



# FOCAL

Canadian Foundation for the Americas  
Fondation canadienne pour les Amériques  
Fundación Canadiense para las Américas  
Fundação Canadense para as Américas

## Research Forum on Cuba

# Chronicle on Cuba February 2008

### HIGHLIGHTS

**Domestic Affairs:** Cuban authorities evict over 60 families living in a shantytown in Holguin province. University students openly criticize government policies. Four Cuban dissidents jailed since 2003 are sent to Spain with their families. Fidel Castro resigns from his post and declines to be re-elected as President of the Councils of State and Ministers. The National Assembly names Raul Castro President of the Councils of State and Ministers.

**Economy:** Nickel consolidated its position as the island's main export in 2007. The Cuban Tourism Minister announces a total recovery of the Spanish tourist market for 2008. Mexico agrees to restructure \$400 million in Cuban debt and re-opens credit lines with Havana. Belarus and Cuba sign an intergovernmental agreement on the supply of buses to the island.

**Exile Community:** Leaders of exile organizations react moderately to Fidel Castro's resignation.

**Foreign Affairs:** Spain holds a second round of talks with Cuba on human rights issues. Representatives of Cuba and the Islamic Republic of Iran sign their first agreement on scientific cooperation. World leaders react to Fidel Castro's resignation and to the new presidency on the island. During an official and pastoral visit to Cuba, the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, meets with Raul Castro. Cuba signs two UN human rights treaties.

**US-Cuba Relations:** The US intelligence community reports to a US Senate Committee on Cuba. Fidel Castro writes five articles on Republican presidential hopeful John McCain. Washington reaffirms the trade embargo and expresses hope that the end of Fidel Castro's presidency will launch a transition to democracy in Cuba. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama urges the US to be prepared to take steps to normalize relations with the island.

## LO MÁS RELEVANTE

**Asuntos domésticos:** Las autoridades cubanas desalojan a más de 60 familias que vivían en una ciudadela en la provincia de Holguín. Estudiantes universitarios critican abiertamente políticas gubernamentales. Cuatro disidentes encarcelados desde 2003 son enviados a España con sus familiares. Fidel Castro renuncia a su cargo y a ser reelegido como presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros. La Asamblea Nacional nombra a Raúl Castro presidente de los Consejos de Estado y de Ministros.

**Economía:** En 2007 el níquel consolidó su posición como la principal fuente de exportaciones de la isla. El ministro de Turismo anuncia una total recuperación del mercado español para 2008. México acuerda reestructurar la deuda cubana de 400 millones y abrir líneas de crédito con La Habana. Bielorrusia y Cuba firman acuerdos para el suministro de ómnibus a la isla.

**Comunidad de exiliados:** Líderes de organizaciones de exiliados reaccionan con moderación ante la renuncia de Fidel Castro.

**Asuntos exteriores:** España sostiene una segunda ronda de conversaciones sobre derechos humanos con Cuba. La República islámica de Irán y Cuba firman su primer convenio de cooperación científica. Líderes mundiales reaccionan a la renuncia de Fidel Castro y a la nueva presidencia de Cuba. El cardenal Tarcisio Bertone, secretario de Estado del Vaticano, se reúne con Raúl Castro durante su visita oficial y pastoral a Cuba. Cuba firma dos tratados de Naciones Unidas sobre derechos humanos.

**Relaciones Cuba-Estados Unidos:** La comunidad de Inteligencia de Estados Unidos rinde informes a un Comité del Senado sobre Cuba. Fidel Castro escribe cinco artículos sobre el aspirante republicano a la presidencia John McCain. Washington reafirma el embargo contra Cuba y expresa esperanza de que la renuncia de Fidel Castro a la presidencia impulse la transición a la democracia. El candidato demócrata a la presidencia Barack Obama urge a Estados Unidos a prepararse para dar pasos hacia la normalización de relaciones con la isla.



## DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

**February 1:** The Regional Child Protection Conference concluded in Havana with strong commitments to provide a high level of protection for children, and ample recovery and social reinsertion assistance to child sexual abuse victims. Brigade General Armando Lopez Orta of the Cuban Interior Ministry (MININT) said that a combined effort is the most effective way to safeguard minors. He noted that studies have shown that 20 percent of women, and 5 to 10 percent of men worldwide, suffered sexual abuse as children. Fifty specialists from fifteen countries participated in the Regional Child Protection Conference where they shared experiences in dealing with cases of child sex abuse. (*Periódico 26*, 3/2/08)

**February 1:** Police forces evicted more than sixty families by force in Holguín. On January 29<sup>th</sup> about one hundred special police forces and a similar number of state security agents showed up in El Pití quarter and reduced a settlement that had existed for

more than five years to rubble. In response to the local residents' reaction to preserve their belongings, the police forces struck forward, wounding a dozen of the evicted including five women. The secretary of the Communist Party in the territory, Miguel Díaz-Canel, does not accept that more than 700 families have had to build their homes "in areas of interest to the army, reforestation and future industrial plans." (*EER*, 1/2/08)

**February 2:** The newly elected 1,201 delegates from 14 provincial assemblies of People's Power began their new positions, with each Assembly choosing a President and Vice President based on proposals from the candidate commissions. These groups are made up of grassroots and student organizations, and put forth the leaders they consider most capable after an exhaustive analytical process. The provincial delegates, in term for five years, received a vote of confidence last January 20 by 95.46 percent of 8.17 million voters to perform, according to article 115 of the Cuban Constitution, a "labor for collective benefit and report the results of their management." The Provincial Assemblies are the highest instances of State power in their areas. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/2/08)

**February 4:** Cuban electoral authorities continued arrangements to elect on February 24 the Council of State. The recently elected 614 delegates for the National Assembly of the Peoples' Power will elect 31 members to the Council of State, led by Fidel Castro since its creation in 1976. Alberto Marchante, member of the National Candidatures Commission, said recently that the country will present aspirants to those posts after an extensive process of consultations with legislators, as they did with provincial delegates. Official media published photos and names of presidents and vice presidents for the 14 Provincial Assemblies of the Peoples' Power, created on February 2. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/2/08)

**February 4:** Cuba's most famous percussionist, Tata Güines, died of a kidney disease in Havana. He was 77. Tata, whose real name was Federico Aristides Soto, shared the stage with some of the world's most renowned performers during a career spanning more than six decades. In the US in the 1950s, the "King of the Congas" performed with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Josephine Baker and Dizzy Gillespie. He had spent his formative years playing with some of the greats of 1930's and 40's Cuban music. Despite his success in the United States, Güines returned to Cuba after Fidel Castro's communist revolution in 1959, saying he had never been able to get used to the racial segregation in the US at the time. After spending years away from the public eye, he enjoyed renewed success in 2004 when he performed on the Grammy nominated hit album, "Lagrimas Negras" (Black Tears), together with Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés. (*BBC*, 5/2/08)

**February 4:** The presence of peaceful opposition leaders in the city of Santa Clara set off a strong police operation in the central park Leoncio Vidal. Dressed in plain clothes the police formed a human barricade in front of the offices of the CMHW radio broadcasting station and summoned other members of mass organizations, the Association of the Cuban Revolution Combatants (ACRC) and the Communist Party. Dissident leaders Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca, Félix Bonne and Francisco Chaviano travelled to Santa Clara to inquire with the State Security in the province about the situation of Jorge Luís García Pérez (Antúnez), charged of public disorder and disobedience on January

28<sup>th</sup>. (*Cubanet*, 8/2/08)

**February 5:** Cuban university students, in a rare public challenge to authorities, openly criticized government restrictions on access to the Internet, hotels and travel abroad. In the 52-minute video, students at the University of Information Sciences demanded explanations from National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcon on a series of issues. The video has since been circulated secretly on computer memory cards. "Why can't the people of Cuba go to hotels or travel to other parts of the world?" asked one student, who identified himself as Eliecer Avila. Only foreigners are allowed to stay at hotels at beach resorts. To leave the island, Cubans need a permit from the government, which particularly restricts travel by young people. Avila asked why the government had banned the use of Web sites Yahoo! and Google for e-mail and messenger services. Alarcon, who is the speaker of Cuba's legislature, dodged some questions, saying he did not know about monetary and Internet matters. The students criticized Cuba's leadership for being out of touch with the people and asked the government to be more forthcoming with proposals on how to solve pressing problems, from poor public transport to low wages. [[Video](#)] (*BBC Mundo Latino*, 5/2/08)

**Febrero 5:** Workplace discipline measures put into effect ten months ago have gone mostly unfulfilled with very "little progress" in the productive use of the workday, reported the weekly official newspaper "Trabajadores". That was the conclusion after the inspection of 1,883 workplaces conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MTSS). According to the study of the MTSS, in 2005 "57 % of employees left the workplace to go to business establishments and take care of personal affairs during workday hours; in April 2007 that figure was 55 %; and last October it had gone down to 53 %." (*AFP*, 5/2/08)

**February 5:** The Chinese community in Cuba and the Cuban School of Wushu are holding a week of activities to commemorate the "Year of the Rat" this February 7. Festivities for the Chinese Lunar New Year include art and traditional clothing exhibitions at the House of Arts and Traditions in Havana's Chinatown, *Granma* newspaper reported. The gala "From Havana to Beijing" will close the cultural activities. The event features a martial arts exhibition at Havana's Sports Coliseum. (*ACN*, 5/2/08)

**February 5:** Some 300 publishing houses from 31 countries will attend the 2008 Havana's International Book Fair. From February 13 to 24, some 145 exhibitors, 90 of them foreigners, will participate in the Morro-Cabaña Park, overlooking the city of Havana, where 44 bookstores are already selling new titles. More than 8 million books, 1,300 titles, will circulate around the isle, including mountain areas. Vietnam and Indonesia are among the countries represented for the first time. Indonesia will also have an extensive craft exhibit. The literary program includes title presentations, round tables, talks and colloquiums dedicated to Galicia, the guest of honor, and to Cuban writers Graziella Pogolotti and Anton Arrufat. (*Prensa Latina*, 5/2/08)

**February 5:** Cuba has begun a "slow reinstatement" of authors censored during the 1970s, said playwright Antón Arrufat, who will be a guest of honour at the (2008)

International Book Fair in Havana. The censorship of his work “*Los Siete Contra Tebas*” (The Seven against Tebas) unleashed an ideological and homophobic witch-hunt in Cuba’s arts world in 1971 known as “quinquenio gris” (five grey years). Arrufat was sent to the basement of a neighbourhood library to pack books for a decade. “Slowly there has been a unhurried reinstatement,” said the 72-year-old author. (*Reuters*, 5/2/08)

**February 5:** Famed Cuban folk singer Silvio Rodriguez said he believes all Cubans should be free to travel abroad and stay in the hotels reserved for foreign tourists. Rodriguez, whose songs have made him a leading voice of the Cuban revolution, described what Cuba is going through now as "a moment of change, of transition (...) not the only one I have lived to see within the revolution." The internationally renowned folk singer is a member of parliament who has long defended the Cuban government in the face of criticism over alleged human rights violations. Nonetheless, Rodriguez said that authorities should ease restrictions that prevent many Cubans from entering state-run hotels, traveling overseas and even within their own country. "Permission to leave and enter should be completely open," Rodriguez said. For decades, Cuba has restricted travel to keep citizens from flooding large cities in search of jobs. It also limits visas abroad, citing national security concerns. Since Cuba first began accepting foreign tourists en masse in the early 1990s, most Cubans have been barred from hotels, even if they can pay for rooms. (*Sun Sentinel*, 6/2/08)

**February 6:** Taking up Raul Castro's invitation to speak their minds without fear of reprisal, more Cubans have begun publicly complaining and challenging government policies on everything from limits on Internet access to travel restrictions. Culture Minister Abel Prieto said that he supports gay marriage. "I think that marriage between lesbians, between homosexuals can be perfectly approved and that in Cuba that wouldn't cause an earthquake or anything like that," Prieto, a member of the party's powerful Politburo, told reporters following the screening of a documentary. A 57-year-old writer turned political leader, Prieto is also a member of the island's supreme governing body, the Council of State. And he said he supports what Raul Castro has termed a "debate" on Cuba's future. The "immense majority of intellectuals" want to "confront problems, to battle all expressions of bureaucracy in culture and in society and at the same time defend this revolution and socialism," Prieto said. (*Sun Sentinel*, *EFE*, 6/2/08)

**February 6:** In an article, the official newspaper Granma criticised the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Granma called on the PCC to "end the lies" and stop giving "undeserved credit" to its own ranks. The newspaper goes on to say "make no mistake, some have been weak on their ethical conduct". It also says that Cubans "should not have to tolerate [a situation in which] distortions of reality become habit to avoid deserved criticism or sanctions" in the PCC. The article, entitled "The Lie", was by María Julia Mayoral, who worked for the now defunct daily Bastión, which belonged to the Cuban Armed Forces. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 6/2/08)

**February 6:** Some 400 books went on sale today in 44 Havana bookstores, anticipating the 2008 International Book Fair that will be inaugurated on February 13. These sales

allow the avid Havana public to get a head start on some of the titles that will be presented at the fair. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/2/08)

**February 6:** Dissident leader Maura Iset González Jurguet, national president of the Latin-American Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR) in Cuba, was arrested and taken to a police station. The peaceful oppositionist was kept there for 2 hours and was threatened with 20 years in jail if she continued her involvement in the “With the same currency” campaign. (*Cubamet*, 12/2/08)

**February 6:** A national seminar to promote the use of the Cuban asthma vaccine ‘Valergem’ was inaugurated in Havana province. The event, that has a scientific-educational nature, takes place at the National Center of Bio-Preparations (BIOCEN) and it aims at promoting the use of the first therapeutic vaccine developed on the island to treat asthma, a very common health problem among Cubans. (*ACN*, 6/2/08)

**February 7:** People were arrested and hundreds of DVD and video cassettes were confiscated for allegedly containing television programs made in Miami, after a police clamp down in Camagüey, Havana and Santiago de Cuba against the rental of “subversive” material. In Camagüey several rental houses were taken over after a surge in demand for the new TV program hosted Carlos Otero in America TeVe, especially the episode containing an interview in which the actress Susana Pérez announces she’s not going back to the island. (*EER*, 8/2/08)

**February 7:** The non-fulfillment of the recruitment plan for educators, as well as successive declines in the number of these professionals, was analyzed at the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of Workers in Education, the Science and Sports, held at the Havana Convention Center. Lázara Mercedes López Acea, a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Party, pointed out that it is necessary to develop cohesion through union activity and to work in a collective way in the search for solutions. “The attention to youth should be greater, and the recognition to the teacher's work must be on-going,” she stressed. A delegate from the city of Ciego de Avila noted that educators are for the most part very young. “For that reason they need more support and guidance than those more experienced, and also help from the family, the community, from everybody,” she said. (*Juventud Rebelde*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** A 12-year-old Cuban student, Daniel Castañeda Alayo, died after his teacher, 17-year-old Rolando, hit him with a chair during an argument in the classroom. The homicide took place February 1<sup>st</sup> in the secondary school Domingo Sarmientos, in Lawton, City of Havana. During the night on February 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, unknown individuals threw rocks at three of the state-run residences housing “emergent teachers” in the districts of El Cerro, Vedado and Luyanó, the latter where teacher Rolando was staying before his arrest. Emergent teachers are youngsters turned teachers to make up for the shortage of teachers in the country, part of a plan designed by Fidel Castro. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 8/2/08)

**February 7:** An unprecedented debate last year among Cuban intellectuals about decades-old cultural repression touched off a snowball effect that has even been felt within the inner circles of the island's communist government. The debate on the "five grey years" (1971-76), as the witch hunt against artists and intellectuals for homosexuality or their supposed lack of commitment to the revolution has been labelled, today reverberates in a critical examination of Cuban society that extends beyond the cultural sphere. Writer Leonardo Padura, who uses the metaphor of a "snowball," told the press that the "debate among the intellectuals was a little ball that has gradually grown (with) different needs and complaints having slowly been added to it." "A change in perception about many phenomena in Cuban society has begun and it wasn't by chance that the intellectuals were the ones who began to move this wheel, which had completely stopped," he said. "There are demands that at this stage are absolutely fundamental," he added, such as the right of Cubans to enter tourist hotels, leave the country, have access to cell phones and freely sell houses and automobiles, as well as demands for changes in the forms of landholding and production. Playwright Anton Arrufat told the press that when the debate took place last year some did not want to participate because "they thought it was an isolated matter, and in this country isolated matters tend to flare up and affect many other matters." In his opinion, Cuba is going through "a moment in which the people in general and we artists are willing to participate and participate means butting in." "If we get burned later," he said, "that's something only time will tell, but at least the fear is gone." (*EFE*, 8/2/08)

**February 8:** Ricardo González Alfonso, was transferred on January 27 from the hospital wing of the military prison in Combinado del Este - to which he was readmitted in September 2007 - back to the prison cell where he has been serving his 20-year sentence since the "black spring" of March 2003. He is suffering from high blood pressure, allergies, migraine, chronic bronchitis and circulation and digestive disorders. Since 23 January he has only been eating food brought to him by his family. (*RWB Press Release*, 8/2/08)

**February 8:** More open debate is flourishing on the Internet where bloggers like Yoani Sanchez, who is not part of the island's so-called dissident movement, walk a fine line between criticism and political opposition. "Cyberspace hasn't been fully regulated here yet. It's in a legal limbo," said Sanchez, 32, who began blogging in April. "I think that's why I am still here because there is no clear illegality in writing on the Internet." Sanchez's site attracted 800,000 hits in January, most from outside Cuba. Inside Cuba, Internet access is increasing, but it remains an object of suspicion. Cuba's communications minister, Ramiro Valdes, a veteran comandante of the revolution, recently told an international conference that the Internet was "the wild colt of new technologies," adding that it "can and must be controlled." Only trusted government employees, academics and researchers may have personal Internet accounts, which are provided by government servers. Ordinary Cubans are allowed access to e-mail at local post offices. They can view government approved Web sites through an official Cuban "Intranet" that blocks pornography and anti-Castro web sites. Sanchez sticks to the rules. She never uses the free Internet access offered at the US diplomatic mission in Havana. Nor does she use improvised Internet setups that some Cubans have installed illegally at

home. "I can't do that. I want to explore the small cracks in the wall to see what is permissible," she says. (*St. Petersburg Times*, 8/2/08)

**February 9:** Interim president Raul Castro has officially convened the National Assembly for a February 24 meeting, when a new new Legislature will be settled. Under a decree published in official newspapers, Raul Castro, 76, summoned the 614 deputies -- including himself and his brother Fidel Castro, 81 -- selected in an uncontested January 20 vote, to the late February gathering to choose the Council of State. Its leader is Cuba's president. Fidel Castro, Cuba's leader since 1959, has not appeared in public since taking ill 18 months ago. (*Prensa Latina, AFP*, 9/2/08)

**February 10:** According to the newspaper "Juventud Rebelde" internal political criticism has lacked "consistency" in Cuba, but the announced system of reforms will not stop, calling it "a revolution within the revolution." The newspaper criticized some headlines in the foreign media dealing with a recent public debate in the country, and the intense broadcasting of a video with university students criticizing Cuban politics and the economy with parliamentary leader Ricardo Alarcón. The article did not debate the critiques but rather took a position on the internal debate, arguing that: a) criticism has existed before in the country, but it has been insufficient; b) it has to be constructive, and c) its impact abroad will not provoke internal "reactions of containment" of reforms. (*La Jornada*, 1/2/08)

