

Black congressional group visits eastern Cuban region

Lorenzo Martin

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The Congressional Black Caucus recently visited Santiago, Cuba, where Juan Carlos Robinson, the Provincial Communist Party Secretary and mover and shaker of what happens in the province, greeted caucus chairman James Clyburn.

Included in the party were U.S. Reps. Benny Thompson, D-Miss., and Gregory Meeks, D-N.Y., their wives, staff and private members of the delegation.

Santiago is central in Cuban history for several reasons. It is the birthplace of the Cuban revolution Fidel Castro and his comrades launched from there in 1953. It is rich in Afro-Cuban cultural and religion — a blend of African, Spanish and, later, Haitian culture along with the dominant African rhythms that describe the people in this eastern region of Cuba.

It is also significant because of the dominance of Afro-Cubans who live in the city and province of Santiago. It is from these roots that Juan Carlos Robinson grew into one of the most dynamic political leaders and today serves with 10 others on the country's poli-bureau that oversees the day-to-day county workings.

As the Aerogaviota Airline plane landed, dignitaries positioned themselves according to protocol and waited to greet the party in a sultry 102 degrees. Descending the plane was Clyburn followed by Reps. Thompson and Meeks. The remainder of the delegation followed the entourage to the VIP room of the airport where they were received and welcomed by dignitaries. Young girls gave bouquets of red roses to the wives and other female delegates, while white gladiolas were given to the men.

Welcoming the delegation were local party officials led by Robinson. He asked, "How is (Calif. Rep.) Maxine (Waters) doing? Her delegation was down here not so long ago." Inquiring about restaurant owner Bill Collins, Robinson loosened the delegation up by saying, he sells chickens, but he doesn't know how to cook them. Laughter seemed to settle the delegation down for business.

Robinson said he was happy for two reasons. "I am happy that you (delegation) are here and we are all happy because it is Raul Castro's 60th birthday. (Raul is the brother of Fidel Castro.) We are celebrating and want you to choose where you want to go. Nothing is compulsory," the chairman added. "There are places, fairs, cultural areas, carnival museums, and of course the markets."

"Brothers and sisters, our struggle is to promote the ideas of social justice," Robinson said on a serious note. Rep. Clyburn answered, "We feel a kinship and friendship with you. We can't select kinship, but through love and affection we can be friends."

"We are celebrating the recent court decision ruling that Elian should be with his father and they both should return to Cuba as soon as possible," Clyburn told the officials.

"Next week in the U.S. Congress, we will attempt to modify the blockade against Cuba. We believe it will lay the foundations to remove it in the near future," he said.

The chairman further explained that he wished to see the travel restrictions lifted. "I am aware of the similarities between us; we have similar background and histories," he

added.

The delegation and the Santiago guests boarded a bus for the marketplace. It was bustling and crowded with people on the sidewalks and streets selling flowers, fish and merchandise. Chairman Robinson in his charismatic manner walked down the street, drawing crowds of people who surrounded him. Taking a baby from a carriage, he held it up, kissed it and proudly gave it back to her mother.

As the television cameras rolled, Robinson recognized some Haitian medical students who were studying to be doctors at the Medical School. He explained that they were taking a crash course in Spanish to make their studies easier. By this time, the streets were full of well-wishers wanting to get close to the African-Americans. Robinson introduced the delegation and explained why they were there. The mainly Afro-Cuban crowd moved in more and studied the congressmen and their wives.

Picking up a bunch of flowers, Robinson smiling said, "Perhaps, one day these flowers will be sold in America." And then it was off to the museum where Robinson met more friends. This time he stopped a jeep and introduced everyone to its driver.

Short on time, the chairman and his congressional delegation took pictures on the steps of the museum (an old Batista Garrison) still bearing the scars of the first battle which kicked off the July 26, 1953 revolution led by Castro, his brother and others. The museum was dedicated to the history of that battle that started in Oriental Province and ended in the streets of Havana in 1959. The truck used for the escape of Castro and his group was on display.

Explaining the reasons for the revolution, Robinson told the delegation that they fought for the ideas of social justice, health care, education and the right to work for everyone.

The delegation visited its National Cemetery where Reps. Clyburn, Thompson and Meeks honored both American and Cuban heroes by placing flowers on the bier covered by a Cuban Flag in the center of the rotunda. The statue of Jose Marti looked over the fallen heroes.

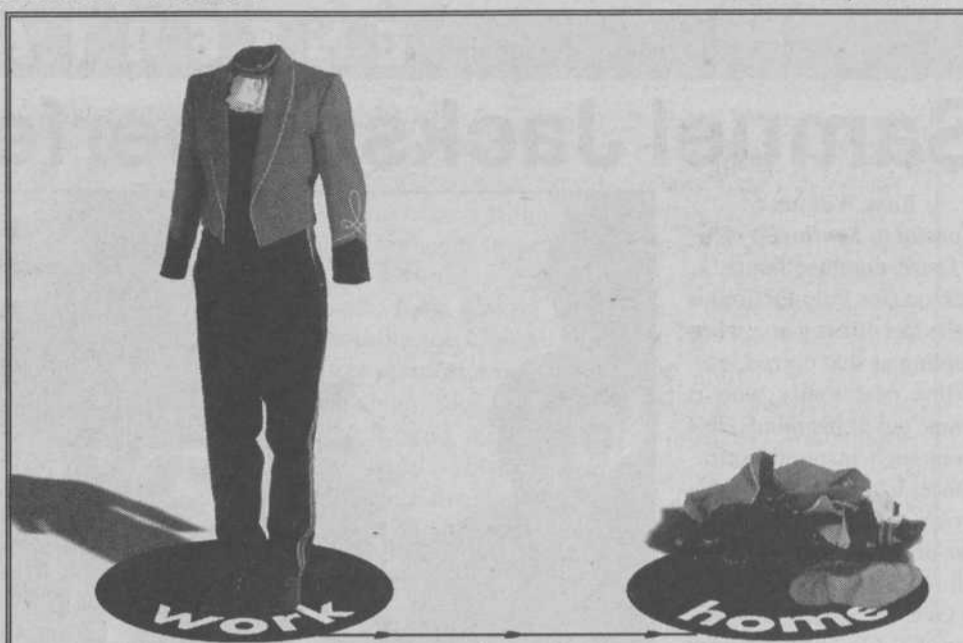
After a shopping spree in the middle of town, Robinson took the delegation to Callejon Bofill Cafe, where an Afro-Cuban band entertained the group. Members were singled out to perform the latest Cuban/Latin dances.

The delegation was treated to a formal sit-down luncheon in one of the most beautiful restaurants in Santiago. The table and seating was arranged according to protocol. Of course, Robinson, who seemed to know where everyone was going to sit, directed it.

Robinson proposed a toast of appreciation. He then had presents of coffee given to the delegation. Rep. Meeks gave a toast for brotherhood, then followed with a promise to vote for the elimination of the blockade. "Nations are based on equality. It will be a step-by-step process," continued Congressman Meeks.

Chairman Clyburn summed up the delegation's position. Of Elian Gonzalez, he stressed that the solidarity of the Congressional Black Caucus with the overwhelming Cuban and American people to have Elian and his father and returned to Cuba.

Lorenzo Martin is editor of the Standard Newspapers.



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