

Pistolerismo Rampant

In his six months as President, Carlos Prío Socarrás has moved efficiently toward the solution of many of Cuba's political and economic problems. But one thing has baffled him as much as it did his predecessors: how to end the epidemic of political gangsterism, known to Cubans as *pistolerismo*.

Pistolerismo is a hangover from the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1925-33). The fight against Machado was carried on largely by revolutionary groups of university students. After the downfall of the dictator they continued hunting down his hated henchmen.

The revolutionary groups supported Ramon Grau San Martin when he was elected President in 1944; as a result he allowed them a free hand, and many of their leaders became prominent in politics. But by this time most of their original enemies had been eliminated so they began fighting for power among themselves.

Prío pledged war on the *pistoleros*. But they barely stopped to catch their breath when he took over. Then the street killings began again. As recently as April 2, two men machine-gunned a taxi, killing the driver and a leader of the University Students Federation. Before he died, the student victim was said to have named Orlando León Lemus, known as *El Colorado*, as one of the attackers. The police have been searching in vain for *El Colorado*, who was also accused of taking part in other killings.

Last week the Havana radio and press sprang a sensation by giving out an interview with *El Colorado*, written by Néstor Piñango. The real sting in the story was its implication of important political figures in the activities of the gangs.

Piñango refused to tell police where he had interviewed *El Colorado*. He was a newspaperman and not a common informer, he declared. A short time later, while he was visiting former President Grau, Chief of Police José Caramés appeared in person and arrested the reporter.

As the week ended, the National College of Journalism was denouncing the arrest of Piñango, the police were ransacking the city for *El Colorado*, and all Havana was buzzing over the interview. On May 6 Prío admitted: "The government up to now has not been able to destroy gangsterism" but "at all costs it will be destroyed."