**February 11:** The Sixth International Congress on Higher Education "Universidad 2008" opened in Havana's Karl Marx Theater with the attendance of over 3,500 delegates and guests from 75 countries. According to the organizing committee of the event, to be run until February 15, about 2,500 foreign academics, professors and researchers will debate for five days on quality of higher education. Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Italy and Cuba are the most represented delegations. The agenda of the meeting that is taking place at Havana's Conference Center includes attention to the university of the 21st century, teaching improvement, social inclusion and membership in higher education. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** In response to the statement by popular singer Silvio Rodriguez that political transition is taking place in Cuba, the president of the Christian Liberation Movement, Oswaldo Paya, said changes on the island can only be considered to be taking place when there is true respect for human rights. "Cubans have learned through various media, but not through state-run sources, of the statements by singer and former congressman Silvio Rodriguez in which he speaks of transition as a fact," Paya said in a statement. He praised Rodriguez, who is an admirer of the Castro regime, for expressing his desire to see Cubans be allowed to stay in hotels and to enter and leave the country without having to request permission, but Paya stressed that many Cubans are serving unjust prison sentences and in inhumane conditions, only for demanding respect for basic rights. "We have the obligation to express solidarity with these Cubans and demand these peaceful political prisoners be released. That would be justice and moral consistency," Paya said. He added that while there may be different opinions about Cuba's past, about

the current situation and about the future, “What we must all agree upon is that we all have rights.” (*Catholic News Agency*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** An earth tremor measuring 3.8 on the Richter scale was felt in four Cuban eastern provinces. The National Center of Seismic Research (CENAI) in Santiago de Cuba reported that the tremor was felt in localities of that province, as well as in Granma, Holguin and Guantanamo provinces. The epicenter was located south of Baconao, on the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba city, at a depth of 14 kilometers. (*ACN*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** A human rights group reported that a Cuban university student was arrested over the weekend after being shown on video being critical of the government despite a flurry of international attention on the case. The BBC posted a video of students at the Computer Science University near Havana asking National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón tough questions about restrictions on travel and the use of dual currencies in Cuba. Human rights activists in Cuba said one of the students, Eliécer Avila, was taken from his home in rural Las Tunas province by state security agents on February 9. The Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, an umbrella organization for Cuban human rights groups, released the news after one of its activists, Esilia Carreoso, was contacted by Avila's mother. Efforts by The Miami Herald to reach Carreoso or the student's mother, Elsa Sicilia, were unsuccessful. (*The Miami Herald*, *EER*, *El Nuevo Herald*, 11/2/08)

**February 12:** Havana's Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Ortega confirmed the upcoming visit of the Vatican's Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone to the island at the invitation of the local Catholic Church and the Cuban government, reported the evening TV news. Cardinal Bertone will be in Cuba from February 20-26 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba, said Ortega, as reported by Granma daily. John Paul II was welcomed with great affection by the people and was well received by the country's authorities, Ortega recalled. “John Paul's visit to Cuba left a more lively presence of the Catholic Church in Cuban reality and closer relations between the church, society and the state,” the archbishop said. “I believe it is significant that Pope Benedict XVI sends his secretary of state to Cuba for the commemoration of a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in our country,” he noted. Cardinal Bertone will celebrate a mass at the Cathedral Plaza in Havana on February 21. He will also travel to the city of Santa Clara, to Santiago de Cuba to visit the Santuario del Cobre (Shrine of our Lady of Charity) and the province of Guantanamo, Ortega said. (*ACN*, 12/2/08)

**February 12:** A Cuban student who appeared in a video grilling a top Cuban official is denying reports that he was arrested afterward, and maintains that his questions were aimed only at bettering socialism. In the video news agencies obtained and aired days ago, Eliécer Avila was seen grilling Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, about low wages and why Cubans are banned from tourist hotels and from traveling abroad. The student's questions came during a meeting between Alarcon and students at the University of Computer Science in Havana. In a new video, the Cuban government says it is responding to "manipulation" by the overseas press and "media

terrorism." In the new tape, Avila says his questions were meant to improve socialism. When asked by an interviewer about reports that he was arrested over the weekend, Avila acknowledges that while his absence from the university might have seemed mysterious to some, "At no point was it an arrest. My family is completely calm. There is no problem." Avila says the foreign media twisted his words out of context. The new video follows an article in Cuba's state-run newspaper warning that if the media outside Cuba is attempting to make Cubans criticize themselves in public, they will not succeed. The new video, not the previous one, was aired in national TV. [[Videos publicados por la prensa oficial cubana](#)] (*CNN, BBC Mundo Latino, EFE, 12/2/08*)

**February 12:** The concerns expressed by students of the University of Computer Science (UCI), during a meeting with the president of the National Assembly, were described as "normal" by César Lage Codorniú, president of the University Student Federation (FEU) at UCI. In a video published by Granma, Lage Codorniú, the son of Vice President Carlos Lage, said the videotape of the entire meeting with Alarcón at the UCI was placed on the university's Intranet and was fully accessible to all students. Several versions of this video were distributed by news agencies based in Havana, including BBC Mundo. The criticism voiced by the students was similar to questions raised last year in spontaneous debates in Cuba conducted by email and on several blogs and web sites, and in public discussions of the country's most pressing problems, which were convoked by acting president Raúl Castro. (*IPS, 12/2/08*)

**February 13:** The mother of Cuban neurosurgeon Hilda Molina asked Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of state of the Vatican, to intercede with Havana so that doctor Molina may travel to Buenos Aires, where her son and grandchildren live. Hilda Molina, who broke with the government long ago, has requested in vain for 14 years that Havana allow her to visit her son and grandchildren in Argentina. (*EER, 13/2/08*)

**February 14:** Writers, artists and academics from 31 countries are expected to attend the 2008 International Book Fair, starting in Havana. About 145 exhibitors, 90 of them from publishing houses like Mexican "Ediciones B," Australian "Ocean Press" and German "Junge Welt" will take part in the expo, to be extended to another 40 Cuban cities. The main venue is Havana's San Carlos de la Cabana Fortress and the guest of honor is Galicia, Spain. Over eight million copies, nearly 1,300 titles and proposals from foreign publishing houses will be on sale throughout the island, including the mountain range zones in the eastern provinces. The exhibition's agenda includes book launchings, round tables, talks, magisterial lectures and colloquiums dedicated to Cuban writers Graziella Pogolotti and Anton Arrufat. (*Prensa Latina, 14/2/08*)

**February 14:** More than a year after the outbreak of the so-called "e-mail war", the debate on cultural policy has not died down in Cuba. And although the issue is not addressed in the national media, the discussion continues, and is spreading to embrace other aspects of life in this socialist island nation. Lectures, book launches, and the airing of works previously censored by national television have been occurring in recent months, less frequently and with a weaker public impact than many people would like, but systematically enough so that the call to dialogue is not forgotten. "What's happening

shows how much we still need opportunities and spaces for this debate," psychologist Norma Guillard told the press, following a talk on the portrayal of lesbians and gays by Richard Dyer, a professor of film studies at King's College, University of London. Organised by the Criterios Theoretical-Cultural Centre, with the support of the International School of Film and Television in San Antonio de los Baños, the goal of the meeting was to promote theoretical reflection from the standpoint of culture on issues of sexual diversity and human rights, which are being raised in present-day Cuban society. A second lecture by Dyer on the portrayal of race also promises an intense debate on the problem. While racial issues have been studied and analysed by a number of academics and intellectuals in Cuba, their conclusions have largely been filed away in dusty corners and have barely appeared in the national press or wider forums. (*IPS*, 14/2/08)

**February 14:** With Raúl Castro, first vice president of the Council of State and Ministers, the 17th International Book Fair was officially opened, to continue through next February 24 in the San Carlos de la Cabaña Fortress in Havana. In a statement to the press, Vice President Raúl Castro, also minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, praised the originality of the pavilion presented by Galicia, the guest of honor at the literary event. In a possible hint of a busy future, Raul Castro said his official duties leave him little time to read, and that he will likely die well short of completing his ideal reading list. "I've got little time to read books. I'll die with hundreds of books I've got waiting there for me to read some day (...) but for now, lots of (official) papers" to handle, Raul said on opening the International Book Fair in Havana. Suggesting that he might continue in his busy capacity as Cuba's top leader for some time to come, Raul repeated that he would die with many books left unread. "There they are waiting. Sometimes I read two at a time," he said. (*Granma International*, *AFP*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** A study by the Cuban Institute of Legal Medicine, based on 246 cases opened in 2001 involving complaints of sexual abuse of children and teenagers under the age of 16, found that over half of the victims were between the ages of 11 and 15 and that 75 percent were girls. The head of the Interior Ministry's office on minors, Colonel Enrique Pérez, told the press in late January that these cases represent less than five percent of all reported crimes. "The main objective is to obtain tape recorded proof that meets the requisites for being presented as evidence in court," said Niurka Ronda, director of the governmental Centre for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, which opened in February 2005 in Havana and is the only one of its kind in Cuba. The Centre dealt with just over 100 cases in 2007, most of which were referred to it by the police, who received the complaints, although some victims came directly to the Centre itself. "These incidents are reported more frequently now than they used to be. I think that's because there is a greater openness to information about and understanding of these issues. Nevertheless, she said, few people know about the Centre for the Protection of Children and Adolescents or are aware of where to turn in such cases or of how to detect incidents of child abuse. Ronda said most of the cases involve molestation without rape, and that very few cases of severe abuse like rape are reported. (*IPS*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** Almost 4,000 participants in the Sixth International Congress "Universidad 2008" successfully wind up five days of sessions in Cuba, in which they advocated for

integrating higher education and societies. Before concluding the forum at the Havana's International Conference Center, delegates from 50 countries expect to analyze ways to internationalize that kind of education in the region. Also on the list is to tackle the function of new information technologies in training human resources and its incidence in the cooperation among universities and nations. In a panel of education ministers, that of Venezuela Higher Education Luis Acuna called to foster students' training to defend their peoples' interests. "It is necessary for universities to support revolutions in the area," stated Acuna, alluding to the processes of changes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** In a move that human-rights activists condemned as "forced exile," four Cuban dissidents jailed since a harsh crackdown five years ago will be freed and sent to Spain with their families. Another three prisoners will be freed soon, the Spanish government announced. The dissidents were arrested in a political crackdown ordered by Fidel Castro in March 2003 that put 75 of his opponents in prison with sentences of up to 28 years. Sixteen had already been freed on health grounds. One of them, economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, said the new releases were a step in the right direction by acting President Raul Castro. "This is a rational step by the Cuban government and by the reformist sectors within that want change," Espinosa Chepe said. "It reflects a climate of change and will benefit that climate of change," he said. Another dissident, Manuel Cuesta Morua, said the government of Raul Castro was responding to requests by the international community for improved respect for human rights in Cuba. But, the move was decried by hard-line members of the Cuban opposition, who cast it as a cynical ploy to boost Spain's socialist government, which faces a general election next month. "This is not what the opposition needs," said Martha Beatriz Roque, one of the original 75. "They are using the political prisoners for their own political gain (...) The position the Spanish government has taken on this makes me nauseous." The four to be released were identified as Pedro Pablo Alvarez Ramos, serving a 25-year sentence; Omar Pernet, serving 25 years; José Gabriel Ramón Castillo, sentenced to 20 years; and Alejandro González Raga, serving 14 years. They were expected to leave Havana on a flight to Madrid, Elizardo Sánchez, head of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said from Havana. The ensuing group of three to be released was not identified. (*Reuters, The Miami Herald*, 15,16/2/08)

**February 19:** Fidel Castro stepped down as the president of Cuba after a long illness, according to Granma, the official publication of the Cuban Communist Party. Just days before the National Assembly is to meet to select a new head of state, Mr. Castro resigned permanently in a letter to the nation and signaled his willingness to let a younger generation assume power. He said his failing health made it impossible to return as president. "I will not aspire to neither will I accept — I repeat I will not aspire to neither will I accept — the position of President of the Council of State and Commander in chief," he wrote. In the letter, he expressed confidence that the country would be in good hands with a government composed of elements of "the old guard" and "others who were very young when the first stage of the revolution began." Mr. Castro asserted he declined to step down earlier to avoid dealing a blow to the Cuba government before "the people" were ready for a traumatic change "in the middle of the battle" with the United States

over control of the country's future. "To prepare the people for my absence, psychologically and politically, was my first obligation after so many years of struggle," he said. [[Message from the Commander in Chief](#)] (*The New York Times, AP, Reuters, Granma*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** In a press release issued in response to the news that Fidel Castro has stepped down as president of Cuba, the leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, Oswaldo Paya Sardinias, said the Cuban dictator's retirement should mark the beginning of an era of freedom and reconciliation in the country. Paya said the news "undoubtedly is of importance both historically and for the lives of Cubans both inside and outside of Cuba," because "one man's almost five decades of power has ended, and we have always said the successor of Fidel Castro should be the sovereign people." The leader of the Christian Liberation Movement is calling on Cuba's National Assembly to "immediately work to transform the laws so that citizens may enjoy freedom of expression and of association, to transform election laws, hold free elections, free peaceful political prisoners so that, in order and in peace, in an atmosphere of reconciliation, the Cuban nation can begin a new phase in its life." [[Declaración del Movimiento Cristiano Liberación](#)] (*Catholic News Agency*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** The main leaders of Cuba's internal dissidents reacted between apathy and hope to the possibility of change after Fidel Castro's announcement that he will neither aspire to nor accept "the position of president of the Council of State and Commander in Chief." "I think he's done the most sensible thing (...) but in any event in the year and a half without Fidel there has been no change, and there will be no change now either," said Vladimiro Roca, spokesman of the All United movement. Roca did not give much importance to the fact that Castro preserves the post of first secretary of the Communist Party. "The Party stopped being an entity of power long ago. Here the power was Fidel Castro, himself, with all the titles (...) it was Fidel and his will," he said. Social democrat Manuel Cuesta said that, "Cuba will begin to normalize as a country after this decision that I call brave on the part of the Cuban ex-president, of looking at reality and realizing that Cuba needs a different course and that Cuba has changed," he said. "The most vulnerable part of his persona as a politician is precisely his continued defense of a totalitarian model that is the main cause of the hardships, the misery and the unhappiness of the Cuban people," said Elizardo Sanchez, a human rights advocate and critic of the Castro regime. (*AFP, CNN, EER*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** The president of the National Assembly of the People's Power, Ricardo Alarcón, called on all Cubans to remain "united" to be consistent with the legacy of Fidel Castro, who resigned from the positions of president of the Council of State and of Commander in Chief. "We must commit ourselves with him (Castro) that united we will be capable, now and always, of keeping high the dignity of our homeland, of making it a more and more just, freer, more independent, more sovereign, and more beautiful homeland," said Alarcón. (*AFP, EER*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** In Cuba, half the women who die as a result of domestic abuse are murdered in the home, while the other 50 per cent die very close to the family circle,

according to University of Havana professor and one of the most renowned researchers on the topic in Cuba, Clotilde Proveyer. During the International Conference on Violence / Counterviolence in the Culture of Latin-American and Caribbean Women, which took place in Casa de las Américas, Proveyer indicated that 52 per cent of women's deaths as a result of domestic abuse happened at home. (*IPS*, 19/2/08).

**February 20:** The main topic of discussion at the upcoming 9th Congress of the Cuban Federation of High School Students (FEEM), will be the continuity of the Revolution, FEEM leader Patricia Flechilla announced. "This is our responsibility today. Not only to preserve what we have been given to, but to improve and move it forward," Flechilla told the press. According to the student leader, the congress will be held from March 8 and 9 at the Havana International Conference Center, with 750 delegates from all over the country and an important number of guests attending. "Other subjects related to FEEM's organic functioning and its role in the defense of the nation." "We will cover all forms of healthy, cultural and useful recreation; cultural and sports movements in secondary education; work of information and international relations," she added. "It will not be a formal meeting but a space from the school to the rest of society in search of solutions," she commented. "We are closing an important meeting and rather than concluding we are beginning a new period of work in organization, expressed in daily tasks such as studies," she emphasized. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** The resignation of Fidel Castro as Cuba's supreme leader means that changes in the socialist economy he guarded for nearly 50 years are inevitable — but experts say no one should expect too much, too soon. "We need time and there is time for transforming the economy, but it must be based on addressing first distortions such as pricing policy and sectors that directly impact the population such as agriculture," Cuban economist Juan Triana recently told a class of university students. Another Cuban economist, who requested anonymity, said Raul Castro would have to fight both Fidel Castro and entrenched bureaucratic interests who oppose change. "I expect we will see some new measures in the coming months to improve our lives a bit, but they will be populist more than structural in nature," he said. The government under Raul Castro has raised the prices it pays for some farm products and is expected to make more land grants to small private farmers and cooperatives. The agriculture, sugar and fishing ministries may be merged and minor changes made to the state food collection and distribution system. "Agriculture is decapitalized and needs vast amounts of resources, foreign capital and market mechanisms to make any significant progress," the economist said. (*Reuters*, 20/2/08)

**February 21:** An outspoken Catholic priest whose church in Cuba was recently raided by state security agents said in Miami that "something very, very profound" is happening in Cuba and that Fidel Castro's resignation as president this week may spur people to demand wider freedoms -- whether the Cuban regime wants to loosen control or not. Even if the post-Fidel Castro government does not allow more liberty, the Reverend José Conrado Rodríguez said, Cuban civilians and church leaders likely will push for "spaces" in which to act more freely. Rodríguez's remarks during the first day of a two-day conference on Cuba at Florida International University provided the first reaction by a

prominent member of the Cuban Catholic Church about Cuba's new political situation. "Evidently, a new time is beginning," Rodríguez said, "but only if we want it to be so, only if we decide it to be so, that this time be truly new and truly different." He added: "The church has not been given space, and the people have not been given space, but the church is conquering space and the people are conquering space. It is not a question of whether they want to give it to us or not. We are going to take it anyway. I think the hour has arrived and we can all unite in that common effort." (*The Miami Herald*, 22/2/08)

**February 22:** As provisional president, Raul Castro has raised expectations for tiny pockets of private initiative. With the resignation of Fidel Castro, Cubans are hoping for an even greater loosening of the economy. The easiest such reform might be to allow more people to work for themselves. But to understand the economic issues facing Raul, who will likely be named president, one has to consider the degree to which Cuba controls private enterprise with licensing, taxes and enforcement, not to mention an onerous approval process. To be self-employed in Cuba means a lot of hard work and patience. "There are good months and bad," said Gonzalez, 54, pulling a pair of pliers from his battered worktable and straightening a silver ring. "It's worth it. Not working, that's not worth it." They are tutors, tire repairmen, taxi drivers and dozens of other professionals who are licensed by the Labor Ministry and forced to pay stiff taxes -- \$19.20 per month -- slightly more than an average state salary. Owners of small family restaurants, musicians and artists who earn money abroad, and small farmers who sell excess produce above government quotas are also among those lawfully allowed to earn their own money. Far more Cubans work without approval in the underground economy in a country where most people need a second income to make ends meet. (*AP*, 22/2/08)

**February 22:** The Lawton Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba demanded the immediate release of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, a Catholic pro-life leader who attracted the ire of the Cuban government after publicly protesting against abortion and the death penalty, which are both legal in the country. In its statement, the Lawton foundation—founded by Biscet himself—demands "the release of Biscet and all Cuban political prisoners, so that this peaceful human rights activist may continue his struggle for justice in Cuba." "We urgently ask all men and women of good will, the international press, human rights organizations, world health organizations and dignitaries of democratic nations to denounce before the Cuban government the unjust incarceration, criminal accusations, and imminent trial of this Cuban physician whose only crime is to honor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in his own country," the organization said. The demand coincides with the visit of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone to Cuba, commemorating the 10th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to the island. (*CNA*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** Chile will be the guest of honor at the next International Book Fair in Cuba. The 2008 Book Fair was closed after 10 days of successful activity. Organizers closed the event officially but the installations of the Morro Cabana Park in Havana will still be open until February 24. The International Book Fair will be extended to 43 cities and towns of Cuba, including mountainous zones until March 9 in Santiago de Cuba. A total of 900,000 books were sold, said the Organizing Committee. The 10th day program included the presentation of books by Mexican Raquel Tibot, Soledad Acosta de Samper,

and famous writer Elena Poniatowska. There was a special moment dedicated to recently deceased Cuban writer Lisandro Otero, 2002 National Literature Award winner, with a re-edition of his book "Temporada de Angeles". The International Book Fair of Madrid donated books by Miguel de Cervantes, Maria Teresa de Leon and others to the National Library of Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** For the seventh time new Cuban filmmakers will be able to see their works on the big screen of Havana's movie theaters during the festival to take place this year from February 26 to March 2. Over a hundred short movies by independent filmmakers will be exhibited at the Charles Chaplin movie theater, the usual venue of the festival in the Vedado district. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/2/08)

**February 24:** Raúl Castro formally became Cuba's president, ending his older brother's 49-year rule, but he tempered any hopes for change by declaring that Fidel Castro will remain the "commander in chief" and will be consulted on important state matters. The Cuban National Assembly skipped over several younger candidates for the No. 2 spot and named orthodox Communist Party member Jose Ramon Machado, 77, as the first vice president. Machado, a physician who fought with Castro's guerrillas and treated their wounded, has served in the Communist Party hierarchy for decades and is known to be a close ally of Raul Castro. He was responsible in recent years for infusing revolutionary principles into the education system. In his first speech as president, Raúl Castro said, "Fidel is irreplaceable and the people shall continue his work when he is no longer physically with us." The fact that Fidel Castro will retain some influence over the government, and the decision to name an original member of the revolution as the first vice president and next in line to become president, has some thinking that nothing substantial has changed in Cuba. Others appointed to the 31-member Council of State, which serves as an executive body and adopts laws between assembly sessions, included several renowned "Raulistas" -- friends and cohorts of the longtime defense minister. [[Key Address by Raul Castro to the NA](#) and [Members of the Council of State](#)] (*USA Today Los Angeles Times*, 25/2/08)

**February 24:** The 76-year-old Raúl Castro announced that the creation of the new Council of Ministers would be decided after a careful analysis of the current system. "Every decision and resolution that is adopted begins to age the very next day". "Everything must be renewed and renovated, and at every moment, it is necessary to do what that moment requires," Jaime Crombet, who was confirmed in his post as vice president of the National Assembly, told the press. For his part, Eliades Acosta, head of the cultural department of the Communist Party Central Committee, said that since Marxists believe that the economic base determines the superstructure, the top priority of the new government must be the economy. "Vigorous action will be taken. What the people expect from the revolution is precisely that: that it will solve a series of pending problems," he told the press. Although he did not specify the changes that lie ahead, President Raúl Castro said the dual currency system is being studied. But, he warned, any decision to that respect must avoid "traumatic effects and incongruencies" and must take into account the current wage system, retail prices, free services and subsidised products

and

services.

