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THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

IN MY OPINION

Cuba marks 60 years of a big fiasco

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Cuban President Gen. Raúl Castro celebrated Friday the 60th anniversary of the guerrilla attack on the Moncada barracks that marked the beginning of the Cuban revolution, but the event could just as well be remembered as marking six decades of Latin America's biggest political, economic and social fiasco.

Granted, many of us, especially those born outside the island, once saw the "Cuban revolution" with a dose of romantic admiration. But even if you brush aside the fact that Cuba's revolutionaries toppled one dictatorship to install another, the cold statistics of the past six decades tell a story of thousands of senseless deaths, a massive emigration that split Cuban families, and an economic collapse with few parallels anywhere.

In 1958, the year before then guerrilla leader Fidel Castro took power, Cuba had a per capita income of \$356 dollars a year, one of the three or four highest in Latin America, according to Carmelo Mesa Lago of the University of Pittsburg, co-author of *Cuba under Raúl Castro* and one of the most prominent experts on the Cuban economy.

By comparison, Costa Rica was poorer, and Asian countries such as South Korea were much poorer, with per capita incomes of less than \$100 a year.

Consider how much things have changed since:

› According to the World Bank's databank, South Korea, which started welcoming massive foreign investments in the early 1960s, today has an annual per capita income of \$22,600; Costa Rica, \$9,400; and Cuba, \$5,400. And according to Mesa Lago, Cuba's real per capita income is probably lower than that because the figures have been manipulated by Cuba's government.

› South Korea has 276 cars per 1,000 people; Costa Rica, 135; and Cuba, 21, the World Bank stats show.

› In South Korea, 37 percent of the population has access to broadband Internet, compared with 9 percent in Costa Rica and 4 percent in Cuba, they show.

While South Korea has become a world industrial powerhouse — its Samsung electronic goods and Hyundai cars are exported everywhere — and Costa Rica has high-tech factories, Cuba is an industrial basket case.

The island has not even been able to continue producing sugar or cigars at its 1958 levels. According to Cuban government figures cited by Mesa Lago, Cuba's sugar production has fallen from 859 tons to 106 tons per 1,000 people over the past six decades, and Cuba's cigar production has fallen from 92,000 cigars per 1,000 people to 36,000.

Until recently, Cubans used to joke that the three biggest accomplishments of Cuba's revolution are health, education and the restoration of national dignity, while its three biggest shortcomings are breakfast, lunch and dinner.

But even Cuba's health and education standards have fallen in recent years, and its national dignity has been compromised by its almost total economic dependence first on the former Soviet Union, and lately by Venezuela.

Today, Cuba's life expectancy of 79 years is the same as that of Costa Rica, and below South Korea's 81 years. In education, Cuba deserves credit for virtually eliminating illiteracy sooner than most other Latin American nations, but its higher education is far from what it used to be.

A newly released ranking of Latin American universities by QS, a well-known London-based university research firm, places the once prestigious University of Havana at the 81st place in the region. It ranks way behind universities of Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela and Paraguay.

Asked whether Castro's latest pro-market reforms to revert Cuba's economic disaster will work, Mesa Lago said that "these are the most important economic reforms that have been implemented in Cuba since the revolution. The problem is that excessive regulations, bureaucratic red tape and taxes are blocking their success."

My opinion: Cuba's apologists will probably argue that I'm influenced by the Miami exile "mafia" and will come up with Cuba's own figures purporting to show it as a model country.

But when I heard the presidents of Uruguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua and other countries who were standing next to Gen. Castro on Friday's anniversary in Santiago de Cuba praising the "achievements of the revolution," the first question that came to my mind was: If Cuba is such a success and Cubans are so happy, why hasn't the government allowed one single free election in six decades? The answer is that Cuba's dictatorship knows very well that its revolution has been a fiasco, and that it would lose them.

