

UN praises Cuba's ability to feed people

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Havana – A U.N. food expert hailed Cuba as a world model in feeding its population, some 18 years after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc ravaged the island's economy and sparked widespread hunger.

Jean Ziegler, who has been the United Nations' independent investigator on "the right to food" since 2000, spent 11 days in Cuba on a fact-finding mission, meeting with top officials and chatting up farmers, state managers and ordinary Cubans waiting in line for food allotted by ration cards.

"We haven't seen even one malnourished person" – a rare feat in much of poverty-stricken Latin America, Ziegler said Tuesday. "The right to being fed is the priority, without a doubt."

Cuba is one of 32 countries that include the "right to food" in their constitutions, and fewer still – including Brazil, Latin America's largest economy – meet pledges to provide food to all their citizens, he said.

Ziegler, who visited two prisons in Havana to ask inmates about their daily diets, did not address human rights concerns over the arbitrary imprisonment and alleged abuse of political prisoners and critics of the island's one-party government.

Despite a 46-year U.S. embargo against the communist-run island, Cuba has found ways to ensure its population does not go hungry, Ziegler said. "Cuba always invents an answer," he noted.

Widespread daily shortages continue to frustrate Cubans, and the government blames those – and nearly all other – problems on the embargo. Yet since 2000, Cuba has been able to purchase food and agricultural products from the U.S. on a cash basis.

The island still struggles with major deficits in food production, and relies too much on foreign imports, Ziegler said. But the related need to improve production capacity has been addressed more openly since July, when interim leader Raul Castro encouraged people to seek ways to improve efficiency in farming and other sectors.

Raul Castro has governed Cuba since July 2006, when emergency intestinal surgery forced his brother Fidel to step aside.

In the early 1990s, Cuba was forced to adopt wartime-like austerity measures after the Soviet Union collapsed and the island's gross domestic product plunged by 35 percent.

Ziegler's visit marked the third time a U.N. special investigator has been invited to the island since 1998. The Geneva-based U.N. Human Rights Council appoints outside experts

like him to investigate specific countries or subjects, giving them wide latitude in their reports.

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