(IPS,

25/2/08)

**February 24:** Vladimiro Roca, a Cuban economist who was imprisoned for his opposition to the Castro regime, said he was not surprised by the National Assembly selections to rule the country. "They raised expectations, people believed them, and now they did this," Roca said from his home in Havana. One of Cuba's most respected dissidents, Oswaldo Paya, called the election "tragicomic" and insisted that the changes "were not the choice of the people." Although sweeping reforms are unlikely, Raul Castro has talked about the need for "structural change" to combat widespread corruption and theft from state enterprises. Oscar Espinosa, a Cuban economist who was part of a group of 75 dissidents jailed during a 2003 roundup, said all the talk of economic changes had raised the expectations of Cubans to a level he had never seen before. "People are forced to rob, to live through the black market and to cheat and steal. It's a terrible situation. We've lost our values," said Espinosa, who is on a conditional medical release from prison after serving two years. Espinosa said many of the changes Cubans want are simple ones, such as the ability to buy a cellphone or stay in a hotel now reserved for tourists. He said it's nearly impossible now to buy a car or move into a new home. Cubans hope those types of changes lead to more business opportunities. "If (Raúl Castro) doesn't make these changes, the possibility of social instability is quite probable," he said. (*USA Today*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** In a letter to Cuban journalist Katiuska Blanco, Fidel Castro wrote that in the election for members to the Council of State he did not vote against any candidate, but for all the names in the ballot. This way "defense is hermetically sealed against the empire's plans," he added. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** The bishops of Cuba have given President Raúl Castro Ruz their "vote of confidence," and urged the new leader to take the "transcendent measures" necessary to respond to the tensions and anxieties of the nation's populace. The prelates, meeting in general assembly, published the statement one day after Raúl Castro was elected the country's new leader, replacing his brother Fidel Castro. The bishops stated, "At this time our prayer goes up to the Lord and to Our Lady of Charity, our Mother, patroness of Cuba, so that" the president and Parliament "would have the light of the Almighty to carry out with determination those transcendent measures that we know must be gradual, but which can satisfy the longings and worries expressed by Cubans." "As we did at Christmas," continued the statement, "we want to renew our vote of confidence, and with Christian hope, formulate these desires to the new President Raúl Castro Ruz, (...) having always before our eyes the common good of the Cuban people whom we serve, and asking our Lord for the gift of peace for our nation." [[Mensaje de los Obispos](#)] (*Zenit*, 25/2/08)

**February 26:** The president of Cuba's National Assembly Ricardo Alarcon assured that his country relies on the people's unity with their leaders, to undertake together steps aimed at improving the Cuban society. In an exclusive interview with TeleSUR in Havana, Alarcon called the recent elections "a moment of much historic significance" in which Raul Castro emerged president of the Council of State. According to Alarcon, the

most important outcome "is a message of very solid unity among all revolutionaries and patriots, among several generations." He noted that the existing combination of generations secures the continuity of the Revolution, and what is very important, he said, its founder, the Commander in Chief (Fidel Castro), is still present. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** Entitled "Social indiscipline is the cancer of our society," Granma newspaper slammed this acute problem, and exhorted all Cubans to face it, noting that "our social model essentially requires discipline and order." The article states as unacceptable attacks on public transportation and the destruction of collective telephones and garbage containers. Also included are car races in the city's main streets at daybreak endangering the life of passers-by, loud music in the evening, lack of good manners or a bad response in a store, coffee shop or hospital. Those expressions are also playing with an enemy trying to prove that this is an unfeasible model. The offering of this homeland affects all Cubans, and this is not only a police problem, the daily reports. If a society has authority, not only to fight indiscipline, but also to impede it, this is ours, and is the only thing that will let institutions and organizations function. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/08)

**February 27:** Cuban President Raul Castro is taking over leadership of a country whose government believes its citizens are not working hard enough. The state-run newspaper recently ran an article headlined "Work: Option or necessity?" The writer pointed out that, judging by the number of people in the streets during the day, many Cubans don't seem to be on the job. They have few motivations to buckle down: Salaries average about \$15 per month on the island, and Cubans get monthly food rations even if they don't work. "There is a strong desire to protect and to gradually increase the incomes and savings of the population, particularly of those least favored," said Raul Castro, 76. The black market is so widespread that Cubans have coined a special term for breaking the law to make ends meet: "resolver" -- literally, "to resolve." The new president, who took the reins of power Sunday from his ailing brother, Fidel, 81, has said the country must become more productive. "The country's priority will be to meet the basic needs of the population, both material and spiritual, based on the sustained strengthening of the national economy and its productive basis without which, I'll say it again, development would be impossible," Raul Castro said in a speech on February 24. With a new president steering the island nation for the first time in 49 years, some Cubans have allowed their expectations to rise. "I think those expectations are really very large indeed and it'll be the Achilles heel, potentially, of this new government if it doesn't attack them with some vigor," said Hal Klepak, a professor of history and warfare studies at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario. (*CNN*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** For two days Cubans swamped currency exchange offices in a brief but intense speculative frenzy fueled by rumors that new President Raul Castro would end the island's reviled dual currency system. Hoping to make a quick profit, many Cubans traded the country's valuable "convertible pesos" -- a currency primarily used by tourists, foreign-owned businesses, the elite and black-market vendors -- for the weak Cuban national peso, which is used for the salaries and pensions of nearly all Cubans. The speculators believed that Castro, who hinted about gradually changing the dual money

system after being named president, would double the value of the weak national peso or abolish the stronger convertible peso. The money swapping became so intense that some exchange offices ran out of national pesos, according to Cubans who stood in line at the offices and to other observers. Faced with what amounted to a small-scale run on its banks, the government aired a report on the morning news program "Buenos Dias" emphasizing that any changes to the money system would be gradual. As word of the report spread, the speculation seemed to end. (*The Washington Post*, 26/2/08)

**February 27:** The Christian Liberation Movement, led by Oswaldo Paya, has announced the publication of the first edition of "Liberación," an independent Christian magazine that will now be the official voice of the movement. The first edition, published electronically, explains that the new magazine takes up the mantle left by a previous Catholic publication, "Pueblo de Dios," which "was created 20 years ago at the Parish of the Hill, as an initiative of a group of lay Christians who wanted to proclaim liberty and the rights of all Cubans and of all human beings, who 'have the right to have rights because they are children of God'." "Pueblo de Dios" was the "first free publication to proclaim the great and good news of the liberation of Cubans, amidst the oppression that our people suffer." "That humble but radical publication," the new magazine Liberation noted, "was the voice of the Christian Club of Cuban Thought, a group that met to think and debate and was predecessor to the Christian Liberation Movement." "Pueblo de Dios" ceased publication and the Christian Club was disbanded, but some of its members founded the Christian Liberation Movement in September of 1988. "Today," the magazine stated, "the periodical 'Liberación' is born, on the 155th anniversary of the passing to eternal life of Father Felix Varela," the precursor of Cuban independence whose cause for beatification is open. Liberation exists "for the people and as the people's voice, to serve with the Truth, inviting all to seek it with a sincere heart. Rather than define it, we want to embrace the Truth and encourage everyone to do so," the magazine's editors said. (*CNA*, 27/2/08)

**February 28:** The executive secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Cuba, Father Jose Felix Perez, said the recently concluded visit by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone to Cuba has opened more room for the Church to carry out her mission. The presence of Cardinal Bertone led to "a more fluid exchange with authorities, in which the concerns of the Church could be discussed with more trust and realism," Father Perez said. The visit by Cardinal Bertone "opens more room than already existed, as occurred with the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998," he continued. Asked by reporters if there would be significant changes in relations between the local Church and the government, Father Felix underscored that "it's only been a short time since the visit, and so anything new I think will be seen in the coming days or weeks." He also said the visit was important because of the message the cardinal conveyed on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI, which was one of encouragement and support. (*Catholic News Agency*, 29/2/08)

**February 29:** Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, called the signing of human rights treaties by Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque, "positive news because the signing of these pacts is an old demand from inside Cuba and from the international community." "I hope it honors the

letter and spirit of the law of these pacts, but I am not sure it will," Sanchez said of Cuba's government. (AP, Reuters, 29/2/08)

**February 29:** A legend in the Cuban cultural world and president of the Cuban Friendship Institute (ICAP), Sergio Corrieri, died in Havana. Born in Havana on March 2, 1938, Corrieri leaves behind a legacy in the performing arts. Attracted to acting, he enrolled at the University Theater and debuted at sixteen in the play "El nieto de Dios", by Joracy Camargo of Brazil. Corrieri was a founder of the Teatro Estudio group along with Raquel and Vicente Revuelta . In his stage career, he played many diverse roles in plays by Miller, Chejov, Lope de Vega, Albee, Brecht, Schnitzler, Dragun and Maiakovski. He found the Escambray Theater Group in 1968, along with his mother Gilda Hernandez, a popular actress of her time. He was also identified by moviegoers for his role as hero Alberto Delgado in "El Hombre de Maisinicu" by Manolo Perez. In 1985, he was named vice president of the Cuban Radio and Television Institute (ICRT). In 1987, he became the head of the Cultural Office of the Communist Party Central Committee and since 1990, had been the president of the Cuban Friendship Institute (ICAC). He accepted to head the organizing committee for the Seventh Conference of the Association of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), an effort highly appreciated by artists and intellectuals who always saw him as an example. (Granma, 1/3/08)

**February 29:** Fidel Castro said in an article published in the Cuban official media that it was his idea to promote two three-star generals to the country's top leadership under his younger brother and successor as president, Raul Castro. They were his first comments since the younger Castro became Cuba's new president and appeared to be aimed at dismissing reports of a rift between the brothers or a militarization of the government under Raul Castro. Castro said his brother and successor consulted him on naming hard-line Communist Party ideologue Jose Ramon Machado Ventura as deputy leader as well as other appointments to the governing Council of State. "It was also my decision to ask the nominating committee to include Leopoldo Cintra Frias and Alvaro Lopez Miera on the list for the Council of State," Fidel Castro said. Lopez Miera, 64, is army chief of staff and Cintra Frias, 66, is commander of Cuba's Western Army. "The chess board pointed to these alternatives. This was not the fruit of Raul's supposed militaristic tendencies, nor was it about generations or parties fighting with bared teeth over power," Castro wrote. Castro's critics, mainly among the Cuban exile community in the United States, see the change of leaders in Cuba as an undemocratic charade, with the ailing Fidel Castro still pulling the strings from behind the scenes. "For many, our country was a boiler full of steam and about to explode," Castro wrote, adding that their "illusions" have come undone. "You can now hear the howls of wolves trapped by their tails," he wrote. "They are so rabid over the election of Machadito as first vice president." [[Espero no tener que avergonzarme](#)] (Reuters, 29/2/08)



## ECONOMY

**February 1:** Cuban Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said that investments in transportation, water systems and electricity will be prioritized in 2008, as key areas for the accelerated growth of the nation's economy. Speaking at a government meeting in the eastern province of Granma, Rodriguez called for a better understanding of the investment strategy, crucial to assure the minimum resources required so that each province can carry out its development programs. He said these include areas such as food production, building materials, electric energy and water for the population and industries. Rodriguez said the effort to improve transportation includes greater passenger and freight capacity, repairing port access routes, refurbishing warehousing facilities and improving the related infrastructure in general. In addressing the special government plan to assist the eastern provinces, Rodriguez noted that the province of Granma will receive a special allocation of 9 million CUC (approximately 10 million US dollars). (*Granma*, 2/2/08)

**February 2:** Nickel, one of Cuba's most important economic sectors, consolidated its position as the island's main export in 2007, said the Minister of Basic Industry (MINBAS), Yadira Garcia, during a meeting with workers and executives of the sector in Moa, in the eastern province of Holguin. Garcia noted that these achievements were the result of the stability, adequate operation and productive management reached by the nickel industry on the island. The production of nickel in Cuba is concentrated in the factories Rene Ramos Latour, in Nicaro, and the Pedro Soto Alba and Ernesto Che Guevara, in Moa, both in Holguin province. In 2007, Cuban Cubaniquel business group, comprised of 19 productive and service companies, made the biggest contribution of its history to the national budget. (*ACN*, 2/2/08)

**February 3:** Improved urban transport; street repairs; and refurbishing hospitals, movie theaters and parks are some of the principal challenges for 2008 in the Cuban capital, said Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez during a tour of Havana. Rodriguez, accompanied by Juan Contino, president of the City of Havana provincial government, informed about efforts to clean up the city and repair popular recreation centers. In a visit to an electric generator set facility in the Havana municipality of Regla, the minister said the program to improve the national electricity system would continue in the current year. He also said a sizeable investment will be spent on upgrading power lines. The water pipe networks are another area to receive priority attention this year, said Rodriguez, who added that funds should especially be spent on infrastructure that helps increase production. (*ACN*, 4/2/08)

**February 4:** The Cuban Government updated its figures for foreign trade in goods and services in 2007, amending the increase in exports to 27 per cent, and the rise of imports to 6 per cent. According to the minister of foreign trade, Raúl de la Nuez, who quoted only percentages, not real values during the annual assembly of the Chamber of Commerce, exports increased three points more than the 24 per cent announced in Parliament last December by his colleague of the economy, José Luis Rodríguez. As for imports, de la Nuez announced a four point increase over Rodríguez's 2 %, which entails

higher expenditures. Official sources refused to specify absolute values for imports and exports in 2007 or 2008. (*EFE*, 4/2/08)

**February 5:** Cuba, formerly one of the most powerful sugar economies in the world, has the potential to boost its sugar output post-Castro but will require substantial investment, a senior sugar analyst said. "Cuba was an 8-million-tonne sugar producer and is now (producing roughly) 1.2-1.3 million tonnes a year," Tom McNeill, senior partner of Lausanne-based consultancy Kingsman SA, told a sugar conference. "With some modernisation and capital investment undertaken, the sugar and ethanol sectors (in Cuba) could do a lot better than that," he said. "It would require considerable investment from outside or an internal investment of funds." Carlos Murilo Barros de Mello, commercial director of Brazilian sugar and ethanol producer Cosan, said the Caribbean island had the potential to achieve strong sugar production yields. Kingsman SA and Al Khaleej Sugar were organisers of the Dubai 2008 sugar conference. (*Reuters*, 5/2/08)

**February 7:** After laying the groundwork, setting up the technical and human resource infrastructure and meeting with key players, Trinidad and Tobago's Trade Facilitation Office (TFO) in Havana, Cuba, is sewing solid contacts and initiating business interactions between local manufacturers and service providers. Cuban business entities are eager to trade with this country, said the Trade Ministry. Following on the heels of the annual Havana Fair, TFO Manager Tracey Savary and Assistant Manager Jude Carasquero are focussed on the office's mandate, which is to promote and facilitate trade between Trinidad and Tobago and Cuba. (*Newsday*, 7/2/08)

**February 8:** The Cuban-Spanish joint venture Alcoholes Finos de Caña S.A. (ALFICSA) will go all out this year to regain its international market, said manager Jose Aleman. The bi-national industry is located in the town of Covadonga, next to a sugar mill, in the south-central province of Cienfuegos. Aleman said the factory's goal is to produce ten million liters of alcohol in 2008 for export. If the goal is reached sales will be around US \$5.5 million and signify a major recovery for the factory. The plant had been inactive due to a lack of its main raw material, the syrup derived from processing sugarcane. Sugar mills in the provinces of Cienfuegos and Villa Clara will supply 80 percent of the 90,000 tons of syrup needed for the industrial process during the current season, said Aleman. (*Granma*, 8/2/08)

**February 10:** Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage visited the works of the National Highway in the section linking the provinces of Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba in the eastern tip of the island. According to *Juventud Rebelde* daily, the secretary of the Council of Ministers Executive Committee was informed that constructors are working on the first mile and a half of the 16.7 miles of the highway going from Cabanas to Songo-La Maya. The director of the Guantanamo Road Center, Manuel de Jesus Guilarte, explained the highway will take the southern route of the road and will have two lanes for circulation and a paved sidewalk. When this part of the project is concluded, the risks of land incommunication with Santiago de Cuba will disappear. This usually happens in the rainy season when the Guantanamo river overflows flooding the Cabana bridge in the existing road, said the official. Also, he added, the completion of the stretch to Santiago

reduces by four miles the part of the traditional road and gives greater comfort and security to the traffic. Lage also visited the Luis Raposo quarry and an asphalt plant where he assessed the execution of investments and the need to increase production of building materials demanded by the social works being done. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** The Cuban Tourism Minister, Manuel Marrero, announced a total recovery of the Spanish tourist market for 2008. Marrero said he defined Madrid as a key client for the Cuban tourism market in 2008. Marrero remembered that at the end of 2006, the flow of Spanish travellers to Cuba was affected by the buyout of Spanish enterprises Pullmantur and Iberojet by US companies, which immediately cut business with the Cuban Tourism Ministry. Such an action provoked a reduction of Spanish tourists by 70 percent, but now the action is being reverted, and we hope for a total recovery in 2008, said Marrero. Marrero attended the International Fair of Tourism FITUR-2008 in Madrid, where he stated that 2007 closed with two million 152 thousand tourists, of them 133,000 Spanish. On the Cuban tourism projects, he informed that in 2008, the work will prioritize investment, with the construction of new hotels and the remodelling of others; also, the opening of new establishments in Havana and the development of golf tourism, with a project to build up to 10 golf fields. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 14:** Brazil flew 50,000 doses of yellow fever vaccine into Paraguay and Peru promised 250,000 more doses next week, as the government said it was expanding a vaccination campaign against the first outbreak of the disease in 34 years. Five cases of yellow fever detected in a remote Paraguayan farm community have touched off unease in South America's second-poorest country and prompted public health officials to make international appeals for vaccine stocks. "We are making additional requests" with Taiwan and Cuba, said Paraguay's public health minister, Oscar Martinez. (*The New York Times*, 14/2/08)

