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**Castro, Cuba leave stark impressions on trip**

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SPRINGFIELD-Cuba has two faces: the graying hardline leader Fidel Castro and the 11 million people who eke out a life under his dictatorship.

I saw both during Gov. Ryan's five-day visit to the island.

Dealing with the Illinois delegation, Castro had the style of an American politician -- a good one. He posed for pictures with reporters, signed autographs and worked crowds of students outside Havana University like any American presidential candidate, shaking hands as they chanted, "Fidel, Fidel."

At a rare press conference, I stood 18 inches from this despot of the 20th century. He gripped my shoulder eight or 10 times to emphasize his arguments against the U.S. trade embargo and to defend himself against suggestions he was to blame for Cuba's squalor.

I'll never forget that encounter with one of the world's last ruling communists. Nor will I forget an hourlong walk a block or two off the main tourism avenue in Old Havana.

At a store where Cubans obtain rationed goods, shelves were largely empty except for a few tubes of toothpaste or soap. "This is where the Cuban people live. You want to see them, you come here," said Tony, an English-speaking Cuban in his 20s, careful not to stand too close when we walked past police officers for fear of being hassled for speaking with a foreign traveler.

While we were in Havana, public health officials in the Cuban capital were contending with an outbreak of dengue fever, a dangerous and sometimes fatal disease spread by piles of rotting garbage and standing wastewater.

On my walk, I spotted a 6-inch-high gusher of brown water bubbling up through the seams of a sidewalk. It looked like raw sewage as it ran into the busy street filled with pedestrians. No one seemed bothered.

Despite these horrible conditions, Tony said as we walked: "Castro is a good guy. It is the people around him who make the mistakes."

After we split up, I encountered an elderly Cuban woman who clasped her hands together and told me in Spanish what I took to be a story of struggle. Captivated as much by her as by my encounter with Castro, I slipped her a $ 5 bill, and she darted off into the crowd clutching half the average monthly Cuban salary.

"Yes, there are complaints (from the people), and I'm well aware of them," Castro said during his news conference. "There are criticisms and we are aware of them. We are the first to discover the difficulties of the people. But I'm telling you this country is advancing. It is making progress. And I want that detailed."