
Cuba: The population is starving and taking to the streets. Monsignor García Ibáñez: “The situation is extremely critical, people feel helpless”

The people took to the streets “spontaneously”, with a decision “born of desperation.” But without a change that allows the people to be “active protagonists of their future”, it will be very difficult to overcome the misery that has brought Cuba to the brink of starvation. Contacted by SIR, **Dionisio Guillermo García Ibáñez**, the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, the largest city in the south-east of the island, Primate of the Cuban Church, said he has been facing weeks marked by anxiety and fear, with the prospect of losing all hope. Santiago de Cuba, on the opposite side of the island from Havana, the capital, was the scene of a spontaneous protest on Sunday, which later spread to other cities. The last time this happened was in 2021, when people took to the streets to protest against the Castro government led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel. The regime responded with an iron fist. This time, at least, the police have kept a tight rein, but have reportedly failed to take massive action against the demonstrators who have been taking to the streets for the past two days, although five people have reportedly been arrested. Díaz-Canel published a series of posts on his X account - formerly Twitter - in which he acknowledged the discontent of citizens "over the power supply and food distribution crisis", but denounced that "the enemies of the revolution" were trying to exploit the situation "for destabilising purposes". With each passing hour, this "narrative" became more widespread, so much so that the Havana government summoned the US ambassador to complain about his "interference" in the protest.

In reality, Cuba's economic crisis goes back a long way. It was precipitated by the shortage of 'cheap' oil from Venezuela and the collapse of international tourism at the time of the COVID pandemic.

But the situation worsened during 2023 and has worsened further during these first weeks of 2024. In fact, the population is on the brink of starvation.

For the first time the Cuban government has requested help from the UN World Food Programme in recent days, asking for milk powder parcels for infants, while 650,000 barrels of oil have arrived from Russia to alleviate the energy crisis that is causing frequent power outages. Residents of Santiago de Cuba told the independent website "14 y medio" that on Saturday 16 March, in some areas of the city "only three kilos of rice had been handed out", out of the seven due each month, while coffee deliveries remained the same as in January. However, this economic model that leaves no room for private enterprise seems to be collapsing, despite the tentative openings that had been made in the last years of the Castro family's rule. The Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba (COCC), in its message of 10 December 2023, appears to refer precisely to this situation: "With responsibility and

commitment, we must create in each one of us the real possibilities for the Cuban people to harness their potential for development”, reads the statement. The bishops also called for “finding in our homeland the space and the freedom to develop projects for personal, family and community life”. This plea is marked by even greater urgency in the interview with Archbishop García Ibáñez.

Your Excellency, what is life like in Cuba today?

Everyone feels helpless. It is indeed a very critical situation. There is a shortage of basic foodstuffs, basic necessities.

Sugar, for instance, is in short supply, which is unbelievable when you consider that sugarcane is the principal crop in the country and that our island is world-famous for its brown sugar. The most vulnerable groups, the elderly and children, are suffering the most, but many households are suffering from a lack of food. Food shortages are compounded by rampant inflation, frequent power cuts and, in some areas such as some districts of Santiago de Cuba, water shortages.

Are the recent protests in Santiago de Cuba a consequence of this situation?

They are. People have taken to the streets in a spontaneous and peaceful way, not only here but also in other places, both in the region and throughout the country. They have done so out of desperation, as a result of a situation that has been going on for a long time and which seems to have no future. We are facing a very difficult reality.

Are there really no prospects?

Actually, I don't see any way out at the moment. On the one hand, we Cubans have a "corazón luchador", a fighting heart. This attitude has always kept our people afloat, and we continue to cling to it. But rationally, there is little hope for change today.

What would you like to say to the Cuban authorities at this difficult time?

We bishops have always been very clear with the Government. For years we have said in our messages what we think about the country and its future. We have said that we stand with and belong to the people. I think what's most important is that we all get involved in trying to resolve this situation.

We demand that all Cubans participate in their future, that the human capital that exists on our island be an active part of Cuban society.

We cannot just sit back and do nothing, things cannot go on like this, with the best and youngest members of society emigrating, leaving the country.

Do you mean to say that families and private entities should be given more room for initiative, including in the economy?

Obviously, I am not an expert, not an economist, and I would not dare to propose solutions here. But I will say one thing: people must be treated in such a way that they can take charge of their own future and their own lives. If not, I fear that everything here is in danger of collapsing.

How is the Church trying to help alleviate the crisis?

The Church is doing what it can, as it has always done. Our Caritas service and the parishes are engaged in helping to cope with the crisis, so I am grateful for the help we are receiving from Italy and other countries in Europe.

*journalist at "*La vita del popolo*"

Bruno Desidera