**February 16:** Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage Davila announced fresh investments to enhance productivity of Cuba's nickel industry now in expansion. In touring the mining facilities in Moa, Holguin, Lage told Juventud Rebelde daily that investments at the staple domestic industry will help improve the staff living standards. He added that the investments will also help reduce the industry's environmental impact by reforesting the mining areas to recover the soil and forest, cut gas emissions and river contamination. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/2/08)

**February 17:** Mexico agreed to restructure \$400 million in Cuban debt and re-open credit lines with Havana after a six-year hiatus to boost bilateral trade amid improving diplomatic ties. Officials from Mexico's foreign trade bank Bancomext, who signed the deal in Havana, said the agreement would lift trade flows that fell to a historic low of \$200 million in 2007, less than half the levels of the 1990s. "With the signing of this agreement (...) a great step has been made to normalize financial and commercial ties between both countries," Bancomext said in a statement, without giving details of the restructuring plan. Traditionally close ties between Mexico and Cuba hit a low in 2004 when Mexico criticized Cuba's human rights record at the United Nations and former President Vicente Fox withdrew Mexico's ambassador to Havana. Mexican President

Felipe Calderon, a conservative who took office in December 2006, has vowed to move Mexico nearer to Latin America while keeping close ties with its key trading partner and Cuban arch-enemy, the United States. (*Reuters*, 17/2/08)

**February 17:** The China Central Television (CCTV) opened three channels in Cuba, marking the completion of a three-phase project over the past five years. Rolando Alfonso Borges, who heads the Ideological Department of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee, attended a ceremony to launch CCTV Channel 4, CCTV Channel 9 and CCTV-E, destined to tourist areas, diplomats, and education. Tian Jin, deputy director of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, and Chinese Ambassador Zhao Rongxian were also present at the gathering. Officials said Cuban TV programs are also making headway in China, with services already landing in 16 provinces. (*Xinhua*, 17/2/08)

**February 20:** Canadian firms doing business in Cuba could benefit if Raul Castro replaces his ailing 81-year-old brother, Fidel Castro, as president of the Communist country, experts say. After spending the past 19 months as acting president, 76-year-old Raul is widely expected to win Cuba's upcoming elections and is believed to be open to the idea of loosening state control of the Cuban economy. Experts say that could give a boost to Canadian businesses that have already enjoyed a privileged position in Cuba because the United States has banned trade with the Caribbean country. Shares of the Toronto-based miner jumped more than 6 per cent to close at \$15.50 on February 19 as part of a broader rally in commodity and metal shares on the Toronto Stock Exchange. High-flying executive board chair Ian Delaney, who has steered Sherritt for 18 years since rescuing the former Sherritt-Gordon Mines from near-bankruptcy, refused to comment on the presidency issue. "From an operating standpoint, it doesn't change any of our activities in Cuba," said Sherritt spokesperson Michael Minnes. Castro's brother taking the reins is just the "next logical step" in the transition of power expected since 2006, Minnes added. Saloman Partners analyst Ray Goldie said regime change could well open the door to competition from US companies. He noted, however, that Sherritt also stands to benefit if US borders are opened to Cuba. The miner currently ships the cobalt and nickel ore mined in Moa, Cuba, to a refinery in Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., by sending the cargo up the Atlantic Coast and then by rail from Montreal. Going up the Mississippi River would cost much less. (*Toronto Star*, 21/2/08)

**February 20:** Analyst Barry Allan of Research Capital Corp. said Fidel Castro's departure could be significant for Canadian companies. "There are some old resources kicking around in Cuba that have yet to be exploited," including gold, he said. "That may open the door again to Canadian junior miners (...) No one has been really gutsy enough to put their foot in that country." Mining companies, meanwhile, want to know how they'll be treated, namely "that it's not going to be radical," Allan said. (*Toronto Star*, 21/2/08)

**February 20:** Ghana's Vice President Alhaji Aliu Mahama voiced interest in enhancing trade and strengthen bilateral ties with Cuba. At a meeting with Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo, Mahama said Ghana could trade cocoa for Cuban cement, adding that his

country could learn a lot from its Cuban counterpart in education and health. Lazo voiced certainty that this visit will further strengthen the historic Cuba-Ghana relations and collaboration that started with Ghana's independence in 1957. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Fidel Castro's gradual departure from Cuban politics may help Petroleo Brasileiro SA, Sol Melia SA and Sherritt International Corp. widen their advantage over US competitors forced to await a more definitive change in the island nation's government. Petrobras, Spanish hotel operator Sol Melia and Canadian nickel-miner Sherritt already operate in the country. "The early bird gets the worm," said Jacobo Blanquer, who helps manage the equivalent of \$880 million at Nordkapp Inversiones SV in Madrid, including Sol Melia. "Sol Melia will be one of the companies that will benefit." Fidel Castro's resignation lifted shares of companies tied to Cuba. Sol Melia, the world's biggest resort operator, rose 65 cents, or 6.6 percent in Madrid on February 19 and was little changed today at 10.40 euros. Toronto-based Sherritt, also little changed today, rose 6.2 percent on February 19 on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Rio de Janeiro-based Petrobras rose for a second day on the New York Stock Exchange to its highest in more than seven years. (*Bloomberg*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Petrobras, Brazil's state-controlled oil company, said it will go ahead with studies for offshore oil exploration and the construction of a lubricant plant with Cuba's state-owned oil company. Castro's resignation won't alter plans, Petrobras Chief Executive Officer Jose Sergio Gabrielli said. Repsol YPF SA, Spain's largest oil company, is drilling for oil offshore and Toronto-based Sherritt began oil exploration in the country in 1992. (*Bloomberg*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** As the world's media reported Castro's retirement, Germany's business community was analyzing the situation. The Comandante's withdrawal was a "striking turning point," said commercial lawyer Frank Seifert, head of the German-Cuba Business Union, but it came as no surprise. "This step had been in preparation for a long time," he said. The transition from the Castro era to his likely successor, Raul Castro, was intended to be a smooth one. "The people are afraid that the little they have will be at risk if the change comes too quickly," Seifert said. Cubans are afraid they could lose out if the island opens up more. That fear is understandable given the powerful groups of exile Cubans in Florida waiting impatiently for the moment they can reclaim property of which they were dispossessed. "Politically, we don't expect a change, but we do expect an economic opening," said Peter Roesler of Germany's Ibero-America Club. There are indications that change may be in store. Raul Castro has called on Cubans to identify the weaknesses of the socialist system and to submit suggestions for improvement. Seifert, who has advised companies on investing in Cuba since 1995, said he foresees new opportunities for German and other foreign firms looking to do business with the island state. "Cuba is an investment country with massive pent-up demand," he said. "Cuba is the gate to the Caribbean. It has a magnificently educated population." (*Dw-world-de*, 21/2/08)

**February 25:** The Cohiba Cigar was the most sold Cuban cigar in 2007, sources from the tobacco sector announced. International corporation company Habanos S.A. vice

president Manuel Garcia said at a press conference that the Montecristo brand used to be the most sold Havana cigar, but last year, the Cohibas were the world's most sought-after. Such change took place after the launching of the Maduro Number 5 brand, which had a warm welcomed in the international market. Garcia highlighted the excellent sale progress achieved by Cuban Premium cigars at the opening of the 10th Habanos Festival in Havana. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** New Zealand Agriculture Minister Jim Anderton voiced the willingness of his government to promote agricultural cooperation with Cuba. Anderton, leader of the New Zealand Progressive Party, made the suggestion at a welcoming ceremony for Cuban Ambassador Jose Luis Robaina. The Cabinet Minister said New Zealand might exchange experiences and cooperate in farming, livestock raising and reforestation, areas in which New Zealand has reached high development levels. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/2/08)

**February 26:** The Cuban Tourism Office launched a promotional campaign in France with the objective of increasing the number of tourists who travel to the island from that European country. Colorful posters with the slogan "Viva Cuba" have been placed in subway and train stations throughout Paris with the goal of surpassing last year's number of French tourists —100,000— who visited Cuba. Carmen Casal, the representative of the Cuban Tourism Office in France, said the advertising campaign has caught the attention of people in the European country. The campaign has been led with the support of the SKAL Internacional tourism association, in the French capital. Representatives of different tourist organizations will join in the promotion of Cuban travel by emphasizing the island's nature, history and culture. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/08)

**February 27:** In Minsk, Belarus and Cuba signed an intergovernmental agreement on the supplies of 100 MAZ buses to Cuba. The document stipulates the terms of a Belarus bank loan to Cuba to finance the delivery. Cuba will produce necessary guarantees for the loan repayment. Cuba is one of the priorities of the Belarusian foreign policy in Latin America, Prime Minister of Belarus Sergei Sidorsky said at a meeting with Cuba's Minister of Government Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz. According to the Prime Minister, the opening of a credit line for Cuba to finance the deliveries of Belarusian buses will boost cooperation between the two countries. Industry Minister of Belarus Anatoly Rusetsky informed that Belarus will supply Cuba with six buses in the near future; the rest will be delivered within the next six months. The Cuban delegation is expected to visit the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ trademark) to get familiar with the production. "We are fully satisfied with today's meeting", Cabrisas said. "We believe Belarus and Cuba have a great potential for boosting cooperation. At the same time the Cuban industry does not have full information about Belarus' economic achievements. In this respect Cuba offers to establish a permanent exchange of information about the economic development of the two countries". The two sides also considered deliveries of Belarusian farm machines and cars to Cuba. (*Oreanda News*, 27/2/08)

**February 28:** Cuban Deputy Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC), Orlando Requejo Gual, arrived in Paramaribo, the Surinamese capital, heading the Cuban delegation to the 3rd Cuba-Suriname Joint Commission that takes

place there for two days. Both delegations will discuss topics related to bilateral cooperation, particularly in the health sector, which began in that South American nation with the implementation of the Cuba-led Integral Program in April 2007. In addition, they will analyze other fields in which cooperation is possible such as agriculture, sports, culture, academic exchange, and others. (ACN, 29/2/08)

**February 29:** The man-made causeway which connects mainland Cuba with several keys north of the Ciego de Avila province, is being repaired, as part of a project to improve the country's roads. Chief Investor Roberto Ramirez told the local press that the works, valued at 23 million pesos, would be completed in five years. He pointed out that the project includes repairing all 14 bridges, completing the promenades, building seven lookouts and pouring rocks on either side of the road. Other works include strengthening the foundations and structures of the causeway, which has been deteriorated by very aggressive natural agents. Ciego de Avila province is 267 miles east of Havana. The 26,550-yard Cayo Coco-Turiguano causeway is the longest road in the province and the first of its kind ever built in Cuba 20 years ago. Twelve hotels and villas, totaling more than 3,600 rooms, operate on Cayo Coco and Cayo Guillermo, in Jardines del Rey. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/2/08)

**February 29:** The 10th International Havana Cigar Festival winds up in Havana, after a week of discussion, talks, trade fairs and visits to tobacco factories and plantations. Over 1,500 participants from 75 nations were satisfied with the program, and able to have a first-hand glance at the quality of Cuban tobacco. The festival will end with a banquet at Havana's PABEXPO exhibition center where the traditional cigar auction and the selection of the Havana Cigar Man of the Year will be held. The Havana Cigar Festival is regarded as the most important cigar event in the world. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/2/08)



## EXILE COMMUNITY

**February 7:** The first large-scale US exhibition of works by the most celebrated Cuban artist of the 20th century, surrealist Wifredo Lam, is an art event of exceptional significance to South Florida. The show, which opens at Miami Art Museum, is a milestone. An attempt by the artist's family a decade ago to bring an exhibit to a Miami museum failed because of perceptions that Lam had supported the Cuban Revolution. But now half the works displayed at MAM are on loan from Miami collectors, some of them Cuban Americans. Lam, a Chinese-AfroCuban who settled in Paris, where he became Picasso's friend and contemporary, had a life of almost cinematic drama: a long, productive interlude in Spain, Italy and France; visa denials from the United States when he tried to leave war-torn Europe; acclaim as an icon who elevated African and Cuban culture to the world stage. "He was all that and more," said Eskil Lam, 44, the painter's oldest son, who is in Miami for the show's opening. (*The Miami Herald*, 7/2/08)

**February 10:** Miami has changed and the sometimes violent scenes of Cuban exile passion appear to be in the past. That could spell trouble for President George W. Bush's

Republican Party in November's general election, opponents and analysts say. As Miami's hardline anti-communist tendencies start to fade, so may the party's once-unassailable grip on congressional seats in south Florida. "There's a generational shift going on," said Miami-Dade Democratic Party Chairman Joe Garcia, who sees a clear trend toward moderation as younger voters and more recent arrivals from Cuba dilute the Cuban American community. Florida has been hardest hit by the current US housing slump. Its sinking economy, sky-high insurance rates, health care and mortgage foreclosures are now of more concern to most voters, including a generation of younger Cuban Americans, than democratic reforms in Cuba, analysts say. "It's really over foreign versus domestic," said Susan MacManus, a political science professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "Younger generations, younger Cubans, are very much more influenced by domestic policy than foreign policy," she said. (*The Miami Herald*, 10/2/08)

**February 9:** San Francisco-based group CodePink organized a demonstration to urge the government to arrest alleged terrorist Luis Posada Carriles. A dozen protesters demanding the arrest of Luis Posada Carriles were met by more than 100 counterprotesters at a demonstration in front of the Versailles Cafe in Little Havana, in Miami. The event was the second time in less than a month that the group CodePink had gathered at the famous restaurant, but the demonstrators, separated by Miami police, were peaceful. A skirmish between the two groups broke out at a January 12 rally, when CodePink's truck/float was rushed and members of the group claimed they were physically threatened. The last rally was largely uneventful. The two sides hurled insults, accusations, and the occasional obscene gesture at each other across SW Eighth Street. A dozen members of CodePink occupied the south sidewalk, singing and chanting while waving banners that called Carriles a "terrorist". Across the street, about 150 members of groups such as Vigilia Mambisa and Alpha 66 joined together in front of Versailles with signs that called CodePink "communists", and "anti-American" and inferred that the left-wing group was on the payroll of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/2/08)

**February 10:** Approximately 30 personalities were honoured into the Cuban Sport Hall of Fame during the sixth edition of the event, which took place in the Big Five Club of Miami. The famous Luis Tiant and Orestes "Minie" Miñoso were in attendance. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/2/08)

**February 15:** Human rights activist Bertha Antúnez Pernet, went into exile in Miami where she said she will continue "the struggle for the democratization of the island and the freedom of political prisoners." Antúnez Pernet is the sister of former political prisoner Jorge Luis García Pérez (Antúnez), released from prison after serving a 17-year sentence. Antúnez Pernet referred to Cuban prisons as "cemeteries of living men." (*AFP, EFE*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** Four Cuban dissidents jailed since a harsh crackdown five years ago will be freed and sent to Spain with their families. Miami exile groups welcomed the prisoners' release but noted that the four were forced to leave. "Unfortunately, these men

were not given a chance to stay in their country and be free," said Cuban American National Foundation spokeswoman Camila R. Gallardo. "They were given the choice: Go to Spain or stay in jail. This is what they do with the people who oppose them and are effective at opposing them." (*The Miami Herald*, 16/2/08)

**February 18:** Bernardo Viera Trejo still remembers that sweltering summer day in 1955, when he and his then-friend Fidel Castro met up shortly after the would-be revolutionary's release from prison. Castro had attempted to overthrow the island's dictator, Fulgencio Batista, with an assault on the Moncada military barracks in southeastern Cuba. He had failed and spent the last two years behind bars. As the two chatted, Viera says Castro drew a map of the doomed attack and signed it for his friend with a flourish. Now, more than half a century later, Viera is selling the map through the Dallas-based Heritage Auction Galleries, the latest in Cuba-related historical documents placed on the auction block. "I believed he was an important person and would become even more so," said Viera, a former journalist who has interviewed luminaries including Ernest Hemingway and Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. "But Fidel, he couldn't understand why I wanted it." The idea came to Viera after he read about a similar auction Heritage held for a lock of hair snipped from Ernesto "Che" Guevara before his burial in 1967. (*AP*, 18/2/08)

**February 19:** In Miami, Florida, the news of Fidel Castro's resignation to the presidency came as no surprise to Janisset Rivero, the executive director of Cuban Democratic Directorate, a group that works with dissidents in Cuba. "I think there have been preparations taking place for quite a while to assure the crowning of Raúl Castro," she said. "It doesn't mean any change to the system. It doesn't mean there will be freedom for the Cubans. One big dictator is replacing the other. "It will be a big deal when political prisoners are released, when political parties are allowed to organize, when the country stops being ruled by a single party." "For Cuban-Americans it doesn't mean a whole big deal. It's the continuation with a different face. We recognize these are not major changes," said Andy Gomez of the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies. But Gomez said in Cuba there will be pressure by the younger generation on Raul Castro to make immediate improvements in the basic quality of life, in terms of housing, food and education. "Today Castro announces the end of the revolution. That doesn't mean it's all over, but that means it allows people to finally begin to move beyond," said Joe Garcia, former executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation and now a Democratic candidate for Congress. (*CNN, Sun Sentinel*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** The Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF), a leading anti-Castro exile organization, said Castro's resignation "opens a new chapter in the history of the revolution and the history of the Cuban people." "After 50 years there is no more one-man rule in Cuba because his successors cannot maintain the same power and the same position that he attained during the last 50 years," CANF president Francisco "Pepe" Hernandez said. (*Reuters*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** The resignation of Cuba's ailing president, Fidel Castro, is not expected to have a major impact on Canadian policy of constructive engagement with Cuba. Ismael Sambra, leader of the Cuban Canadian Foundation, said there's nothing "constructive" about the government of Cuba. Sambra, a Cuban –Canadian, was arrested in 1992 for urging Cubans to vote against Castro's government and sentenced to eight years. "The policy of Canada towards Cuba is (...) dialogue, but those guys, they don't understand what the dialogue is," said this construction worker who spend nearly six years in jail before being released in 1998 after Castro gave in to pressure from Ottawa, Amnesty International and the late Pope John Paul. "Anything for that government right now that smells (like) democracy is a conspiracy - is helping the Americans; so with them there is no reasonable dialogue,' he said. Canada co-sponsored a resolution on Cuba's human rights situation for the 14th straight year at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in April 2005. And it has urged Cuban authorities to recognize the rights of freedom of speech, association and the press in the past. However, Sambra says Canada's current policy has done nothing to encourage political changes there. "Canada should condition its trade with Cuba, with the freedom of press, real democratic changes, the freedom of all political prisoners," he said. (*Canadian Press*, 19/2/08)

