

INTERNATIONAL

Cuba warms to rap music despite growing criticism

By Patricia Grogg

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HAVANA (IPS/GIN)—Rap music in Cuba has made it past the initial phase of rejection and incomprehension that its politically critical lyrics produced and continues to gain space in national culture.

And it now has its ninth festival—with local and international artists—under its belt.

In socialist Cuba, the musical genre's progress has been such that the government created the Cuban Rap Agency to promote the island's hip-hop and rap artists inside and outside of the country.

Meanwhile, the recording label Asere ensures the production of albums and the magazine, "Movimiento," facilitates exchange and reflection about this popular musical phenomenon.

"Movimiento" aims to illustrate and enrich all artistic and intellectual projects in the world of Cuban hip-hop, and to foment critical and self-critical discourse," states the publication in its first edi-

tion.

The magazine and the first album, "Asere1," from the new recording label, made their debut at the recent ninth Havana Rap and Hip-Hop Festival, drawing rap artists from the United States and other countries to the Cuban capital.

With its crude musical poetry, the group Obsession launched a new rap music recording label at the festival.

The now-annual event, which includes everything from massive concerts to seminars on music theory, has become a catalyst for the growth and evolution of rap and hip-hop as a cultural movement on the island, say observers and music experts.

The objective of the Cuban Rap Agency (ACR) is "to promote and market" the groups that represent this musical genre, director Susana Garcia, told IPS. "We are getting started in the marketing phase. We have achieved many positive things, especially in promotion, but there is a long road



Hundreds of people attend the first concert of the 9th Habana Hip Hop Rap Festival, celebrated at the Alamar neighborhood amphitheatre in Havana, Cuba earlier this month.

ahead of us."

Created in September 2002, the agency has under its wing nine rap groups, and is taking on two more. This is a small figure, even for Cuba, where there are some 1,000 bands, more than a few of which perform rap music.

"The idea is to not grow too fast, so that we can dedicate all the time necessary to those that already are involved in the agency," said

Garcia, who denied the notion that controversial lyrics might keep some groups from being accepted by the agency.

"We believe that if these messages encourage reflection, they are important for society," she said.

Most Cuban rappers follow the critical line, though some are more cutting than others.

"We're artists and we reflect our realities, just like a

painter or novelist does, but we always try to be constructive, no matter how difficult the song might seem," commented Norlan Leygonier, of the group Alto Voltaje (High Voltage).

Like the rest, Leygonier did not escape the problems associated with starting out.

"Because of prejudices. It was something new and people didn't know what this kind of music was. But we

haven't ever let up. We brought hip-hop to our neighbourhood, and now there are a lot of rappers," he says.

Rap was born in the 1970s in the Black and Hispanic neighborhoods of New York, and was later adopted by discontented young people in other cities of the United States, Europe, Latin America and Africa.

Rap involves rhythmic, spoken rhymes, set to music, and is a key component of hip-hop, which also encompasses artistic expression like breakdance, deejaying and graffiti.

The rap movement reached this Caribbean island in the late 1980s, and by the middle of the 1990s there were several groups performing, with the first "Havana Hip Hop Festival" taking place in 1995.

According to Ariel Fernandez, editor of "Movimiento," this transfer of culture is not a "phenomenon that fell out of the sky," but has to do with the Cuban (See Cuba, Page 14)

Talk of U.N. trusteeship for Liberia draws big protest

By Thalif Deen

Special to Sentinel-Voice

UNITED NATIONS (IPS/GIN)—A proposal for a virtual takeover of war-devastated Liberia by the United Nations is being given a mixed reception by African advocacy groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights leaders.

"It would be inappropriate to turn Liberia over to the United Nations," says Bill Fletcher, president of TransAfrica Forum.

"There needs to be a U.N. peacekeeping force, and the United Nations, along with the African Union, can play a very constructive role in facilitating internal negotiations and national reconciliations."

But "Liberians must take the lead, and they are in the process of such negotiations," Fletcher told IPS.

