changer reappearing. He soon informs us that he has to count the money first, and that this takes time. Pochito's mother and one of his friends, a fisherman, join us. Given the diesel shortage, the fisherman doesn't go out to sea for the time being. "A few weeks ago, a local tried to escape in a small boat he'd built himself. He was never seen again. The sea probably swallowed him up, like so many others", he says. He himself admits that he would never do such a foolish thing, because he knows how cruel the sea can be. Pochito's mother raises her fist in anger: "People are starving here because we can't even

no longer offer us rice or eggs! While every Cuban receives a monthly quota of basic foodstuffs at reduced prices, such as oil, rice, sugar and flour, there is never enough. Half a liter of edible oil per person per month for 50 pesos should do the trick; those who need more have to buy it at full price in stores, or to someone who sells his oil on the side of the road. It costs 1,000 pesos.

### **A disgraced government**

For the difficult economic situation in which so many Cubans find themselves today, Pochito, his mother and their fisherman friend blame not the US embargo or the pandemic, but their own government. "It's horribly bad. They're thieves. For them and their children, they have everything. They send them to good schools, to the best hospitals, but what about us?" complains the mother whose sick husband died a year ago because the hospital didn't have the necessary medicaments, syringes and surgical equipment. Pochito takes out his cell phone and shows a video. First we see demonstrators chanting slogans against the government, then a policeman appears and shoots a protester in the stomach at point-blank range. The video was shot during one of the protests that took place in Cuba. two years ago. These were the biggest riots in decades, and the anger was directed at the government's inability to provide sufficient food and medicine. But the government's response was not radical political and economic reform, but repression. More than a thousand protesters were arrested - and some sentenced to decades in prison. "They hate us, and we hate them", confirms the fisherman.

The fact that today, despite the repression, many Cubans are also openly fulminating against their government and

The fact that smaller-scale demonstrations are a regular occurrence shows the extent of the frustration and the extent to which the situation still leaves much to be desired. The socialist planned economy has failed, but the old guard still in power doesn't seem to want to change.

even after Fidel's death. The people are paying the price. Despite this, Switzerland plans to end its long-standing bilateral development cooperation with Cuba. In 2020, the Swiss parliament decided to gradually redirect bilateral funds to Latin America between now and 2024. When you see the deep crisis and distress of the population in In Cuba, it's debatable whether the timing is right.

### **Underpants full of money**

Finally, after two hours, the moneychanger with the pesos, and I immediately understand why counting the money took so long. As he hasn't been able to unearth any large-denomination notes, he hands us the 80,000 pesos in 50s, a big pile wrapped up in an old pair of shorts. With the pesos, we buy diesel for ourselves and for Pochito, the fisherman and Norbert. While Cubans are not entitled to fuel, foreign tourists get as much as they want. The price depends on whether you pay in pesos or dollars. If you pay in pesos, 100 liters cost the equivalent of 18 dollars; if you pay in dollars, each liter costs one dollar. Cuba is no stranger to nonsense.



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