**February 22:** For Taras Domitro, Hayna Gutierrez and Miguel Angel Blanco, everything has changed -- except ballet. Since the three leading dancers with the National Ballet of Cuba made their late night dash for the United States last December, driving across the border from Ontario, Canada, to upstate New York, their lives have concentrated around their art. Where they once lived in Havana, rehearsing at the National Ballet's stately but dilapidated center and touring Europe, Asia, and Latin America, they are now sequestered in the heart of suburban South Florida. They live with Domitro's mother Magaly Suarez in her Pompano Beach home and rehearse every night in her studio, The Art of Classical Ballet, in the Storage Mart strip mall six blocks away. It is a strange but safe launching pad before they vault onto the next stage -- as soloists with the San Francisco Ballet. For now, however, they are focused on their US debut at the Fillmore Miami Beach in Swan Lake with the Cuban Classical Ballet of Miami, a small South Florida company co-directed by Suarez and Pedro Pablo Pena. Their future is wide open, but right now all they've got is this small space for the moves they've practiced all their lives. (*The Miami Herald*, 22/2/08)

**February 22:** The early morning charter flight from Miami to Havana looks like a traveling emporium as Cuban exiles carry back items ranging from DVD players to bicycles for friends and relatives in their deprived homeland. In the check-in line at Miami International Airport, three days after long-time leader Fidel Castro said he would retire as president, baggage carts were piled high with bags stuffed with clothes, boxes of electronics, coffee machines and car parts. The abundance of goods -- the result of a small change in Cuban customs regulations brought last year by Castro's younger brother and expected successor, Raul Castro -- could be a sign of things to come. "To get by in Cuba you need to have family here," said a man named Hernandez, 28, a health-care worker who was visiting Cuba for the first time since he left 19 years ago. "It's mostly clothes, medicines, all kinds of stuff you can't find there," said Hernandez, who declined to give his full name. "Underwear. People have no underwear over there." He also was

taking a wheelchair for his grandmother. Operators at the airport wrapping travelers' suitcases in protective shrink-wrap were doing brisk business. It was too early to tell the significance of the easing of the rules, said Damian Fernandez, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University. "There have been ebbs and flows on government control in many spheres. Just because there's an opening now doesn't mean it will be a pattern," he said. "What is clear is that people inside and outside of Cuba have expectations that there is a modicum of an opening. Cubans are demanding it." (*Reuters*, 22/2/08)

**February 23:** The large Cuban community in southern Florida has joined in the prayer campaign convened by Archbishop Dionisio Garcia Ibanez of Santiago, Cuba on the occasion of the visit of Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who will visit his archdiocese on February 24. In a letter, Archbishop Garcia said the Archdiocese of Santiago would welcome Cardinal Bertone "as a pilgrim to the Shrine of Our Mother and Patroness, the Virgin of Charity. It will be a profound moment of prayer. Young people from neighboring dioceses and from communities in our own archdiocese will join him in praying the Holy Rosary for reconciliation and fraternity between all Cubans." Therefore, he continued, "I invite all those who cannot be present at the Shrine together with us to join in our prayers and intentions, whether at home with family members and neighbors, in houses of prayer or in churches, by reciting the Rosary or attending Holy Mass." In Miami, the Cuban Catholic ministry "CRECED" announced that in response to the invitation, hundreds of the faithful "will meet in prayer at the Shrine to Our Lady of Charity in Miami" together with Auxiliary Bishop Felipe Estevez of Miami. (*CNA*, 23/2/08)

**February 24:** A Cuban exile group flew to a spot near the Caribbean island where Cuban fighters shot down two of its planes and killed four of its members 12 years ago. Jose Basulto, 68, who founded Brothers to the Rescue, which flew planes over the Florida Straits looking for rafters and boat people fleeing Cuba, said Cuban air traffic control threatened them but did not intercept their planes. Three Cuban Americans and a Cuban exile, all companions of Basulto, were killed when Cuban government MiGs shot down two Brothers to the Rescue planes near Cuba on February 24, 1996. "Fidel Castro and Raul Castro gave the orders and (should be) indicted for murder in the United States," said Basulto. Basulto piloted one of the Brothers to the Rescue planes that survived the 1996 shutdown. He was on one of four small planes, carrying about 10 members of Brothers to the Rescue, that marked the anniversary by flying from Opa Locka airport outside Miami to the shutdown site known as Martyrs' Point. One of the planes dropped flowers over the site as a prayer was said for the men who died. "It is and it always was international waters. It was on February 24, 1996, and it is today," said Basulto. "That's where they were shot down." (*Reuters*, 24/2/08)

**February 24:** Andro Nodarse-Leon, a director of the Miami-based and anti-Castro Cuban American National Foundation referred to the new leadership in Cuba: "It's unfortunately more of the same coming out of Cuba and no real sign that there is an openness to a changing of the guard or a broader opening to real transition toward having a free and democratic country, which is what Cubans want." Ninaska Perez, a popular

Spanish-language radio commentator in Miami and member of the Cuban Liberty Council, an anti-Castro exile group said that, "for those who entertain any ideas that there could be changes with Raul Castro I think this should give them a very good answer." (*Reuters*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** Fidel Castro will continue to have a hand in shaping Cuba's future, but his brother and successor will remain in firm control of the government, Castro's daughter said. "He is still behind the scenes, but Raúl is making the decisions," Alina Fernandez told the press. "No doubt about it." Fernandez, who lives in Florida and has long opposed her father's regime, said her uncle may bring some changes for Cuban business people and foreign relations for the island. "I think he will encourage some foreign investment," Fernandez said. "Small businesses also will be allowed. He wants more commerce with America, and that is what he will get." (*CNN*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** Many Cuban Americans are growing weary of the US government's attempts to isolate Cuba, a hard-line stance that militant Cuban exiles have largely dictated for the last four decades, and has yet to yield any real changes there. Instead, Cuban Americans increasingly favor a post-Cold War policy that tries to foment democracy by freeing up travel to the island and defrosting diplomatic relations with its leaders. "Why are we pursuing a policy with Cuba that has not worked anywhere in the world?" said Carlos A. Saladrigas, a prominent Miami businessman. He co-founded an organization called the Cuba Study Group that's trying to convince Washington that a "silent majority" of Cuban Americans favors a more moderate path. Florida International University, which has been polling Cuban American attitudes here since 1991, found last year that nearly two-thirds want a dialogue with the Cuban government, compared with 40% when the poll started 16 years ago. More than 55% supported unrestricted travel to Cuba. Though most Cuban Americans still back the US economic embargo of Cuba, support is steadily shrinking. The university survey found that 57.5% wanted to continue the embargo, the lowest number since the poll began. The changing views are playing out in congressional contests in South Florida, where two Cuban American Democrats are challenging the Republican Diaz-Balart brothers, scions of a powerful and strongly anti-Castro exile family, who have helped craft US Cuba policy for years. (*The Miami Herald*, 25/2/08)

**February 26:** Cuban exiles have traditionally been a safe vote for Republican presidential candidates in the key battleground state of Florida, but in a potential boon to Democratic hopeful Barack Obama, many now agree with his call for lifting some sanctions against Cuba. The exile community has pressured successive US administrations to take a hardline stance against Cuba's communist regime, but travel and money transfer restrictions imposed by President George W. Bush in 2004 have frustrated many Cuban Americans. Cuba's seamless power transfer from Fidel Castro to his brother Raul has fueled a debate about whether it is time to change US policy toward the island after a nearly 50-year-old embargo failed to bring down the regime. Obama, who has called US policy on Cuba a "failure," proposes lifting the travel and remittance restrictions as a first step toward changing relations with Cuba. "When I lived in Cuba, they didn't let me leave the country," said Jose, a Bank of America employee who arrived

here from Havana five years ago, who gave only his first name. "Now that I live in Miami, they don't let me go there. The two governments seem the same." "I think Barack Obama is right," he said. "It's time to show the United States is different and can help Cuba change little by little, although I don't know if it will be possible with Raul Castro." (*The Miami Herald*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** To the generation of Cuban exiles that has spent almost half a century dreaming of the day Fidel Castro left power, decisions taken on February 24 came as a cruel disappointment. While the legendary revolutionary leader finally stepped down as head of state, the communist government he set up maintains its grip on a calm and stable Cuba. With no sign of a fundamental policy shift in Havana, Washington is also continuing the economic embargo introduced by John F. Kennedy. Still, that balance may be about to shift, with an American presidential election due this year and economic and social pressures for a changed relationship building up within the US. Growing US interest in trade with Cuba, a more general move away from ideological "regime change" based approaches to foreign policy and, perhaps above all, growing moderation within the 1.4 million-strong Cuban-American community all make an altered approach likely. "The current type of tightening hurts the individual victims more than it damages the government," says José Basulto, a veteran of the disastrous 1961 US-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion, and founder of Brothers to the Rescue, a programme to save refugees attempting the perilous sea crossing between Cuba and the US. "It has done more damage to the cause than anyone else. Revenge hurts the people of Cuba more than the government, Basulto said." "There isn't really an embargo; the embargo is a straw man," says Joe Garcia, who campaigned to keep the embargo when he was executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation and who is now a congressional candidate in South Florida for the Democrats. Even the old guard is shifting its position. Many have become frustrated by the lack of progress. "These guys are getting too old to carry a gun," says Alfredo Duran, a Cuban-American lawyer. Santiago Martinez, a recent migrant who works as a building inspector in Miami, calls the policy disastrous. "My mum, my dad, my aunt are all in Cuba and theoretically I can't send them much help." Scrapping the embargo would "take the ideological support away" from the regime and "would be very demoralising", he argues. (*The Financial Times*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** In a case that puts the Bush administration in a legal dilemma, Cuban-American groups demanded the Justice Department indict Fidel Castro for the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-downs as he no longer enjoys immunity as head of state of Cuba. Relatives of the three US citizens and one resident killed in the February 24, 1996, downing of two Brothers aircraft by Cuban MiGs met with a top White House official and presented thousands of signatures supporting the petition, as well as resolutions from several South Florida municipalities. Some legal experts doubt the Bush administration will issue an indictment because other countries might seize on the precedent to prosecute US officials. But the relatives and their supporters were undeterred. With several family members fighting back tears, Rafael Crespo, president of the Cuban American Veterans Association, vowed to go after Fidel and Raúl Castro, who have spoken about their roles in the shoot-downs. "Therefore," he said, "we believe their declarations to be sufficient as grounds for their indictment." (*The Miami Herald*, 26/2/08)



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

**February 1:** Fidel Castro enumerated several factors that complicate the planet's situation and alerted the need of learning about them to avert those dangers. In his fourth and last article entitled "Lula," Castro writes about the conversation he had with his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, during the Brazilian President's visit to Havana. Castro refers to Lula's invitation to visit Brazil. "'You are invited to go to Brazil this year'. Thanks, I answered, at least in my thoughts I will be there", Castro wrote. [[Lula, part four and last](#)] (*Prensa Latina, EFE*, 1/2/08)

**February 1:** Julien Francis, general secretary of St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Unity Labor Party, leads a delegation from his country visiting Cuba, Granma newspaper reported. The group is composed of Hans King, press secretary of Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves' office, Nichole Evans, executive secretary of the party's female branch, and youth leader Saboto Caesar. Their stay in Havana responds to an invitation by the Central Committee of Cuba's Communist Party. (*ACN*, 1/2/08)

**February 1:** Students from the Alba Academy of Plastic Arts in the eastern Cuban city of Holguin are currently exhibiting their work at the National Fine Arts Museum of Montreal, Canada, as part of the largest Cuban collection exhibited in that center. The exhibition, called 'Cuba: Art and History from 1868 Until Today', is part of a project of artistic cooperation born in 2005 between this Cuban academy and the College de Bois of Boulogne. This program, that emerged from the cooperation and exchange between Canadian professor Marie Luise Pepin and Cuban Ernesto Blanco, also benefits the promotion of both cultures through the study of the work of two great poets: Jose Marti and Arthur Rimbaud. (*ACN*, 1/2/08)

**February 1:** Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez expressed their condolences for the death of writer and Chilean communist leader Volodia Teitelboim. In their respective messages, Castro and Chavez expressed their condolences to the Teitelboim family, a spokesman for the Chilean Communist Party said. Teitelboim, 91, died due to respiratory and kidney complications. Castro and Chavez highlighted Teitelboim's achievements as a writer and former general secretary of the Chilean Communist Party. (*Xinhua*, 1/2/08)

**February 1:** The Czech Republic will continue supporting the Cuban opposition and the observance of human rights across the world, Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg told representatives of Cuban opposition Hector Palacios and Gisela Delgado. "The Czech Republic will insist in the future on its support to human rights in the whole world and in Cuba in particular. I hope that freedom and democracy will appear in Cuba through a concerted effort," Schwarzenberg told journalists after meeting the Cuban dissidents. Palacios, who had been imprisoned for his views, said the European Union was understanding the situation in Cuba better, though it had been "confused" in this respect. "Fidel Castro was a sort of icon. It is vital for the public to understand the real situation.

We hope Cuba will become a free country with the help of the EU," Palacios said. (CTK, 1/2/08)

**February 1:** Cuban dissidents sent to Spain's King Juan Carlos a letter asking for copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with an eye toward distributing them on the communist-ruled island. The letter was delivered at the Spanish Embassy in Havana by Felix Bonne, Idania Yanes Contreras, Marta Beatriz Roque, Jorge Luis "Antunez" Garcia Perez and Iris Perez Aguilera. According to Roque, the leader of the banned Assembly to Promote Civil Society, some of those present "could have shown the marks of the beatings" State Security agents gave them in recent incidents. The dissidents said in the letter sent to the king that they were making the request because they know their "democratic calling" and because Spain's 1978 constitution "draws upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." (EFE, AFP, 4/2/08)

**February 1:** Cuba and Ecuador signed a cultural collaboration agreement that will enhance the exchange among teachers and students of arts from both countries and will encourage the training of cultural promoters. The document was penned by the president of the Metropolitan District of Quito's Parish Association, Juan Hinojosa Larcos and by the head of the international department at Cuba's Culture Ministry, Ana Maria Pellon Saez. (Invasor, 4/2/08)

**February 1:** The historic changes taking place in Guatemala today with a new government guided by a broad vision of social responsibility and determined to struggle against poverty, bode well for the strengthening of relations between this Central American country and Cuba. This was the view expressed by Guatemalan Vice President Dr. Rafael Espada, during a discussion held with Carlos Lage, vice president of the Cuban Council of State and secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers. "We are celebrating the tenth anniversary of Guatemala and Cuba's reunion," said Espada, referring to the 1998 reestablishment of bilateral relations, and he emphasized that it was a great honor to represent the Guatemalan people and the Alvaro Colon administration on the new government's first international visit which, he said, is taking place "from the heart, not as a political measure." Lage thanked the vice president for representing Guatemala in Cuba and emphasized the importance of increasing the exchange between the two countries. (Granma International, 1/2/08)

**February 3:** The Yemen Deputy of Parliament Speaker, Yahia al-Raei, held a meeting with the Cuban Ambassador to Sanaa, Bienvenido Garcia Negrin, to discuss the means for enhancing parliamentary relations between Yemen and Cuba. (Saba, 3/2/08)

**February 3:** Fidel Castro paid tribute to the recently deceased intellectual and revolutionary Chilean Volodia Teitelboim, whom he described as an example of a communist militant, whose struggle gave his life some meaning. "I will not say he has died; he has left to live in ideas. He joined the ranks of those who struggle and will continue to struggle for those dreams", Castro wrote in an article entitled "Volodia's Journey". [[Volodia's Journey](#)] *Prensa Latina*, 3/2/08)

**February 3:** A US journalist will soon publish a book in which he reveals that several former Mexican presidents supported the CIA in its clandestine campaign against Cuban leader Fidel Castro in the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican media reported. Former Washington Post reporter Jefferson Morley will publish his investigation based on declassified US documents that show that Mexico provided assistance for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 aimed at toppling Castro's government, the El Universal newspaper said. Morley, the author of "Our man in Mexico: Winston Scott and the hidden history of the CIA," said that Adolfo Lopez Mateos, who was Mexico's president from 1958-1964, authorized "under the table" help for the CIA by handling the delivery of 50,000 gallons of fuel for the boats that were used in the foiled invasion. (*EFE*, 3/2/08)

**February 4:** Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage welcomed a delegation of a European Socialist parliamentary group visiting the island. The parliamentary group was invited by the National Assembly of People's Power. In the meeting, party president Martin Schulz explained the current main tasks of the group that includes Socialist Vice Presidents Pasqualina Napolitano and Ralf Beste. The European Parliament members, who arrived in Havana on January 31, also met with Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/2/08)

**February 5:** Former Mexican Foreign Secretary Jorge Castaneda denied a newspaper's allegations that he had served as a Cuban spy for at least three years beginning in the late 1970s. The allegations appeared in a front-page story in the Mexico City daily El Universal headlined "From Traitor of the Fatherland to Chancellor." "Obviously, the story is categorically false," Castaneda said in a telephone interview. "It's entirely made up." The story cited documents that the newspaper said were obtained from a file belonging to Mexico's now-defunct Federal Security Directorate (known by its Spanish-language initials, DFS) in Mexico's national archive. Those documents indicate that Castaneda, a former communist, was recruited by Cuban intelligence in 1979, the paper reported. For the next several years, according to El Universal, Castaneda pressured his father, Jorge Castaneda y Alvarez de la Rosa, then Mexico's foreign secretary, to enact policies favorable to Cuba. He also relayed information to Cuban officials about "activities, meetings, events, decisions" and conversations that his father had with other ministers, the story said. Castaneda's father served under Jose Lopez Portillo, Mexico's president from 1976 to 1982. (*Los Angeles Times*, 4/2/08)

**February 5:** Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque termed as excellent the bilateral relations with Cape Verde, in a meeting with Victor Manuel Barbosa Borges, minister of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and Communities from that African nation. Perez Roque recalled that this friendship goes back in time to the struggle for the independence of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau where many Cubans fought. A new chapter in bilateral links, he said, is the graduation of nearly 900 students from the African country in Cuban educational centers including universities. The Cuban minister congratulated Cape Verde for being removed from the United Nations' List of Least Developed Countries. For that respect, Barbosa Borges said it is a great victory for his country and Cuba has a great part in it, for its support in the fields of education, healthcare, human resources development, among others. Barbosa Borges, first Foreign

Minister of Cape Verde to visit Cuba, is heading his country's delegation to the 15th meeting of the Cuba-Cape Verde inter-governmental Commission. (ACN, 5/2/08)

**February 5:** Cuba's UN Ambassador, Rodrigo Malmierca made a speech at the United Nations Security Council in which he claimed to represent the non-aligned movement and attacked Israel for its ongoing blockade on the Gaza Strip saying it was responsible for the hardships being faced by Palestinians in the enclave. Israeli Ambassador Dan Gillerman was displeased with Malmierca's remarks and asked for permission to respond. Gillerman cynically asked the Cuban: "Who is this group representing since the Cold War has already ended?" Many countries that are members of the non-aligned nations, such as Vietnam and Panama, have condemned Palestinian terrorism and support Israel's right to respond to terrorist attacks and were not party to the formulation that the Cuban ambassador decided to present. (*YnetNews*, 5/2/08)

**February 6:** The President of the Cuban National Assembly (Parliament), Ricardo Alarcon, met with a delegation of the Chamber of Deputies of the Dominican Republic that arrived in Havana for an official visit. Alarcon and Julio Cesar Valentin, head of the Dominican legislative body, analyzed ways to strengthen bilateral ties between the two entities and also exchanged opinions about several aspects of the reality in both countries. (ACN, 6/2/08)

**February 6:** The First Secretary of the Cuban Young Communist League (UJC), Julio Martinez, congratulated Belarus for hosting the 15th World Festival of Youth and Students that will take place there next year. According to *Juventud Rebelde* news daily, in a meeting with Leonid Kovalev, General Secretary of the Belorussian Republican Youth, Martinez said he was confident of the success of the event that will take place in the summer of 2009. (ACN, 6/2/08)

**February 5:** Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, member of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee Secretariat, met with a delegation headed by United Left Group President Francis Wurtz of France. The delegation includes Gabriela Zimmier (Germany), Georgios Toussas (Greece), Giusto Catania (Italy), Kyriacos Triantaphyllides (Cyprus), Pedro Guerreiro (Portugal), Vera Flasrova (Czech Republic), Willy Meyer Pleite (Spain), Soren Sondergaard (Denmark) and Maria D'Alimonte, the general secretary of the parliamentary group. (*Granma*, 6/2/08)

