

Deputies set sights on the nation

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF PEOPLE'S POWER

• WITH the purpose of reviewing and debating issues of great importance to the country's development, the National Assembly's (ANPP) 10 standing commissions met July 10-12 in the Havana International Conference Center, prior to the Ninth Period of Ordinary Sessions of the Eighth Legislature of the ANPP, to be held on July 14.

With the presence of Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, Political Bureau member and first vice president of the Councils of State and Ministers, the Education, Culture, Science, Technology, and Environment Commission focused its discussion on cultural work in communities and efforts to make schools the cultural centers of neighborhoods, as well as deficiencies and challenges faced by the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT) in its programming, in addition to future prospects.

Díaz-Canel commented during the commission debate that community work must span ideological, economic and social processes.

Community cultural work and the role of institutions and educational centers in these efforts were emphasized by deputies during the discussion which Díaz-Canel said requires professional attention, since it improves the people's quality of life, strengthening commitment to the Revolution and national unity.

Deputy Luis Morlote Rivas, vice president of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, presented the results of a review conducted by deputies regarding this issue, which revealed a number of problems including few diagnostics to determine residents' interests and a lack of clarity on the role of the government in this work.

Likewise noted was dissatisfaction within the population about little publicity and difficulties in addressing the issue, fundamentally focused on the lack of funding and the limited number of cultural promoters and art instructors involved.

In this regard, Liliam Mendoza, president of the José Martí Brigade of art instructors, noted that of 30,000 university graduates professionally trained in the country, the workforce today includes only 14,000. In an effort to address the problem, it was announced that this coming October an experimental three-year program will be launched to train art teachers, with a smaller number of students enrolled in the longer university program.

Minister of Education Ena Elsa Velázquez noted progress in the sector's involvement in community work, citing as examples the approval of plans which allow individual schools the flexibility to organize the school day and include more time for neighborhood activities.

Summarizing the discussion, Minister of Culture Abel Prieto noted that fundamental to success are training of the people, ensuring the quality of what is being promoted, and articulating work by all actors within the community.

At another point, the commission addressed the ICRT's difficulties and strategic projections, with emphasis on news and cultural policies.

Waldo Ramírez, television general director, noted among the challenges insufficient media coverage of the public agenda; the need to understand and conceive of audiences as producers of messages and managers of public communication; addressing the scarcity of new projects and the lack of originality in others; as well as professional and cultural shortcomings.



JUVENAL BALÁN NEYRA

Deputies discussed important issues related to the country's development.

Other difficulties include the lack of research and criticism, and poor planning, conception, and evaluation of projects before they are recorded or broadcast live.

In this sense, Ramírez noted among ICRT's projections the improvement of efficiency and the artistic quality of productions; the use of social research; and prioritizing the most authentic of Cuban and universal culture.

Arlín Alberty, deputy from Guantánamo, emphasized the existence of other media and channels which have an impact on the education of youth, which are more attractive than those presented by our media. It is thus of great importance that competitive productions be created, she said, not only for entertainment purposes, but informative multimedia which offer an analytical view of reality.

ECONOMY TO FACE CHALLENGES IN SECOND HALF OF 2017

Inadequate disaggregation of the plan's components and its conception with reserves, the longstanding problem of misappropriation of gasoline, as well as poor management of inventories, and their tendency to expand, were issues discussed during the Economic Affairs Commission, which reviewed the meeting of objectives for the first half of 2017, with the participation of Esteban Lazo Hernández, Political Bureau member and president of the National Assembly of People's Power.

Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz, a Council of Ministers vice president and minister of Economy and Planning, referred to "tensions faced last year" and how, with the efforts of all, "the economy's deterioration was detained."

"This," he emphasized, "does not in any way mean that all the problems are resolved. The effort which must be made in the second half of the year is enormous, because at this point, the high tourist season has ended and the sugar harvest completed. Therefore, we must all work to guarantee income from exports and the rational use of fuel, issues which are still pending tasks."

All the problems, he said, "cannot be solved in the short term, what is most important is working together to advance, on the basis of priorities indicated by the country's leadership. In this sense, among the fundamental activities are the driving

force of tourism, the completion of projects linked to renewable energy resources, and, above all, meeting the needs of the population to the greatest degree possible."

Cabrisas Ruiz also commented on the review conducted by deputies at 2,225 workplaces in the country's 168 municipalities, which confirmed the existence of irregularities in the understanding and implementation of guiding economic documents; failures to meet projections for income from exports and the substitution of imports with domestic products; as well as shortcomings in the management of inventories and investment projects.

Deputy Armando Utrera Caballero, the commission's vice president, emphasized that during the visits, in which 381 deputies participated, it was observed that efficiency is a problem and that entities were identified which did not meet production or sales projections, that planned on earnings but reported losses, and paid salaries that were not commensurate with results.

