

By Marc Frank

HAVANA (Reuters) - As global fears about food security mount with riots in Africa and panic buying elsewhere, one world figure can sit back and say he warned a year ago of a coming food crisis -- Fidel Castro.

Cuba's ailing revolutionary has not appeared in public since he underwent intestinal surgery in July 2006 from which he has never fully recovered.

He finally retired as president in February but from his sickbed he has been writing columns on world affairs since March 2007, when he launched an attack on the biofuels policy of his ideological enemy, the United States, saying it was pushing up food prices and threatening global famine.

"More than three billion people in the world are being condemned to a premature death from hunger and thirst," Castro wrote in his first column.

"It is not an exaggeration; this is rather a conservative figure," he wrote, criticizing plans to turn food crops into fuel as a "sinister idea" hatched by the Bush administration and the U.S. auto industry.

In recent weeks, riots have broken out in more than a dozen countries, from Indonesia to Egypt and Cameroon, some countries are restricting food exports, and global panic buying of rice forced even some U.S. retail chains to limit purchases.

Violent protests ignited by rising food prices toppled Haiti's government earlier this month.

Increased demand from rapidly developing nations led by China, the use of crops for biofuels, low global stocks, export curbs and market speculation are blamed for pushing world prices of wheat, corn and rice to record highs.

As U.S. rice futures marched to new record highs, the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO, last week exhorted farmers and governments to ensure this year's crop is a success.

The FAO has said 37 countries face food crises.

"This steeply rising price of food has developed into a real global crisis," United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said last week.

The price of basic foods from corn and wheat to soy, powdered milk and rice are in some cases more than double what they were a year ago, when Castro first warned of trouble.

His closest foreign ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, says Castro was way ahead in predicting the crisis and that the rest of the world is only now realizing that governments have to get involved to regulate the market.

World Food Program executive director Josette Sheeran earlier this month said the first global food crisis since World War II was comparable with "a silent tsunami".

ENERGY REVOLUTION

Instead of biofuels based on food crops, Castro has proposed that the world follow an "energy revolution" he launched in Cuba in 2005 when oil prices were still relatively low.

To crack Cuba's energy crisis, Castro ordered the replacement of all the country's incandescent light bulbs with energy-saving florescent bulbs.

Other developing countries, such as Argentina, have followed Cuba's example in switching to florescent bulbs.

Castro, now 81, also moved to revamp Cuba's wasteful energy grid and replace inefficient electrical appliances such as refrigerators and cookers with energy-saving equipment made in China.

Castro, one of the world's best known critics of consumerism, has advised countries such as China, India and Brazil to avoid disaster by not copying what he sees as wasteful U.S. patterns of consumption.

"I think that reducing and recycling all fuel and electricity operated engines is an urgent and elemental necessity of all humanity," he wrote in his first column.

Critics say Castro's energy revolution was little more than a scramble to overcome a crisis caused by Cuba's obsolete power generation system, and Cuba has moved to relax some of Castro's anti-consumerism policies since he retired.

He was succeeded by his younger brother Raul Castro, who has lifted bans on Cubans buying computers, DVD players and other electronic goods, and is also allowing them to stay at hotels previously reserved for foreign tourists.

(For more stories on the global food price rises, click on:
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