

May 12, 1963

**Telegram from the Indian Ambassador to Mexico,
'Cuba After the Crisis'**

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Summary:

The ambassador describes the domestic situation in Cuba and what it is like in Havana specifically in detail. He recounts a meeting with Foreign Minister Raul Roa.

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BY BAG

DATE: May 12, 1963

Telegram No: 132/61

FROM: P.L. Bhandari, Ambassador of India to Mexico

TO: Shri B. Sanyal, Director, Western Division, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi

Subject: Cuba After the Crisis

My dear director,

I have just returned from Havana - my first visit to Cuba since the missile crisis of last October.

Cuba is now, from the standpoint of normal communication, perhaps the most isolated country in the western hemisphere. The once-proud international airport at Havana is a dismal sight, and the only activity is when the three overworked Britania aircraft of Cubana de Aviacion take off for or return from Mexico City (two services a week, although for a long spell these were badly disrupted) or Prague (once weekly) or when a Soviet plane comes and goes non-stop from Russia at weekly intervals. The passengers are mostly refugees or members of "socialist" delegations or diplomatic officials and couriers. The harbor present no happier picture, the few ships to be seen being freighters from communist countries and an occasional such vessel from Western Europe. Indeed, the only passenger outlet to the "free" world is by the plane service to Mexico City, and even here the Mexican authorities have now clamped on such rigorous surveillance and security measures that passengers are harassed and delayed (my plane, due to leave at 1 pm, left after 7), to such an extent that travel to Cuba has become an ordeal, if not a penance.

In Havana itself, every effort appears to have been made to give the capital at least some semblance of normality. Uniforms (and beards) are considerably less conspicuous than they used to be, and there are fewer hammer-and-sickle signs, portraits of Lenin and hoardings bearing communist-type slogans. The shops now have window-displays and some goods are on the counters, but most sales are by ration coupon and there is a pitiful lack of variety. Food is a little more plentiful - rice (from China), some eggs (from Israel) and small quantities of poultry, pork and vegetables from the countryside. In public eating places, no one can complain of lack of quantity - but the quality is something else again. In our hotel, for the main meal there was usually a choice of chicken or frog-legs or calves' hoofs, and for dessert, a pasty ice-cream or sugar preserve - all of these unappetizing, badly served and barely edible - for a standard price of about Rs. 20. Certainly Cuba can no longer be regarded as a gourmet's paradise! Yet it must be admitted that no one appears to be under-nourished, that there are no signs malnutrition. Even the most vehement of Cuban critics admit that a surprising health standard has been maintained and that no epidemics of serious proportion have occurred. Smiling faces and care-free people are still the rule, and one aspect of Havana life continues to be a joy and a delight - the shows in the night places of entertainment, originally staged, exquisitely costumed and performed by attractive young people with grace and gay abandon.

I had a meeting of well over an hour with the Foreign Minister, Dr. Raul Roa. The first half of this time was occupied by a discussion of our border dispute with China, and Dr. Roa took pains to explain why Cuba could not be more forthright in her expressions of concern over the invasion of our territory - preoccupation with her own crisis, and the desire to preserve the friendship of both India and China by saying or doing nothing which might be regarded as offensive by either. He stressed that the

Cuban Government had maintained a strictly "equal" attitude in this matter, and hoped that a negotiated settlement would take place in conformity with international law in keeping with the dignity of both countries. Somehow, however, the Foreign Minister gave me the impression that Cuba was no longer so enamored of Chinese professions of friendship and support, and that in fact she was somewhat disillusioned. This impression was confirmed by subsequent conversations with other persons.

Regarding the situation in Cuba itself, Dr. Roa said that there had been a marked relief of tension since the American action putting a stop to tip-and-run raids by Cuban exiles in Miami and elsewhere. He remarked: "So we can now sleep at night - but with one eye open!" He referred to the friendlier attitude of Western European missions in Havana and stated that whereas for four years he had been deliberately ignored by their Ambassadors and hardly invited to any of their receptions, suddenly he was now finding it difficult to keep track of the number of invitations which were pouring in. He said that Cuba was anxious to reach an understanding with the USA - And he referred to recent French-Algerian developments as a guide - but insisted that any negotiations in the future would be on the basis of complete equality, and certainly never under duress. He mentioned the strength and stability of the Cuban Government, and remarked that Fidel Castro's visit to the Soviet Union - "by invitation, as an equal" - was an indication of that strength, for otherwise how could the head of a government leave the country for any length of time? Dr. Roa admitted that the economic situation was bad, that serious mistakes had been committed, but that these were being rectified. "Given a spell of peace, we should be able to put our house in order," he declared. Regarding the ideological rift between China and the Soviet Union, he said that Cuba would take no sides but hoped that the present disagreement would be settled by amicable discussion.

I had long meetings also, among others, with the British, Canadian, UAR, Yugoslav, Swiss, and Mexican ambassadors. All of them referred to the improvement of the previous tense situation; none of them overly decried the Cuban Government for its shortcomings. They explained away the latter as due to lack of "expertise," and remarked on the good intentions of the regime but their difficulties in implementing their plans. A great part of the economic deterioration, they thought, was due to the country's preoccupation with various crises, which entailed complete mobilization at short notice, leaving fields and factories unmanned for weeks on end. All agreed that the majority of members of the present Government were pushed into communism, that few of them were "original" Marxist-Leninists; certainly there was none of the terror and regimentation associated with other communist regimes. They paid tribute to the high health standard in the country and to the progress made in the field of education. "Indoctrination, yes," one of them said, "but every child is learning to read and write - and you could not find a more well-behaved community of children anywhere in the world." They referred to the special efforts being made by the Foreign Office in helping to make their living conditions more bearable. All of them looked forward eagerly to a Cuban-American rapprochement at some stage - but when, and how?

I was somewhat surprised by being asked for an appointment by the Chinese ambassador, who some years ago was Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi. I had paid a courtesy call on him after presenting my credentials in January, 1962, and he had not been able to return this call. Our meeting, in the apartment of our Charge d'Affaires, lasted the correct period of 30 minutes, during which we exchanged pleasantries, mostly through interpreters.

One of the pleasant features of my tour was finding how well our Embassy has managed to establish itself in the last difficult months. Our Charge d'Affaires, S.J.S Chhatwal (two h's?) has made many friends in a wide circle, and a measure of his popularity was the fact that the Foreign Minister, the Justice Minister and other high Cuban officials and their wives stayed throughout the duration of a reception he gave

in my honor – something which, I am told, is not normally done in Cuba. Several Ambassadors of friendly countries, from east and from west, were present at this reception, and all of them commented on the good work our Embassy was doing and the good name it had established for itself.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Director of our Historical Division.

With kind regards.