

Cuba brings in austerity measures

Flickering lights

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Cubans' misery grows amid moves to reduce their isolation

THE vote on June 3rd by the Organisation of American States (OAS) to lift Cuba's 47-year suspension from the regional block did little to lift the island's weary population, who face deeper hardships from an austerity programme their government began this week. Cuba faces the return of the frequent power cuts that were common in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, its hitherto paymaster.

Buses and trains have been cut. State-run shops have been told to switch off their refrigerators for two hours a day. Bakeries must not bake in the evening, when power consumption peaks. Foreign firms wanting to take more than a few hundred dollars out of the country now need the central bank's permission. These and other retrenchments reflect a growing liquidity crisis. The price of nickel, once Cuba's leading export earner, has slumped. The global downturn has hit tourism. Oil production remains plagued by inefficiency.

Raúl Castro began his presidency with something of a spending spree. Second-hand Chinese-made buses have replaced most of the lorries that once served as public transport in Havana. A bulk order of dark-blue paint has been applied to official buildings. But the younger Castro's hoped-for economic reforms have so far been limited to agriculture—farmers have been allowed to take over fallow state land and buy their own tools. Other businesses, such as tourism, have been pulled back into central control, with formerly semi-autonomous outfits such as car-hire agencies and marinas now run by ministries.

"I am out of here," said Yuni, a musician in his 20s, as he began the tortuous process of obtaining an exit permit. Emigration has soared in

economic crises, notably in 1980 and 1994 when tens of thousands set off for the United States in rafts. Both countries' governments seem keen to avoid a repeat of this. On May 31st the United States said agreement had been reached to restart migration talks, which were broken off by George Bush in 2004.

Three days later the OAS, at a summit in Honduras, voted unanimously to let Cuba rejoin. The United States agreed to this on condition that any re-entry talks took into account the regional block's pro-democracy principles. Shortly before the vote, however, Cuba's revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, reiterated his country's long-held line that it did not want to be in what it calls an imperialist grouping. Like Marx (Groucho, not Karl), he would not join any club that would have him as a member.