**February 7:** The second Traveling Exhibition of Caribbean Cinema will arrive in Cuba later this year and it will be dedicated to infancy and adolescence. Jose Juan Ortiz, UNICEF representative in Cuba, told reporters that, as media outlets have a great influence on the cultural formation of children and adolescents, it is very legitimate to show through this initiative the things that are autochthonous to each country of the region. For his part, Rigoberto Lopez, a Cuban filmmaker who co-founded this project, insisted on the importance of the Traveling Exhibition of Caribbean Cinema. He noted that it helps the Caribbean people reaffirm their identity, as these works are authentic cultural products. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** Cuba and Cape Verde signed several cooperation agreements in the fields of education, public health, agriculture, fishing and tourism. The protocols were penned by Cuba's Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration Marta Lomas and Cape Verde's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and Communities, Victor Manuel Barbosa. The signing ceremony rounded off the 15th Session of Cuba-Cape Verde. (*ACN*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** In Syria's history, the assistance received from Cuba is held high. For that reason and many others, our people and leaders greatly admire the Cuban revolution and Commander-in-Chief Fidel Castro," said Elias Mourad, managing director of the *Al-Bass* newspaper in conversations with Granma. Mourad is on his second trip to Cuba, the first occurring in 1995. He said that Cuba and Syria are confronting the same enemy and totally coincide in condemning the aggressive actions of the Israeli government against the Palestinian population. (*Granma*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** Spain and Cuba will hold their second session on human rights in Madrid with a "comprehensive" agenda where "no point is left out," said the Spanish minister of foreign affairs, Miguel Angel Moratinos. Moratinos and his Brazilian counterpart Celso Amorim agreed during a press conference that dialogue "is the best way of moving forward on an issue as important as human rights." "We have been able to see that both Brazil and Spain are very well placed to work with Cuban authorities on this topic," said the Spanish minister. (*AFP*, 8/2/08)

**February 7:** Parliamentarians from six Swedish parties nominated dissident leader Oswaldo Payá for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize, considering that he is "one of the better known Cuban defenders of democracy." Payá, winner of 2002 Sakharov Award granted by the European Parliament, has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on other occasions since 2003. (*EER*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** Czech tourists travelling to Cuba should bring with them newspapers, magazines, books and audiovisual recordings in Spanish, the People in Need organisation said within its campaign called Hotel Cuba that started in Prague. While for ordinary Cubans such items are not available, tourists can bring them with impunity, the organisers said. The aim of the campaign is to present Cuba as a world of two faces, one being the Caribbean paradise and the other a desperate place of lack of freedom, the organisers said. The organisation is also going to launch a website that will provide advice to tourists travelling to Cuba on how to help local residents. (*CTK*, 7/2/08)

**February 7:** In an effort to help India raise its sports quality, a group of Cuban experts evaluated athletic training plans and sport programs of the Asian country. "We hope to raise the quality of Indian sports and teams at an international level with that Cuban cooperation," S. Harmilapi, director of India's Sports Department, told the press. The Indian official recalled that in a recent visit to the island, the Indian Minister of Youth and Sports signed a memorandum with a Cuba on sports cooperation. The Cubans met with Indian sports officials and visited sports centers and complexes in New Dehli. On

Thursday, they began a tour of several cities including Patiala, Pune, Bangalore and Gwalior. (ACN, 8/2/08)

**February 7:** Vice President of the Cuban Council of State Juan Almeida Bosque, received new ambassadors from Zambia, Liberia and Mauritania, who presented their credentials at the venue of the Council of State in Havana. According to Granma news daily, during the ceremonies, Almeida was accompanied by First Deputy Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez and by Angel Reigosa de la Cruz, head of the Protocol Office. The new ambassadors are David Clifford Saviye, of the Republic of Zambia; Nathaniel Barnes, of the Republic of Liberia; and Abderrahim Ould Hadrami, of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/2/08)

**February 11:** The ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Cuba, Mostafa Alaei, called political ties excellent, and highlighted both countries' coincidence in identification of international issues. In an interview published by Granma daily on the occasion of Iran's 29th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph, the diplomat predicted higher economic exchange with the island, which currently surpasses 200 million euros. Trade in the industrial and agricultural fields grows, and Iranian productions in railroads, irrigation, among others, will contribute to the increase of the Cuban economy, Alaei pointed out. As part of the increasing bilateral relations, he mentioned the construction in Teheran of a plant to produce vaccines against hepatitis B with Cuban technology. Asked about US current pressures to condemn Iran for its nuclear development, Alaei affirmed Washington is waging a disinformation campaign and making new political demands his nation will not accept. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** Spain said it sees improvements in Cuba's attitude to human rights, following a second round of talks between the two countries on the issue. "We appreciate the new more constructive attitude of Cuba," in particular towards the UN Human Rights Council, a foreign ministry source said. Several political prisoners have been freed on the island in recent months, and there is a "possibility we can have a political dialogue with the European Union in which human rights would be included," the source said. It was the second round of talks between Spain and Cuba on human rights following meetings in Havana in May 2007. The two countries agreed to hold political consultations, including on the issue of human rights, during a visit to Cuba in April 2007 by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos. This round of talks took place "at a technical level" between Cuban deputy foreign minister Abelardo Moreno and a senior Spanish foreign ministry official, Rafael Dezcallar. (*AFP*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** Canadian workers strengthened their friendship with Cuban counterparts during a visit to workplaces and places of social interest in the province of Holguín, the weekly official newspaper "Trabajadores" reported. "Our work is aimed at uniting workers from both countries," said Heide Trampus, member of the Worker to Worker Association of Canada. Aileen Runstedler, member of the Communications Union, pointed out that Canadian workers put pressure on their government to improve relations with Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** Six Cuban technical advisors will provide expertise on construction projects in South African North West, the provincial public works department said. Department spokesperson Matshube Mfoloe said the six advisors would be hosted by Public Works for the next three years to bolster its capacity and provide mentoring and skills transfer. The team will also help fast-track building projects to help increase service delivery. Team Leader Jose Alfredo Ibanez Mestre said the Cuban experts were looking forward to a productive stay in the South African province. "High on our expectation list is to learn, share our experiences and contribute to the development of this country," he said. (*IOL.Com*, 11/2/08)

**February 12:** An undocumented Cuban couple died of asphyxiation in a van travelling through Nicaragua en route to the United States, said police sources. Maikel García Enamorado, 28, and his fiancée, Yureimi García Julia, 25, died while being transported by traffickers, according to investigations of the Nicaraguan Police. (*AFP*, 12/2/08)

**February 12:** Cuba has agreed to sign two UN covenants on human rights by the end of March, the Spanish government said following talks between the two countries. "The Cuban delegation confirmed that its government would sign the agreements on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights in the first quarter of 2008," the foreign ministry said in a statement. Signatory nations to the two international covenants agree to guarantee a certain number of civic rights for their citizens. The communist regime in Havana announced in December that it would sign both of them, but had given no date. The foreign ministry said Spain "would continue to work to normalise and develop relations between Cuba and the European Union". The announcement came after talks between senior officials of the two sides -- the second round of meetings between Spain and Cuba on human rights following discussions in Havana in May 2007. (*AFP*, 13/2/08)

**February 13:** Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque affirmed that Cuba will extend hospitality and welcome to Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, a token of the excellent relations existing between both states. In his news conference, Perez Roque also confirmed the coming visit to the island of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, at the invitation of national authorities and the Catholic Bishops of Cuba. The visit of Bertone, February 20-26, has both an official and pastoral character, and takes place on the tenth anniversary of the historic visit of Pope John Paul II. During his stay Bertone will meet with Cuban authorities and will celebrate masses in the city of Havana, Guantanamo and Villa Clara where he will also bless a monument in honor of John Paul II. Perez Roque indicated that Havana will have talks of mutual respect with the Vatican, regardless of sharing agreements on several issues of the visitor's agenda. [[Conferencia de prensa](#)] (*Prensa Latina, La Jornada*, 13/2/08)

**February 13:** During a press conference, Cuban foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, thanked the Spanish Government for its "efforts" in helping normalize the island's relations with the European Union (EU) and for trying to bring about the end of the sanctions imposed by the 27-member bloc. The dialogue with Spain, according to Perez Roque, helps toward the "final lifting of the absurd sanctions that, even though

suspended, still have not been eliminated completely.” [[Conferencia de prensa](#)] (*EFE*, 13/2/08)

**February 14:** Venezuela’s Culture Minister Francisco Sesto arrived in Havana to take part in the International Book Fair Cuba 2008 underway in the Cuban capital. Sesto was welcomed by his Cuban counterpart Abel Prieto at Havana’s international airport. Both high ranking officials confirmed they would attend the presentation of the book “Vuelta de Siglo”, by Ecuadorian-born Mexican philosopher Bolivar Echeverria, who was the winner of the second edition of the Libertador Prize, a contest organized by the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture to stimulate reflection on fundamental issues. (*CAN*, 14/2/08)

**February 14:** European commissioner Louis Michel will visit Cuba on March 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> to promote political dialogue with the government of Havana. “The objective of the visit is to advance in the process of dialogue with the Cuban government,” said spokesman for Michel, John Clancy. (*EFE*, 15/2/08)

**February 14:** Cuba asserted that the struggle for Latin American unity and against US hostility is among the priorities of the island's foreign policy. Head of the International Relations Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, Fernando Ramirez, said that campaigning for the release of the five anti-terrorist Cuban fighters held in US prisons will also be among top priorities. Speaking at the plenary of the 6th Congress University 2008, Ramirez requested international support to get Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labanino, Antonio Guerrero, Rene Gonzalez and Fernando Gonzalez released. He highlighted the interest of the Caribbean nation for strengthening regional pro-integration mechanisms, including the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, which has been joined by Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Nicaragua and Venezuela. (*Prensa Latina*, 14/2/08)

**February 14:** The UN's human rights chief should reconsider her praise of Cuba's record and of the recent mission there by a UN official compromised by ties to the Castro regime, said UN Watch. In a letter sent to High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, Hillel Neuer, executive director of the Geneva-based human rights monitoring group, urged her to recognize Cuba's consistently negative role at the UN Human Rights Council. UN Watch also questioned Arbour's praise of a mission to Cuba by Jean Ziegler, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, whose position at the world body was sponsored by Cuba, and who co-founded the Moammar Qaddafi Human Rights Prize that was given to Fidel Castro in 1998. (*UN Watch*, 14/2/08)

**February 14:** Representatives of Cuba and the Islamic Republic of Iran signed their first agreement of scientific cooperation to contribute to their economic and social development. The document was inked by Cuban Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment, Fernando Gonzalez Bermudez and Iranian Minister of Science, Research and Technology, Mohammad Medi Zahedi. Also attending the signing ceremony was State Council advisor Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart. The document envisages the exchange of scientists, professors and specialized information, the organization of

seminars, courses and design and application of research programs in industry, agriculture and other fields. We are particularly interested in collaborating in the field of biotechnology and the medical/pharmaceutical industry. However, we have no limit at all to broaden it and cover other fields, Medi Zahedi said. (*Prensa Latina*, 14/2/08)

**February 15:** Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo is expected to arrive in Havana on an official visit to Cuba invited by the island's government. The African statesman's stay in the island will foster ties of friendship and cooperation existing between the two countries, particularly in health and education.

About 191 Cuban collaborators are working in Equatorial Guinea and some 96 youth from that nation are studying in the island, 248 of which have graduated. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** Cuba will free seven of 59 dissidents imprisoned since 2003. The first releases of jailed dissidents since August were negotiated by Spain on health grounds and announced by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos. "The decision was made unilaterally by the Cuban authorities and we are very satisfied," Moratinos told Spanish radio from the city of Cordoba, noting that the move came after dialogue with Cuba. The Spanish newspaper *El Pais* reported on its Web site that four of them will be sent to Spain with their families to receive medical treatment. The four dissidents who will go to Spain have been gathered from different jails around Cuba in the Combinado del Este prison on the outskirts of Havana. They are Omar Pernet, Jose Gabriel Ramon Castillo, Alejandro Gonzalez and Pedro Pablo Alvarez. The dissidents were arrested in a political crackdown ordered by Cuban leader Fidel Castro in March 2003 that put 75 of his opponents in prison with sentences of up to 28 years. (*Reuters*, 15/2/08)

**February 15:** A delegation from the Mexican state of Campeche, including the mayors of Campeche and Tenasco Jorge Carlos Hurtado and Enrique Marquez, is visiting Havana to reaffirm more than two decades of friendship ties between their people and Cuba. The journalist and founder of groups of solidarity with the island, Carlos Joaquin Reyes, told the local press that the group is opposed to the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the US on this island for almost half a century. We also condemn the imprisonment of the antiterrorist Cuban Five, he declared. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/2/08)

**February 16:** Cuba will send doses of yellow fever vaccine to Paraguay following an outbreak that has already killed two persons in the South American country, President Nicanor Duarte announced. "The Cuban friends will arrive with their plane for Operation Miracle and they will also bring the vaccines", Duarte said. Yellow fever had not been registered in that nation for 34 years. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/2/08)

**February 16:** Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Saleh Ba-Surrah and his Cuban counterpart Huwan Villa signed a cooperation treaty in the field of higher education and scientific research. According the treaty, Cuba will grant Yemen ten more scholarships annually to start from the next academic year 2008-2009, eight in medical sciences and two in engineering. The treaty also includes organizing joint scientific

conferences, exchanging academic experiences and bringing Cuban professors to teach Spanish in Sana'a University as well as teaching Arabic to Cuban students in Yemeni universities. (*Saba*, 17/2/08)

**February 17:** Four Cuban political prisoners freed by Havana arrived in Spain. They comprise trade unionist Pedro Pablo Alvarez Ramos, dissident Omar Pernet Hernandez and independent journalists Jose Gabriel Ramon Castillo and Alejandro Gonzalez Raga. They arrived at a military airport in Torrejon, near Madrid, after flying on board a Spanish air force plane. When contacted by AFP, the Spanish foreign ministry declined to comment. The four Cubans, which were suffering serious health problems, would be given medical examinations and would then address the media. Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos had said that seven political prisoners would be freed, with four set to come to Spain to rejoin their families. The three other prisoners are expected to travel to the United States, but their final destination is not yet decided, according to Cuban sources in Spain. They were all arrested as part of a crackdown in 2003, which saw 75 dissidents arrested and condemned to prison terms of up to 26 years. (*AFP*, 18/2/08)

**February 17:** The Ladies in White, relatives and wives of political prisoners, thanked the government of Spain for the release from prison of four dissidents, who are already in Madrid, and demanded the regime to release more prisoners "immediately." The release of four dissidents from prison "gives us great joy" and "we appreciate the Spanish government's negotiations in achieving this," they said in a communiqué read by one of the spokeswomen of the group, Miriam Leyva. In the release, the Ladies in White, winners of the 2005 European Parliament Sakharov Award, pointed out that "55 of the group of 75 are still in Cuban jail." "They must all be freed immediately and unconditionally, as they have committed no crime, but tried to exercise their right to free opinion in a peaceful and constructive way," they added. (*EER, AFP*, 18/2/08)

**February 17:** Ecuatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo concluded an over 48-hour visit to Cuba, in which he inked two accords and met with First Vice President Raul Castro. "We and our peoples are greater friends, and we help each other," Raul Castro told the press after signing two agreements between both governments. The accords included the reciprocal lifting of visa requirement in diplomatic, official and service passports, and cooperation between the foreign affairs ministries of Cuba and Equatorial Guinea. The Cuban first vice president pointed out that Nguema Mbasogo's recent visit to the island took place in September 2006 to attend the 14th Non-Aligned Countries Movement Summit. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/2/08)

**February 18:** Reporters Without Borders welcomed the release of four Cuban dissidents who were arrested during the "Black Spring" crackdown of March 2003. They include independent journalist Alejandro Gonzalez Raga, 48, who was serving a 14-year prison sentence. "The dialogue initiated with the Cuban government by Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos - inevitably a difficult one when it concerns human rights - is beginning to bear fruit," Reporters Without Borders said. "The release of these four could soon be followed by the release of

three others, and we welcome this". The press freedom organisation added: "This gesture by the Cuban government comes just a week before the appointment of a new Council of State, its executive branch, which could confirm Raul Castro as president, a post he has held in an interim capacity since July 2006. But we must not forget that 23 Cuban journalists continue to languish in prison simply for doing their job without permission from a government that does not tolerate any independent press. We also point out that these latest releases condemned their beneficiaries to exile." (*RWB Press Release*, 18/2/08)

**February 18:** Amnesty International welcomed the release of four Cuban activists but urged Raul Castro to urgently release the 58 remaining incarcerated prisoners of conscience and to guarantee the right to freedom of expression on the island. "The release of the four Cuban prisoners of conscience is a very positive step but we must not forget about the at least 58 people who remain held in prisons across Cuba for the sole reason of expressing their political views," said Kerrie Howard, Deputy director at Amnesty International's Americas Programme. "We hope that the recent release is a sign of change in Cuba, a further openness to improving respect for human rights, including the right to freedom of expression and association," said Kerrie Howard. (*AI Press Release*, 18/2/08)

**February 18:** The President of the Russian Federation Communist Party, Guennadi Ziuganov, received the medal of Friendship for his contribution to strengthening relations between his country and Cuba. The recognition awarded by the Cuban Council of State on the petition of the Institute of Friendship with the Peoples was also given to the 2000 Physics Nobel Prize winner Zhores Alfiorov and the director of the daily *Sovietskaya Rossia*, Valentin Chikin. The Cuban ambassador to Moscow, Jorge Marti, highlighted the meaning of the official distinction for their permanent support to the Cuban revolution and their personal contribution to tightening the friendly links between Russia and Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 18/2/08)

**February 19:** The European Union Commission stressed its willingness to engage in "a constructive political dialogue" with Cuba to promote a peaceful transition to democracy, following Fidel Castro's decision to step down. John Clancy, spokesman for EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel, told reporters in Brussels the commissioner would go ahead with a scheduled visit to Havana on March 6-7, though it has not been decided whether he will meet Castro. "The objective of the EU in relation with Cuba is to encourage a peaceful process of transition to a pluralistic democracy and to respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms," Clancy said. The EU's common position, which remains unchanged by Castro's announcement, also seeks "a sustainable recovery and improvement in the living standards of the Cuban people," he added. "We reiterate our willingness to engage with Cuba in a constructive political dialogue," he said. This dialogue should be "with all stakeholders, including the authorities and civil society," he stressed. (*EUObserver*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Canada's foreign affairs minister said he hoped Fidel Castro's decision to step down as Cuba's president leads to "political and economic reform" in the communist island nation. "We are continuing to monitor developments in Cuba," Foreign Affairs