Juana Caridad Herrera Pérez, deputy from the municipality of Primero de Enero, in Ciego de Ávila province, stated that the review visits in her province revealed, among other difficulties, poor management of inventories, both in enterprises and budgeted entities, where large quantities of items were in storage, including those unrelated to work underway.

After the discussion, Esteban Lazo questioned the tendency to not give measures implemented the follow-up and regular attention they require. He asked what concrete actions should be taken to address the problems observed.

He reported that in September, about 50% of the municipalities will be visited again to verify what has been done about deficiencies noted, what has been resolved, because this is one of the fundamental responsibilities of deputies, he said, providing oversight in the name of the people.

Lina Pedraza Rodríguez, minister of Finances and Prices, presented deputies with a close-out report on the 2016 state budget, as well as an update on the execution of this year's budget during the first six months.

With respect to the 2017 budget and problems faced thus far, Gladys Bejerano Portela, Council of State vice president and Comptroller General, noted that solutions

entail overcoming shortcomings in accounting systems, working on the monthly balance sheet of income and expenses, reviewing excessive payments to private operators, and deepening the discussion of these issues within management councils.

INVESTMENT AND REORGANIZATION OF TRANSPORTATION

Cuba's railroad system is a large but aging one, making modernization of infrastructure imperative, along with prioritizing the participation of domestic industries in the fabrication of replacement parts.

For these reasons, an investment plan for 2018-20 projects the acquisition of 308 passenger cars, 300 rail buses, 23 high power locomotives, and 75 to carry medium and small loads, along with the renovation of workshops, the purchase of 1,000 freight cars, and the repair of 1,300, according to Eduardo Rodríguez Dávila, deputy minister of Transportation, who presented a report on the performance of rail transportation to the Services Commission.

Speaking with the press, he explained that the investment projects are complicated since they require modern technology and long term financing to cover costs. Nevertheless, he said, we are immersed in the search for alternatives.

Any discussion of rail transportation involves the population's dissatisfaction with services provided. According to the report discussed by deputies, the inability to carry out projected investments in repairs and replacement of equipment; few training programs for operators; misappropriation of fares collected; and uncomfortable stations, agencies, and passenger cars; are among the difficulties facing the Cuban rail system, the Union Ferrocarril de Cuba.

Several persistent complaints about bus transportation were also expressed, including the failure to respect schedules, unnecessary stops, and little comfort in stations and agencies.

Given this panorama, actions have been taken which include plans to incorporate 480 Cuban-assembled Diana buses to fleets in all provinces, 260 of which have already been delivered; the purchase of KAMAZ trucks to rebuild as buses for difficult to access communities and those in the Turquino Plan; and the regulation of self-employed drivers transporting passengers.

Likewise, the inter-provincial National Bus Enterprise is projecting the gradual renovation of its fleet with the arrival of 100 vehicles, and an automated system of ticket sales has been established in 12 provinces.

Many opinions were offered regarding the participation of privately owned vehicles in public transportation, including those of Deputy Leonardo Naranjo, from Santiago de Cuba.

Self employed drivers are part of the transformation of passenger transportation in the country, and this cannot be forgotten, he noted, but the exorbitant prices charged are not sustainable for the population. A consensus must be reached, he said, suggesting that perhaps the state could take action to lower the price of fuel for these individuals, or allow them access to state repair shops, in order to establish set prices for all routes, not only in Havana.

SUGAR INDUSTRY NEEDS AND STRENGTHS

Sugar production in the 2016-2017 harvest

increased by 20%, as compared to last year, but projections were not met, explained Orlando Celso García Ramírez, president of the AzCuba Sugar Enterprise Group. Of the 2.1 million tons of sugar planned, only 1.8 million were produced, he reported, a figure which demonstrates the need for continued improvement in the sector.

The Agriculture and Food Commission discussed the issue, noting that sustained work continues to address the industry's various deficiencies, among them the lack of coordination between cane harvesters and mills, as well as training and discipline problems among workers, which lead to breakdowns that interrupt operations.

Along with this, the industry faces the challenge of obsolete equipment, fundamentally cauldrons, grinders, and electric plants, plus a shortage of replacement parts for repairs and modernization. Also discussed were delays in the arrival of equipment, its erection, and completion of start-up trial periods, before the beginning of the harvest.

Problems created by the drought and lack of attention to cane fields in some units were discussed as issues which had a negative impact on yields and the productivity of new harvesting methods. Calls were made to use new machinery more rationally to allow for better efficiency in the sector.

The need to improve performance was emphasized. Some proposals were focused on consolidating training programs for workers, above all to provide youth the needed experience, while other deputies called for linking salaries more directly with production.

