

More respect allowed for Christmas in Cuba

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--An increase in Christmas tree sales and a call from the Roman Catholic church for more respect marked the Cuban celebration of Christmas this year.

Cuban families were allowed to put up Christmas trees and other Christmas decorations in their homes, but government and state institutions could not do so because Cuba is a secular state.

Restricted facilities included the "bodegas" or local state grocers which provide subsidized, rationed food items to the population in every local neighborhood and are a centre of community life.

But the Cuban press agency Prensa Latina said the regulation did not apply to state-owned shops, hotels or tourist facilities which operate in hard currency. These sold Christmas trees and decorations and advertised special Christmas offers.

Such hard-currency outlets have become an increasingly important source of foreign exchange for the cash-strapped Cuban government, especially since the collapse of trade with the former Soviet bloc plunged the island into economic crisis.

The government statement led to rumors that the display of Christmas trees was also banned in private homes. The government later issued another announcement clarifying that the ban related only to government-owned stores.

Communist-ruled Cuba stopped celebrating Christmas at the end of the 1960s because authorities said the celebrations would hamper the island's efforts to produce a 10-million metric ton 1970 sugar harvest. In the end, the harvest fell short of the goal but Christmas was never revived, although

the island maintained New Year festivities. December 25 is not an official holiday in Cuba.

Nevertheless, many Cuban families, despite official disapproval, maintained the tradition in their own homes.

In recent years there has been more interest among Cubans in the festival, partly because of a more tolerant official attitude towards religion and an apparent growth in religious belief.

However, news reports from Cuba indicate that many residents are indifferent to the holiday and see the Christmas trees more as a decoration than part of a religious holiday.

The official denial of any prohibition on Christmas trees did reflect a softer public stance adopted by the government in recent years towards religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular.

Reforms adopted in 1992 to the island's single-party socialist constitution introduced more guarantees for religious freedom but maintained Cuba's identity as a lay state.

Sources close to the government reported that the permission to allow private Christmas trees was the subject of debate among government agencies. Finally, more conservative segments of the government were forced to give way to reformist movements which advocated a loosening of restriction.

Meanwhile, Cuba's Roman Catholic Church called for greater respect for the celebration of Christmas.

A Christmas message by the Catholic bishops criticized the ban on the public display of Christmas trees and nativity scenes, saying the decision had dashed hopes of "a rather more public celebration (of Christmas), as used to be traditional in our country."

"It causes us real sadness that the birth of Jesus ... is considered a private celebration," the bishops' statement said, adding the message of Jesus was also aimed at the "structures of society".

The Catholic bishops, who have irritated authorities in recent years with calls for political change and greater tolerance, said in their statement that there was supposed to be respect for the private celebration of Christmas, but this was contradicted by a lack of conditions to do so.

For example, a child at a boarding school far from home could not celebrate Christmas with his or her family if there was no public holiday, the bishops said.

Their statement also drew attention to current hardships in Cuba, saying "persistent food shortages are a cause of anguish and it makes us sad that our children for years have lacked the joy of a toy."

The Catholic bishops also called for more tolerance in society, saying Christmas was a time of love and goodwill.

On December 17, tens of thousands of Cubans, some dragging themselves along the ground, paid homage at one of the island's most popular religious rites amid evidence of a new tolerance to private enterprise.

The annual pilgrimage to a church on the outskirts of Havana celebrated the festival of St. Lazarus and his Afro-Cuban equivalent Babalu-Aye.

Dozens of vendors selling vegetables, pork, chickens and ready-made food sold their wares on the streets of a nearby town and around the Saint Lazarus sanctuary, the site of an old leper hospital.

The free market sale of food and artisan products was legalized last year in one of the many moves made by Cuba's socialist government to open the economy to elements of a market economy while preserving its socialist character.

In past years, the pilgrims often went hungry for lack of food during their long hours of walking to the sanctuary and worshipping at the shrine.

This year vendors offered a variety of Cuban delicacies like fried pork, black beans and rice.

Many who sold food did not have the required license but police, who were out in force, made no effort to interfere.

The pilgrimage to St Lazarus has been celebrated each year since the revolutionary victory in 1959.

But over the past five years Cuba's communist government has shown much greater tolerance toward organized religions and their followers.

According to religious authorities of different faiths, church attendance has increased considerably. There are many young people who now wear crucifixes around their necks, something seldom seen in past decades.

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