Minister Maxime Bernier said in a statement. "It is our hope that this decision will open the way for the Cuban people to pursue a process of political and economic reform." (AFP, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** In response to the announcement made by Fidel Castro that he will not return to the presidency, Special Advisor at Amnesty International, Javier Zuñiga said: "The new Cuban leadership must take advantage of this change to introduce much needed reforms to guarantee the protection of human rights". "Reform in Cuba must start with the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, the judicial review of all sentences passed after unfair trials, the abolition of the death penalty and the introduction of measures to ensure respect of fundamental freedoms and the independence of the judiciary." Amnesty International called on the new Cuban government to allow UN human rights bodies and independent human rights organisations to visit the country and also for the international community - in particular the US - to abolish policies and practices that impinge on the human rights of Cubans, such as the US economic embargo. [[Cuba: Reforms to Human Rights Much Needed](#)] (AI Press Release, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Vietnam, a staunch ally of fellow-communist Cuba, praised Fidel Castro after he resigned as president for "building and protecting" his country. "To leaders and the people of Vietnam, President Fidel is forever a great friend, a dear comrade and a brother," Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Le Dung said in a statement. The Vietnam spokesman's statement said Castro made an "extremely great contribution to the cause of building and protecting Cuba over nearly the past five decades". (Reuters, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Fidel Castro will continue to lead the revolution despite his decision not to seek another term as the island's president, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has said. "Fidel is not giving up or abandoning anything," Chávez, who has called Castro his "father," was quoted as saying in news reports out of Caracas. "He is occupying the post that he has to fill in the Cuban Revolution and the Latin American revolution." "Fidel always was in the vanguard," Chávez said as he inaugurated a hospital. "Men like Fidel never retire." (The Miami Herald, AFP, El Universal, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** The president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, called Fidel Castro's resignation "painful." "For me (it is) painful that the president, commander Fidel asks the National Assembly to leave the Presidency. I'm sad, very sad, I learned much from him, working for unity and solidarity," said Morales. Castro's decision "is democratic" because he presented his request in the context of the norms of the Cuban National Assembly of the People's Power shortly after it was elected, said the leader. (EER, AFP, 20/2/08)

**February 19:** Any potential change in Cuba after Fidel Castro's resignation must come as a result of internal decisions, said the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza. "I believe that many things could happen in Cuba, I only hope that they happen peacefully and as a result of internal decisions by the Cuban people," Insulza said. He also added "it would be a mistake to try and accelerate changes" on the island and urged all countries to "act with caution." "Any change that

takes place must stem from a democratic and peaceful dialogue among Cubans and by no means should anyone attempt to push it from outside," said Insulza. "We hope that's what'll happen and that Cuba could soon return to the OAS," he added. (*AFP, EFE, 19/2/08*)

**February 19:** Spain, which has a policy of constructive engagement toward Cuba, said it believes Fidel Castro's decision to step down as president would give his brother Raul more power to carry out reforms. "Now Raul Castro will be able to take on his reform project with a greater capacity, toughness and confidence," said Spain's minister responsible for Latin America, Trinidad Jimenez. "He has spoken of it (the project) himself and I think he will be able to start these very important reforms." But she said that although the announcement was of "great importance", it must be viewed "with caution." The head of Spain's conservative opposition, Mariano Rajoy, said he hoped for "the rapid arrival of democracy (in Cuba), because it is absurd at this time, in 2008, that a man is the judge of the people, telling them what to do and what not to do." There was no immediate comment from Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos. (*AFP, 19/2/08*)

**February 19:** Britain and the European Union joined in calling for a transfer to democracy within Cuba, the West's old communist foe, after the resignation of Fidel Castro. David Miliband, the British Foreign Secretary, said: "The Cuban people will now be looking to the future, a future which we hope will offer them political progress founded on democracy and human rights, and continued progress based on social justice and individual need." The European Commission offered to enter into a "political dialogue" with Cuba to encourage a transition to democracy. While, Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Russian Communist Party, said "it's a brave decision and, in taking it, I'm sure Fidel Castro was guided by the interests of his country and his people." He added that the President was "a fantastic political leader who has hosted high the flag of freedom". (*Times Online, 19/2/08*)

**February 19:** Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams paid tribute to Fidel Castro, who is retiring on health grounds after 49 years in power. Mr Adams met Castro during a controversial visit to Cuba in 2001. The West Belfast MP said the announcement of Castro's resignation marked "the end of an era in Cuban and Latin American politics". "He leaves behind him a country with world class health and education systems and I wish him well in his retirement," he said. Mr Adams' 2001 trip to Cuba was criticized at the time by some US politicians, including Republican Congressman Peter King, a long time supporter of Sinn Fein, who described Fidel Castro as "a human rights violator". While he was in Havana, Mr Adams unveiled a monument in memory of the 10 republican prison hunger-strikers who died in Northern Ireland in 1981. (*BBC, 20/2/08*)

**February 19:** The Vatican's No. 2 official, on the eve of a trip to Cuba, held out the possibility of a future visit there by Pope Benedict XVI, according to an interview. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, departs for Havana on February 20 for a weeklong visit to mark the 10th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic pilgrimage to the communist nation. Bertone's interview with the Italian Catholic newspaper "Avvenire" appeared on the same day that an ailing Fidel Castro, who

welcomed John Paul to Cuba in 1998, resigned as president. "Up until now it hasn't been possible," Bertone said of a possible pilgrimage by Benedict. "In the future we will see," he said without elaborating. Bertone described Vatican-Cuban relations as "relatively good," and said the Roman Catholic Church in Cuba enjoyed "great vitality" despite the "known difficulties." The interviewer noted the church continues to have problems getting its voice heard in the media, bringing in foreign clergy and freedom of religious education. "Progress has been made on some of these issues, on others less so," Bertone said. There has been no official word on whether Bertone would meet with Fidel Castro during his visit. (*AP*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Ghana's Vice President Alhaji Aliu Mahama arrived in Havana invited by the Cuban government, to foster bilateral links, especially in health. "This visit will further strengthen relations between Cuba and Ghana," stated the visitor after arriving in the Havana's international airport where he was welcomed by Education Minister Luis Ignacio Gomez and Deputy Foreign Minister Yiliam Jimenez. Aliu expects to analyze with Cuban authorities the possibility of increasing the presence of Ghanaian students on the island and sports collaboration. The African official highlighted his pride for this first visit to Havana and Cuba's support to Ghana and to African countries. (*Prensa Latina*, 19/2/08)

**February 20:** Benin's Foreign Affairs minister Moussa Okanla is to start an official visit to Cuba to expand bilateral links, "Granma" newspaper reported. Okanla's agenda in Havana includes meeting with his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque and other Cuban authorities. Okanla's first visit to Cuba will foster ties of friendship and cooperation existing between both countries. Over 360 Beninese students have graduated in Cuba, while another 33 scholarship holders are currently studying in the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Congolese Foreign Minister Basile Ikouebe began a tight agenda in Cuba, including talks with his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque. Ikouebe's agenda also includes meeting with other Cuban authorities. Some 2,718 Congolese students have so far graduated in Cuba, and 32 scholarship holders are currently studying here, the daily states. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** His Eminence, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State of the Vatican, arrived in Cuba on an official and pastoral visit until February 26. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, the chief of the Religious Affairs Office at Cuba's Central Committee of the Communist Party, Caridad Diego, Deputy Foreign Minister Eumelio Caballero, the island's ambassador to the Vatican Raul Roa Kouri, among other leaders, welcomed the illustrious visitor at the Jose Marti International Airport. Also included were Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the Apostolic Nuncio on the island Monsignor Luigi Bonazzi, and several Cuban bishops. Bertone, also Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, is expected to meet with Cuban authorities and attend pastoral activities in Havana City, Santa Clara, Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo. Cardenal Bertone's stay takes place in the context of the 10th anniversary of the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Following the resignation of Fidel Castro, Javier Legorreta, an Aid to the Church in Need specialist on Cuba, said that the presence of the Vatican's Secretary of State during the country's power transition will help promote peace and a spirit of reconciliation. According to Legorreta, the announcement that Fidel was handing the government over to his brother was "what everybody has been waiting for." Noting that the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Bertone, arrives in Cuba on February 20, the specialist says that while the coinciding of the two events wasn't planned, it is providential. "After 49 years of rule by Fidel Castro what happens on the 24th of February is very important to Cuba. Cardinal Bertone can help this change of power to take place in peace and in a spirit of reconciliation within the country. This is something the Catholic Church in Cuba has already long seen as her mission, and Cardinal Bertone will endeavor to strengthen her in this," Javier Legorreta said. The expert on the Church in Cuba also explained that "the mission of the Church is to spread reconciliation and peace. She will therefore endeavor to help the transformation in the country to take place in peace and human justice." (*CNA*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Father Joaquín Alliende, the spiritual director of the international Catholic pastoral charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), is calling the resignation of Fidel Castro "a great opportunity for the Church." He conveyed his belief by pointing out the "wisdom and tenacity" of the Cuban bishops in great times of need and Pope John Paul II's prayers when he visited the nation. Father Alliende, expressed his confidence that after the difficult years of the past, the Cuban bishops would continue to lead the People of God "with wisdom and tenacity" in the present circumstances. The Church lives through the history of her peoples, he added, and seeks "every possible opportunity" to make her Lord Jesus Christ "newly present in the constantly changing circumstances of every nation." As a final point, Father Joaquín Alliende noted that on February 24, 1998 Pope John Paul II crowned the image of Our Lady of Cobre, the patroness of Cuba and declared her the "Mother of Reconciliation" for Cuba. It was then that he asked her to "unite her people." He added, "May the events that are now unfolding there permit Cuba to restore her national solidarity, so that she may then set about planning her future." (*CNA*, 20/2/08)

**February 21:** The announcement that Fidel Castro is stepping down as Cuba's leader has raised the question of Cuba's future. One hint of what Cuba's successors are thinking comes from Brazil. A major Brazilian newspaper, *Folha de Sao Paulo*, has been carrying a series of articles by columnist Kennedy Alencar, an international journalist with close contacts in the government of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva. Da Silva visited Cuba on January 15 and met with both Fidel and Raul Castro. According to Alencar, Raul Castro indicated to Da Silva that he wanted Brazil's help in reorienting the country's economy and possibly its relationship with the United States. Raul urged Da Silva, a friend of Fidel's for years, to encourage Brazilian entrepreneurs to invest in Cuba. There were indications that Raul envisions Cuba liberalizing its economy — one of the most communist in the world — and reshaping it along Chinese or Vietnamese lines. Alencar said Raul Castro reached out to da Silva not only because of friendship, but

because he feels that only da Silva is in a position to be taken seriously in Havana, Washington and Caracas. (*Stratfor*, 21/2/08)

**February 21:** Gerónimo Gutiérrez, undersecretary for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), said that any process of change in Cuba should come from within the country and highlighted the interest “of the entire hemisphere” in “stability” on the island. On the possibility of Mexico joining a potential Group of Friends that would collaborate in a process of change in Cuba, Gutiérrez said that his country “is totally open to responding, to the best of its ability, to any type of request like that.” “But in my view any such request should come from the Cubans themselves,” he added. (*EFE*, 21/2/08)

**February 21:** The chief of Argentina’s Cabinet, Alberto Fernández, said that Castro’s exit from power will not change relations between his country and Cuba and indicated that the Cuban leader’s announcement “clearly has a special historical significance.” (*EFE*, 21/2/08)

**February 21:** Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone met with the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops (COCC) and delivered a message from Pope Benedict to the people of Cuba. Pope Benedict XVI called on Cuba's Catholic Church to work for "reconciliation" in the Caribbean country. "Do good, promote the dignity of the person (and) spread feelings of understanding, mercy and reconciliation," the pope urged in a message published simultaneously in Havana and the Vatican, handed to Cuban bishops by Bertone, the Vatican secretary of State. Benedict's message made no mention of the announcement by ailing Fidel Castro that he was stepping down after 49 years in power on the communist island. Ahead of Bertone's arrival the Cuban opposition asked him to intercede on behalf of some 240 political prisoners on the island and for an "end to repression." The pope spoke of "difficulties" encountered by the Church in Cuba, citing a "lack of resources, indifference and even mistrust." He added: "In such cases, the good disciple will find comfort in the words of the Master (Jesus Christ), 'don't be afraid, little flock. Your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.'" [[Cardinal Bertone’s address to Cuban Bishops](#) and [Papal address to Cuban Bishops](#)] (*AFP*, *CNA*, 21/2/08)

**February 21:** The Vatican's No. 2 official hinted at a papal visit to Cuba, hours after Pope Benedict XVI said Roman Catholics on the communist-run island still face difficulties and distrust. Bertone said he hoped his visit to Cuba would give "a new push" to sometimes-strained relations between the communist government and the island's Roman Catholic Church. Later, during an open-air Mass in a cobblestone courtyard outside the National Cathedral, Bertone said that Castro invited Benedict to the island in 2005. When Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega said he hoped Bertone's visit would be a precursor to one by Benedict, a grinning Bertone said: "The Holy Father heard well with his own ears the invitation of Cuba's cardinal tonight. We hope that in the future the Holy Father can visit." Bertone's comment drew a minute of sustained applause and shouts from the hundreds of faithful who filled plastic chairs and spilled out into nearby alleyways in Old Havana. Ricardo Alarcon, Havana's Communist Party First Secretary Pedro Saez, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, and other figures from the government

and the Party attended the Mass. Bertone repeated Catholic officials' long-held requests to ease government bans on religious schools and air some religious services and events on Cuban state television. Bertone said the Cuban church "aspires to be ever more present and active (...) carrying out its wide mission to teach, heal, assist the poor and promote the dignity of all human beings." [[Homilía del cardenal Bertone en la misa de la Catedral](#)] (*The New York Times, Prensa Latina, 22/2/08*)

**February 21:** Congo's Foreign Affairs Minister Basile Ikoubemet told his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque that relations between his country and the island are excellent. In a meeting with Perez Roque at the Foreign Ministry Building in Havana, the Congolese minister said Cuba is a friend country and that this first official visit to the island is a symbol of the excellent relations between the two nations. Basile Ikoubemet said that before traveling to Cuba he met with the president of his country Denis Sassou Nguesso who asked him to pass on a message of support to Fidel Castro. (*ACN, 21/2/08*)

**February 21:** Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and his counterpart from Benin, Moussa Okanla, signed a cooperation agreement that will promote diplomatic ties and bilateral exchange. During the official talks in the Foreign Ministry Building in Havana, Perez Roque highlighted common interests between the two nations as members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and reiterated the invitation of his government to the Beninese President Boni Yayi to visit Cuba. Okanla expressed his pleasure with being in Cuba and thanked the island for its historic support in helping to win the independence of Africa. "It is our duty now to build Africa and to guarantee peace, security and prosperity for the continent by wisely managing its immense natural resources and potential," said Okanla. (*ACN, 21/2/08*)

**February 21:** Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told the press that Cuba condemns the US political and economic aggression against Venezuela in support of Exxon Mobil Corporation in its legal claim against the Venezuelan oil company PDVSA. Perez Roque said that every government has the right to nationalize natural resources, and that this principle is defended by the international community. The minister officially declared that Cuba strongly supports the Venezuelan people and the government of President Hugo Chavez, and demanded respect for the sovereign decisions made by them. [[Declaración del Ministro](#)] (*Prensa Latina, 22/2/08*)

**February 21:** East Germany's last premier, who oversaw the communist country's transition to democracy, is in Cuba meeting with Fidel and Raúl Castro, a German professor working in Mexico said. Former East German Premier Hans Modrow headed to the island after receiving an invitation from Cuba's government and will stay there until late April, said Heinz Dieterich, a professor at Mexico City's Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana and a friend of Modrow. In a phone interview, Dieterich said he spoke with Modrow in January about the visit. Modrow, a moderate communist, took office four days after the opening of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and governed until the country's first democratic elections in March 1990. "The invitation means he'll meet with important Cuban politicians, including Fidel and Raúl obviously," said Dieterich, who is widely considered to be a mentor to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. (*AP, 22/2/08*)

**February 22:** During a Mass celebrated at the Monastery of St. Teresa of the Discalced Carmelites in Havana, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone called on contemplative nuns to help bring about reconciliation in Cuba through their prayers, because as he said, “Cubans need God.” In his homily, the Vatican Secretary of State said the Church’s hope for contemplative nuns is “a life transfigured by the profession of the evangelical counsels, which create communion both in the community as well as in the Church and in the world.” “In fact, the Church and the world hope for their affectionate companionship, with their incessant prayer, in the big and small events both in the universal Church as well as in the specific society in which they live,” Cardinal Bertone continued. Referring to Cuban political authorities, Cardinal Bertone also called on the nuns to pray “without ceasing that the Lord will enlighten the consciences of those who are responsible for providing a decent life to citizens, restoring peace and justice, promoting solidarity especially with those most in need. Fervently pray for the fostering of human, ethical and religious values, the absence of which particularly affects young people.” (CNA, 22/2/08)

**February 23:** Fidel Castro termed antediluvian the argument given by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Jose Miguel Insulza, regarding an alleged immediate re-admission of Cuba into the regional group. His assertion appears in an article released under the title "Who wants to join the garbage dump?" "I learned by chance that the OAS existed while reading an Internet cable about the article written by Georgina Saldierna, published in “La Jornada” under the title “Insulza Rules out Immediate Re-admission of Cuba into OAS”. "Nobody remembers the OAS. One can see the antediluvian nature of the argument, " Fidel Castro wrote. [[Who Wants to Be in the Garbage Dump?](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** North Korea praised Fidel Castro as a close ally who did not allow US sanctions and a blockade to hinder his leadership of Cuba. "The Korean people have regarded Fidel Castro as the closest comrade-in-arms and comrade, and will make positive efforts to steadily consolidate and develop the relations of friendship with the fraternal Cuban people," the North's official Korean Central News Agency cited the Foreign Ministry as saying. The ministry wished Fidel Castro a swift recovery, hoping “everything will go well in Cuba in the future too," KCNA said. "Fidel Castro has wisely led the party, government and people of Cuba to triumphantly advance the socialist cause in Cuba despite the U.S. persistent sanctions and blockade," it said. (*AP*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** The Vatican's No. 2 official unveiled a statue commemorating Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba 10 years ago, after hinting that Pope Benedict XVI may make a visit of his own. Thousands attending an open-air Mass applauded as Roman Catholic Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's secretary of state, pulled off a white cloth to reveal the bronze likeness of a smiling John Paul, waving his right hand and holding his papal staff in the other. Three times as tall as an average adult, the statue came from Rome as a gift from the Vatican and was placed in Santa Clara as the site of John Paul's first Mass during his January 1998 visit. It is inscribed: "Open the doors to Christ." A crowd of thousands stretched for 10 blocks down a wide, divided boulevard in the central Cuban city of Santa Clara, which features another famed statue: of guerrilla

fighter Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Most worshippers wore white T-shirts reading "Messenger of Truth and Hope" over a picture of John Paul. Others had baseball caps or clutched paper fans with the image of the late pontiff. [[Discurso del Cardenal Bertone](#)] (*AP*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** Pray the rosary with confidence and bring the love of Christ to people of Cuba, the Pope's secretary of state urged the youth of Cuba. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone said this during the recitation of the rosary with youth gathered at the shrine of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre in Santiago de Cuba. The Vatican representative is in Cuba to mark the 10th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to the island nation in 1988. Speaking with the youth at the Marian shrine, the cardinal said: : "You are the heirs to the memory of the Christian communities who, through trials and difficulties, knew how to hand on their authentic faith in the course of history. Now it is up to you to be the present and the future of the Church of Cuba". "You are the voice of those who do not have a voice. Today you are faced with new challenges, new and numerous problems, and new hopes too, above all in what regards the dignity and fundamental rights of the person." The Santiago Mass featured vibrant music and dancing by the faithful and top church officials, an outpouring of energy and emotion that residents of eastern Cuba are famous for. "Cuban music fascinated me here and excited me so much," said Bertone who sang a spirited rendition of the song of the Virgin of Charity together with thousands of worshippers. [[Rezo del Santo Rosario en el Santuario del Cobre](#)] (*Zenit, Reuters*, 24/2/08)

**February 24:** Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez sent congratulations to Cuba's new president, Raul Castro, and said his brother Fidel Castro remained the country's "commandant". Calling Raul Castro his "friend", Chavez - a staunch ally of Cuba - said Raul was always a quiet force, working for his brother and "loyal to the revolution". "Fidel, comrade, you continue to be el commandant Fidel. Viva Raul, viva Fidel, viva Cuba!" Chavez said on television. (*Reuters*, 24/2/08)