Later, an update on the progress of investment projects was presented. According to figures in the report, the AzCuba plan for the first three months of the year involved a total of 52.8 million pesos, while 51.3 was in fact invested, representing 97% of the amount projected.

Beginning this year and through 2024, objectives will be financed with medium and long term credits.

TOYS, MATERNITY HOMES & TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Deputies participating in the Commission focused on Youth, Childhood and Equal Rights for Women discussed the production, distribution and sales of toys in the country; conditions in maternity homes for at-risk mothers-to-be; and the national plan to address trafficking in persons.

Regarding the first, deputy Aymara Guzmán Carrazana, president of the José Martí Pioneers Organization, for elementary school children, noted that no defined strategy exists to ensure the availability of toys, and the few that are received as donations are sent to pediatric hospitals and a few schools.

Citing the results of a study conducted in the provinces of Guantánamo, Granma, Holguín, Santiago de Cuba and La Habana, she noted concerns expressed about the high cost of toys available in retail stores.

Rosmary Santiesteban, deputy from the municipality of Yara, in Granma, commented that many of the stores in her province are poorly stocked and sell low quality toys at prices that are beyond the reach of many Cuban families.

Olga González Naranjo, director of Selected Production at the Ministry of Industry, said that an immediate solution was not forthcoming, but that steps are being taken to solve the problem, adding that the ministry was very much interested in doing so.

She noted proposals that had been made by light industry, in particular regarding the creation of educational toys, adding that the sports industry's production is double what it was in 2016.

Regarding conditions in maternity homes, Roberto Álvarez Fumero, national director of the maternal-infant program, reported that in the 131 centers of this type in the country, pregnant women who are at risk for complications are guaranteed specialized care, including regular medical attention and adequate nutrition, among other services.

Among the issues discussed was the adolescent pregnancy rate, which, according to Álvarez, indicates that for every 1,000 women who give birth, 52 are less than 20 years of age.

Teresa Amarelle Boué, Political Bureau member and first secretary of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), explained that the organization is working on the selection of young promoters "who can reach adolescents on these issues, not with a prohibitive approach, but with one focused on their life projects," adding, "We are also working directly with families, since this is a priority for us."

Addressing another subject, deputies heard a report on the national plan to prevent trafficking in persons, presented by Antonio Ybarra Suárez, advisor to the Minister of Justice.

He indicated that the plan's objectives include strengthening prevention and detection of trafficking; protecting and assisting victims; as well as the acquisition, processing, and dissemination of reliable information on the topic.

Among prevention strategies, Ybarra emphasized the need to confront conditions which lead to trafficking, via the implementation of programs to warn of its dangers, increasing educational opportunities and improving school systems, while promoting equal rights.

Teresa Amarelle Boué commented, "When we talk about our country's strengths in confronting this situation, it must be recalled that Cuban women have an organization that promotes public policies that protect not only women, but boys and girls as well."

Wherever there is a vulnerable woman, neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, social workers, the FMC, the Ministry of Education, Public Health, can take action, she noted, saying that all of this makes it difficult for these things to happen in Cuba, but, "We can't take it for granted."

RENEWABLE ENERGY, ENERGY CARRIER SAVINGS & INVESTMENTS IN WATER RESOURCES

Deputies from the Industry, Construction and Energy Commission discussed the implementation of the policy for the development of Renewable Energy Sources (RES), as well as the fulfillment of energy carrier saving measures by state and private entities.

During the session, Alfredo López, minister of Energy and Mines, noted that the RES policy – being implemented from 2014 through 2030 – features among its main objectives the transformation of the country's energy system and promotion of environmental sustainability.

"We have 25 bio-energy plants which – with a plan through 2030 – will generate 14% of the country's total energy, a program whose conclusion we are committed to advancing.

"Today, work is underway to set up and negotiate 11 bio-energy plants, four through state financing and seven under the category of joint venture. The remainder is included in the portfolio of foreign investment opportunities," he noted.

In regards to wind energy, López reported that 14 wind farms are scheduled to be built by 2030.

Meanwhile, some 191 solar parks are set to be built as part of the renewable energy program. Of these projects, 22 are already in operation, 32 are included in the 2017

plan and 27 are proposed for 2018.

Addressing energy saving in homes, the Minister reported that 13 million fluorescent lights are scheduled to be replaced by LED versions in the residential sector. "1.8 million have already been replaced and three million are set to be substituted in the 2017 plan."

He went on to note that the Ministry is aiming to replace two million electric cookers with induction ones, also in the residential sector. "540,000 have been sold to date with 284,000 units scheduled for the 2017 plan."

Deputies also discussed organizational and control actions carried out to improve energy efficiency and save fuel.