The proposal, being informally discussed in U.N. circles, calls for Liberia to be under a "trusteeship" for at least two years, so that the West African nation can be "governed" by a senior U.N. official authorized by the 15-member Security Council. During this period, the coun-

try would be funded by international donors and policed by a U.N. peacekeeping force.

Jacques Klein, U.N. special representative in Liberia, has predicted that "free and fair elections are at least 18 months away."

He also hinted that during the interim period, the country might have to be administered by the United Nations. "There are a lot of good Liberian civil servants willing to form a technocrat government, beginning with a U.N. mandate," he told reporters recently.

The United Nations may need as many as 15,000 troops to maintain peace in Liberia, he added.

About 1,000 Nigerian troops, part of a regional peacekeeping force from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), are in the country.

Other nations that are expected to provide troops include Ghana, Senegal and Mali.

A few hundred U.S. marines are also in the capital Monrovia, with another 2,000 in ships stationed offshore.

No formal proposal has been made for a U.N. trustee-

ship, an African diplomat told IPS, suggesting, "I think Klein is floating a trial balloon to see which way the wind is blowing".

Klein had enormous administrative powers when he was U.N. special representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, earlier, the transitional administrator for Eastern Slovenia.

"He probably wants to run Liberia the way he did Bosnia and Eastern Slovenia," the diplomat added.

The most recent example of a U.N. trusteeship is East Timor, which was once part of Indonesia and became independent in 1999.

Addressing reporters in Monrovia recently, Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis warned about the current power struggle among various warring factions to rule Liberia.

"Those who came to kill us, want to rule us," he said.

The Roman Catholic archbishop urged the United Nations to send at least 15,000 troops to Liberia as "part of the solution for the next two years."

The Security Council is expected to meet within the next couple of weeks to for-

mally create a new peacekeeping force for Liberia to replace the existing ECOWAS military force. Most of the ECOWAS troops are likely to be absorbed into the U.N. body.

Since the civil war began about 14 years ago, about 250,000 people have died.

"The United Nations has an important role to play in the healing process, providing relief and confidence-building," said Rev. Gabriel Odima, president of the Africa Centre for Peace and Democracy.

"But trusteeship will not be the answer to the Liberian crisis or even Africa in general," he added.

Odima said the global community should help the nation's people put together a transition government that represents their wishes.

"The United States should work with the presidents of Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and Mozambique to help Africans find solutions to the problems in Liberia," he added.

"It is time for the United States to help Africa move from the stigma of colonial legacy to a viable society where hunger is no longer a

threat to human existence, and democracy and good governance become the theme of the 21st century and beyond," Odima said.

But Daniel Volman of the African Security Research Project strongly supports U.N. trusteeship of Liberia.

"It would be the best way to ensure that a long-term program of demilitarization, humanitarian and development aid, and revival of democratic politics will be sustained and adequately funded," he said. "And I think the United States should commit itself to providing a substantial proportion of the money that will be required for such a long-term program."

A trusteeship, if backed with adequate manpower and funding, "would probably be acceptable to the various armed groups," he added.

"And in the event that there was resistance, a strong peace enforcement mission would be capable of controlling the violence," said Volman.

He also criticized the current U.S. military deployment in Liberia as "probably the worst strategy that could be conceived."

"The idea is that U.S.

forces will only be used as a rapid reaction force to respond in the event that Nigerian soldiers confront armed groups that they cannot handle."

But given the limited deployment of Nigerian troops, their small numbers, and the prospect that they will encounter serious difficulties if challenged, it is likely that the whole peace enforcement mission will soon become involved in combat, he added.

"What is needed is a much larger force, as recommended by Archbishop Francis and other analysts, composed of both American and African troops, which is capable of deploying throughout the country, and carrying out the necessary task of demilitarization and relief," Volman said.

George Kun, a fellow at Refugees International, also supported the proposed U.N. trusteeship—particularly the East Timor model.

He called for the appointment of a U.N. administrator for a year, followed by elections. "This would be the right path to take: anything short of this, I think Liberia will again plunge into another disaster."