Alicia Alonso Becerra, representing Havana, explained measures being taken to control energy consumption in both the state and private sector, especially since the latter provides services such as public transportation which are not only expensive but also use stolen fuel.

In this regard, Alfredo López noted that new measures have already been approved with a reorganization process set to begin in Havana in September.

Comandante of the Revolution, Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, also a member of the Party Political Bureau and a vice president of the Councils of State and Ministers, addressed the issue of fuel theft, which stems from the failure of enterprise directors, workers and deputies themselves to control fuel distribution and act in a timely and effective manner to combat the phenomenon.

Meanwhile, the results of audits and assessments undertaken by deputies of state-budgeted investments in the National Hydraulic Resources Institute (INRH) were also reviewed.

CUBAN LEGISLATURE STRENGTHENING LINKS WITH PARLIAMENTS ACROSS THE WORLD

Meetings and exchanges with parliamentarians from various continents held during the first six months of the year not only contributed to strengthening ties between the National Assembly of People's Power and legislatures from all over the world; but also to promoting solidarity with Cuba. Yolanda Ferrer Gómez, president of the International Relations Commission provided a recap of the group's work to date with positive results expected to be seen by the end of the year.

The Commission report highlighted the importance and value of the visits made by ANPP President Esteban Lazo to Vietnam and China, where he gained experiences related to bilateral collaboration; and learned about the inner-workings of the two countries' parliamentary bodies and their role in the processes of economic renovation taking place in both nations.

Deputy Caridad Diego Bello, meanwhile, emphasized specific aspects of Lazo's visit to the Asian countries, noting that the ANPP President was received by senior political officials from both nations. She also highlighted the various experiences from which the Cuban parliament can learn, looking toward the future.

The report also noted that Cuba continues to be a member of the Board of Directors of the Commissions Secretariat, following Parlatino (Latin American parliament) elections, held in June.

CUBA, A PARADIGM OF SECURITY

The National Defense Commission reported that 97% of Cuban youth undertake military service; in fulfillment of their duty to defend the homeland against any act of aggression.

The report noted that control mechanisms must be established in civil registry

offices, in order to identify the total number of citizens eligible for military service or to undertake alternative activities during the established timeframe.

The second half of the discussion was dedicated to reviewing customs services at the Sierra Maestra International Airport in Manzanillo, Granma. Deputies highlighted the complexity of the situation at the facility given a rise in the number of tourist arrivals, and increases in flights and maritime operations, as well as new ways of operating by criminals worldwide, who constantly try to evade customs controls.

Deputies also addressed ways of preventing negative social behavior, with the aim of ensuring that preventative measures and responses to harmful actions are able to preserve order and maintain Cuba's prestige as a safe society.

DEPUTIES DISCUSS LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Representatives from the Attorney General's Office of the Republic of Cuba (FGR) read out a report of their work for the period 2011-2016, before the Constitutional and Legal Affairs Commission.

Deputies noted that progress has been made regarding penal processes, attention to citizens, prisoners, minors, women, the elderly and the most vulnerable sectors of Cuban society in general. However, an increase in cases of corruption and illegalities were also seen during this period.

FGR officials noted that the U.S. blockade, political subversion supported by the United States, and the arrival of drugs to Cuba's borders, have complicated current efforts to combat such issues.

KEY INVESTMENTS IN HEALTH

Given Cuba's rapidly aging population and the health situation on the island, where chronic non-transmissible diseases are having a significant impact on morbidity and mortality rates, the work of Physical Education graduates and the role of the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) in promoting health, and monitoring the use of gyms, occupied the agenda for the Commission on Health and Sports.

According to the report presented, one of the main issues in this area is the lack of sufficient Physical Education graduates to cover the deficit for such teachers in certain provinces, or the demand for related services to the population; while the need to develop new methodological actions directed toward recent graduates remains an issue.

"To the chain linking managers of sports facilities and municipal directorates must be added actions able to ensure a more stable supply and retention of recent graduates," stated deputy Willy Fernández Alguézabal.

Other issues discussed by deputies were related to the performance of Sports Initiation Schools, the work of the General Customs of the Republic of Cuba, and efforts to improve the port-transport-domestic economy chain.

Meanwhile, the Constitutional and Legal Affairs, and the Industry, Construction and Energy commissions discussed guidelines related to the Terrestrial Waters Bill, which will be presented during the Ninth Period of Ordinary Sessions of the Eighth Legislature of the National Assembly of People's Power.

(Lissy Rodríguez Guerrero, Yudy Castro Morales, Yaditza del Sol González, Yisel Martínez García, Jesús Jank Curbelo, Lauren Céspedes Hernández, Jorge Legañoa, Nuria Barbosa León, Alejandra García & Lisandra Fariñas Acosta) •