**February 24:** Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Le Dung referred to the newly elected leadership in Cuba: "We fully believe that in any position, President Fidel Castro will continue to devote his intellectuality to the Cuban revolutionary cause, and contribute to further strengthening and developing the traditional friendship, brotherly solidarity and comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Cuba." (*Reuters*, 25/2/08)

**February 24:** Bolivian President Evo Morales congratulated Raul Castro on his election as president of Cuba and expressed his unconditional support with the new head of state and his revolutionary people. Morales expressed the desire of his government "to continue working together for the revolution and the integration of our peoples, since only through unity can we guarantee the path of liberation," reported Prensa Latina. "I repeat my fervent support and endless solidarity for you and our beloved Cuba," said Morales in the official text. (*Granma*, 27/2/08)

**February 25:** The European Commission is willing to engage in a "constructive political dialogue" with Cuba's new President Raul Castro, Louis Michel, the EU's Development

and Aid Commissioner said. Michel "takes note" of Castro's nomination to succeed his ailing brother and long-time leader Fidel Castro as new president of Cuba, the EU's executive arm said in a statement. "The European Commission stands ready to continue working with the Cuban government, in coordination with our European Union partners, to improve and deepen cooperation issues of common interest such as the environment and climate change," it said. The change at the head of the Cuban regime comes amid a debate among European nations over whether to normalise relations with Havana. Michel, who will visit Cuba, also "stated his willingness to engage in a constructive political dialogue with Raul Castro." The EU official's trip to Cuba on March 6-7 had been planned before 81-year-old Fidel Castro announced his decision to step down. [[Statement by Commissioner Louis Michel](#)] (AFP, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** Cuba and the Vatican highlighted their common views on key international issues and considered the current level of bilateral relations positive. We have found many coincidences, Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said in a press conference after meeting with Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who is on a pastoral visit to the island. Perez Roque described the meeting as "friendly, frank and respectful," and stressed they were able to discuss "thoroughly" bilateral relations and international issues, including the need to reform the UN system and to democratize international relations for the benefit of poor countries. The Cuban official confirmed that Bertone will be received by the newly-elected Cuban President Raul Castro. Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone said he expected "clarity" and "sincerity" in his talks with the new leader. "I have come here at a special, extraordinary moment," Bertone told the news conference. Bertone hailed as "positive" the recent freeing of certain prisoners, but said he had not called for amnesties. The Vatican Secretary of State called the US embargo against Cuba "unjust" and "ethically unacceptable", and a violation of the Cuban people's independence. The Vatican Secretary of State asked the US government to end such a hostile policy and allow contact between Cuban families living across the Strait of Florida. [[Conferencia de prensa](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, AFP, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** The Vatican's secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, favored harmony between culture and ethics to build a world with values that stimulate human and social development. Coexistence without values is like culture without ethics, and that leads to a dehumanized society, said the cardinal in his lecture "Culture and Ethical Foundations of Human Life" at the University of Havana. The envoy of Pope Benedict XVI urged to find concrete ways, at the level of society, for culture and ethics to build a better world based on such values as freedom, solidarity, justice and peace. He highlighted the thought of illustrious Cubans such as National Hero Jose Marti and Father Felix Varela, to whom he paid his respects at the University of Havana where his remains are kept. "If culture is an asset, it then must be at everybody's reach," said Cardinal Bertone during the lecture, also attended by Culture Minister Abel Prieto and intellectuals Armando Hart, Fina Garcia Marruz, Cintio Vitier, Miguel Barnet, Eusebio Leal and Roberto Fernandez Retamar. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** Raúl Castro's defiant speech and his decision to designate a hard-liner as his No. 2 drew mixed international reaction, with a top European official saying he was

disappointed but others sending their congratulations. "The news could have been more open, better," said Javier Solana, the European Union's top foreign affairs representative. "I'm not sure that the transition has begun from the political point of view." The French foreign ministry called on Cuba to take a democratic path and free political prisoners. "More liberations of opposition politicians and journalists, especially those who are in poor health, would be a first sign by the Cuban authorities on their determination to begin implementing reforms," said Pascale Andreani, a foreign ministry spokesman. Many countries, however, had different reactions. Meanwhile, South African President Thabo Mbeki sent a congratulatory message to Castro, recalling how Cuba had helped fight colonialism in Africa and promising to help as Cuba begins "the new and difficult task of consolidating the political and economic system in Cuba." A Peruvian foreign ministry official said bilateral relations would be unaffected by the events. Peru was the only major Latin American country to openly call on Cuba to enact democratic reforms after Fidel Castro announced last week he would not seek reelection to the presidency. (*EFE*, 25/2/08)

**February 26:** During his visit to the island, the Vatican secretary of State, cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, held a meeting with diplomats based in Havana. At the venue of the Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry, Bertone addressed the role of the Church in Cuba and saluted the new government in place since February 24. [[Discurso de Bertone](#)] (*Zenit*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** The Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) "is an eminent symbol of the international vocation of Cuba," said Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, after meeting with a group of students at the institution. The Secretary of State of Pope Benedicto XVI received an explanation on the efforts of ELAM from the administration as well as from Jose M. Miyar, Secretary of the Council of State and Yilliam Jimenez, Vice Minister for International Cooperation at the Foreign Ministry. After learning about the project, Cardinal Bertone said that at ELAM the ideas of cooperation and solidarity become reality; "the solidarity with the poorest and neediest," in a world where the right to health care is not for all, he noted. Later in his tour, the Vatican official praised the role of Cuba in conceiving the highly professional medical school where values of "integral humanism" are promoted, precepts he said coincide with the Catholic Church. (*Granma*, 27/2/08)

**February 26:** Vatican secretary of state Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone raised the Catholic Church's concern about prisoners in Cuba in a meeting with Cuban President Raul Castro. "With the greatest respect for the sovereignty of the country and its citizens, I expressed to President Raul Castro the concern of the Church over the prisoners and their families," Bertone said at Havana airport before his departure. The Vatican's No. 2 official did not specify whether he was referring to jailed dissidents or common prisoners. Earlier, the cardinal told the news agency of the Italian Bishops Conference, SIR, that in discussions with Cuban officials he had not asked "directly" for the release of political prisoners. "It would look like interference," he was quoted as saying. "The Church does not impose, but proposes." He also told the agency that the island's leaders had assured him they would allow some Roman Catholic broadcasts on state-controlled media.

"Authorities have promised me more openness in the print press and the radio -- and in some exceptional cases, in television as well," he said. "We do hope for some openness, because nothing is impossible." Bertone said he hoped his six-day visit had given a new push to once strained ties between the Cuban state and the Catholic Church 10 years after Pope John Paul's historic trip to the island. But he said the relations would always be "challenging." Bertone's visit brought a welcome boost to the Church in Cuba through greater exposure in the state-controlled media. Cuban television broadcast live a news conference where Bertone, in response to a question, welcomed the recent release of four political prisoners, though he said he had not pressed for an amnesty for other jailed dissidents. (*Reuters, AP, 27/2/08*)

**February 26:** China congratulated Cuba's new leader Raul Castro, the younger brother of Fidel Castro, who stepped down last week after 49 years in power. "China and Cuba are friendly nations, and China will continue to work with Cuba to push forward reciprocal and friendly relations," said Liu Jianchao, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman. Liu told a regular press conference that China had advocated respect for the Cuban people's decision. "We believe and wish Cuba would maintain stability and development under the new leadership, and this conforms to the interest of the people and is conducive to regional peace and stability," Liu said. Liu also praised Fidel Castro. "He has long been committed to China-Cuba friendship and made historical contributions to bilateral ties," he said. (*Xinhua, 26/2/08*)

**February 26:** Former Czech President Vaclav Havel and former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar said Cuba remains subject to "tyranny" after Fidel Castro's resignation and called on the new Cuban president to make democratic changes. "Sadly, Fidel's abdication has not been meant to give way to a pluralistic democracy (...) but to perpetuate tyranny on the island," Havel and Aznar said in a statement released by the Prague-based International Committee for Democracy in Cuba, and also signed by Carlos Alberto Montaner, head of the Cuban Liberal Party. "This is unacceptable", the statement affirms. The committee was formed in 2003. Its members also include former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and other former politicians from around the globe. [[OneStepBack](#)](*AP, 27/2/08*)

**February 26:** One hundred young students from Nicaragua will be selected to study medicine in Cuba. The selection process has been undertaken by the Youth Institute of the Central American country. Benita Arbizu, deputy director of the Nicaraguan institution, explained that people from communities located far from the capital of the country —such as Rio San Juan, Chinandega and other departments— will have priority in the selection process. Around 2,000 Nicaraguans are currently studying medicine in several facilities of the Latin American Medical School in Cuba, while nearly a hundred have become doctors in Cuba. (*Prensa Latina, 28/2/08*)

**February 26:** Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba sent teams to Paraguay to try to help authorities control a yellow fever outbreak that has killed three people and sickened at least 13, including some living near the capital, Asuncion. Medical, laboratory and insect specialists from the three countries joined Paraguay health officials as local authorities

used the army, police and schools to promote insect control and vaccination programs, the Pan American Health Organization said in a statement. Seven cases have been found in young people from San Pedro department who visited rural areas where they contracted a jungle variant of the virus spread by mosquitoes among monkeys and humans, the organization said. (*Bloomberg*, 27/2/08)

**February 26:** Experts from Venezuela and Cuba are developing research to genetically diagnose people with physical disabilities, in an initiative aimed at determining illness causes and the necessary treatment, official sources reported. Venezuelan Participation and Social Protection Minister Erika Farias said the work started in the state of Miranda in 2007, and has been extended to such other states as Barinas, Zulia, and Delta Amacuro. People that are already located by the Barrio Adentro Mission are genetically assessed within that system, she told *Venezolana de Television*. The official said the initiative involves house-by-house actions with Cuban medical equipment, social workers and specialized physicians. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/08)

**February 27:** Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya and former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who drafted a plan to supervise the independence of Kosovo, are among a near-record 197 nominees for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. "Of the total, 164 are individuals and 33 are organisations," Geir Lundestad, head of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, told the press. "This is the second highest number -- the most was in 2005 with 199." "The field is wide open," said Stein Toennesson, head of the Peace Research Institute, at Oslo. "I cannot see any clear favourites". (*Reuters*, 28/2/08)

**February 27:** Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom met with Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodriguez in a private audience, Guatemalan Presidential spokesman Fernando Barillas informed. "They spoke of the origin of music in Cuba and Guatemala, and their importance for strengthening the identity of the Latin American peoples," Barillas told *Prensa Latina*. Silvio Rodriguez, who is visiting Guatemala for the first time, invited Colom to attend his performance in Guatemala City. After his presentation in Guatemala, Rodriguez will perform in El Salvador, another country he has never visited, and from there will go to Nicaragua, a nation he visited 23 years ago. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/2/08)

**February 28:** Cuba is to sign at the United Nations headquarters in New York the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Pact and the Civil and Political Rights Pact, as announced on December 10, *Granma* newspaper reported. According to the publication, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque traveled to New York to ink those accords. Perez Roque's agenda also includes meeting with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Coordination Bureau, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and the president of the UN General Assembly, Srgjan Kerim. The Cuban diplomat will also travel to Geneva to participate in the Top Level Segment of the Seventh Ordinary Session of the Human Rights Council, where Cuba attends as a founding country. (*Prensa Latina*, 28/2/08)

**February 28:** The Spanish government advised, through different channels, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican Secretary of State, regarding the visit he paid to Havana.

Spain and the Vatican - albeit possibly with different short-term aims - are conducting very similar policies regarding the situation in Cuba. In an electoral debate with the PP (opposition Popular Party) the spokesman in the Congress, Gustavo de Aristegui - who criticized the rapprochement with the Castro regime by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Bernardino Leon, said the Spanish government and the Catholic Church are maintaining "the same position". During a stopover by Bertone in Madrid, the subjects of conversation with Spanish government officials included the Vatican secretary of state's visit to Cuba, the contacts he held there with the Cuban authorities and the subjects he asked about, including the situation of the prisoners, a matter that worries the Catholic Church from the viewpoint of human rights and specifically of the humanitarian aspects. (ABC, 28/2/08)

**February 28:** Cuba signed two UN human rights pacts that long-time president Fidel Castro, replaced by his brother just four days ago, had refused to endorse for more than three decades. But the communist-run island's foreign minister said after signing the documents at UN headquarters in New York that Havana still shared the reservations expressed by Castro about the pacts and would formally record them in the future. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Perez Roque had announced on December 10 Cuba's intention to adhere to the accords. He also said then that Cuba would open its doors in early 2009 to regular international scrutiny by the recently created UN Human Rights Council. Perez Roque said in a statement on Thursday the decision to sign "has been taken now that the selective and unjust mandate against Cuba imposed by the brutal pressure and blackmail carried out by the United States ... has been clearly defeated." He called this "a historic victory for the Cuban people," adding that "it was the Revolution the one that made possible the enjoyment by its people of the rights protected by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." The signature was "a sovereign decision of the Cuban government," he said. [[Statement by Cuba's Foreign Minister](#)] (Reuters, AP, 28,29/2/08)

**February 28:** Benedict XVI's secretary of state has brought back a positive report after his six-day pastoral trip to Cuba, saying the Church in Cuba is being reborn, above all in the enthusiasm of the youth. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone affirmed this in an interview with Vatican Radio and L'Osservatore Romano, to be aired and printed on March 1<sup>st</sup>. Cardinal Bertone spoke of his meeting with Raúl Castro, saying: "I have seen a man who is very realistic, open to discuss everything, and above all, concerned with maintaining values and ideals. "Naturally I have proposed to President Raúl also the problem of prisoners of all types, not just political prisoners, as well as pastoral attention to the prisoners." Asked about his public condemnation of the embargo, "the cardinal said that this judgment could also be applied to "many restrictions that the European Union still maintains." "It seems to me that these attitudes naturally seek to try to make the government of the island evolve toward greater liberty, a greater respect for human rights, but I think that these measures that are so hard, taken unilaterally, do not favor development," the cardinal said. "They make the people suffer, because it is the people, the families, the children, the youth, who are penalized with these measures, and they don't recognize the dignity of the

nation in its values, in its independence, in its tradition. Thus, they are unacceptable." He continued: "I have assured that the Holy See will work to try so that at least these sanctions are reduced, or even eliminated. Certainly, this has to come with a development toward greater liberty, toward a greater recognition of personal rights and social rights, as well as political and economic rights. "But there are also promising prospects, because now, Cuba is preparing itself to sign two UN conventions, precisely regarding personal rights, regarding social rights, regarding economic rights, regarding political rights." (*Zenit*, 28/2/08)

**February 28:** Cuba supplies aid to a number of countries and one of the biggest aid schemes is in Bolivia. "There is usually a love interest behind it all, if you ask me," says Dr Maria de los Angeles, a sparky woman from Guines, not far from Havana, director of the Cuban-Venezuelan eye hospital at El Alto, 13,000 feet up (3,962m) in the High Andes. Discussing why a very small number of the 2,000 Cuban medical personnel sent to Bolivia from the island over the past two years have jumped ship and gone home, Dr Mabel, an attractive young eye surgeon from Pinar del Rio, the western-most province of Cuba, says that "there's no pack of parties here." In a score of general hospitals built mainly with Venezuelan money over the past two years, 2,000 Cuban medical staff including 1,300 qualified doctors have been at work. They have provided more than nine million consultations. In particular, Maria de los Angeles, Mabel, and her colleagues have carried out 200,000 operations in ophthalmological units up and down Bolivia. So popular are they, that the units built on the frontiers with Peru and Argentina have treated more Peruvians and Argentines than Bolivians. "We treat anyone who walks in, and we do it for nothing," says Maria de los Angeles. In the other Cuban hospitals in Bolivia, services go from preventative medicine - which has pushed down infant mortality and pushed up life expectancy - to general healthcare and emergency operations. (*BBC*, 28/2/08)

**February 29:** In an interview with the "L'Osservatore Romano" and "Vatican Radio", Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone reflected on his recent visit to Cuba and said dialogue between the Church and the State is necessary. He also said Raul Castro is willing to "exchange prisoners" with the United States. Recounting his meeting with Cuba's new president and with other officials, Cardinal Bertone said, "Discussions began initially with the exchange of impressions about Cuba and about the vitality of the Catholic Church. Later I met privately with the President face to face for 55 minutes. I presented him with a specific request and the new President responded positively." The Vatican Secretary of State said one issue addressed with the Cuban president "refers to the action of the bishops' conference." "The recognition of the Catholic Church's legal status is one concrete problem that exists," he stated. Cardinal Bertone also revealed that he discussed the issue of political prisoners with the President. "I gave President Raul a list of names of prisoners for consideration [to be released] for humanitarian reasons, respecting always the sovereignty of Cuba," the cardinal said, adding that he also expressed his concern for the families of those detained. In response, Cardinal Bertone said, "the President emphasized the importance of reciprocity at the international level. He said he was willing to address all the problems with great openness and even to make concrete gestures in an atmosphere of reciprocity". The Vatican cardinal said President

Castro also brought up the issue of five Cuban prisoners in the United States and their humanitarian treatment, “with the eventual possibility of an exchange.” He also stressed that since the embargo directly affects the inhabitants of Cuba, he “gave assurances that the Holy See would work to have these sanctions reduced, if not altogether eliminated.” However, he emphasized that “this would certainly imply movement towards greater freedom, towards the recognition of personal, social, political and economic rights” by the Cuban government. (CNA, 29/2/08)



## SECURITY

**February 2:** The Angolan Ministry of Home Affairs and the Cuban Ministry of Interior signed in Luanda a cooperation agreement on security and public order. The accord was signed by the Angolan Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Angelo Viegas Tavares, and his Cuban counterpart, José Mian Pino. The agreement has seven points linked to study programmes in different specialities, evaluation of teachers, a chronogram of the courses, as well as training, preparation of staff and technical assistance. (ANGOP, 3/2/08)

**February 26:** Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) commemorated the 90th anniversary of the Red Army that defeated fascism in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1945. We send our deepest affection to our brothers-in-arms, said Vice Admiral Pedro Perez, chief of the Revolutionary Navy, at the main event to commemorate the Red Army’s anniversary in Havana. Perez said Cubans feel proud of the solidarity and assistance the then Soviet Union granted to the Cuban Revolution. General Alvaro Lopez Miera, deputy chief of the Chiefs of Staff of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, Ambassadors Andrei Dimitriev (Russia) and Igor Paluyan (Belarus), and Kazakhstan’s business attaché, Beisenbek Diusenbayev, attended the event. (Prensa Latina, 26/2/08)

**February 29:** Cuban President Raul Castro led a meeting of the Western Army Military Council, in which he highlighted the work carried out by the military in 2007. In the meeting, it was reiterated that the mobilization of Army reservists and militiamen, known as "Operacion Caguairan", will continue for the time being, with the aim of developing their military abilities. The importance of enlisting women in the defense of the country, especially through the female voluntary military service, was also stressed. During the meeting, Raul Castro read a message from the leader of the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro, who congratulated General Julio Casas Regueiro for his promotion to Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR). "I think the enemy has not managed to entangle us thanks to Raul Castro's wise and serene speech," Fidel Castro noted in that text. On behalf of the Military Council, Western Army chief Lieutenant General Leopoldo Cintra, praised Raul Castro’s work as FAR minister for almost five decades. (Prensa Latina, 2/3/08)



## TERRORISM

**February 7:** For the first time, the top commander of detention operations at Guantanamo has confirmed the existence of the mysterious Camp 7. In an interview with the press, Rear Admiral Mark Buzby also provided a few details about the maximum-security lockup. Guantanamo commanders said Camp 7 is for key alleged al-Qaida members, who must be kept apart from other prisoners to prevent them from retaliating against long-term detainees who have talked to interrogators. They also want the location kept secret for fear of terrorist attack. (*AP*, 7/2/08)

**February 20:** A logistics support network of the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia was dismantled in an international operation that led to the capture of 39 people, including a Cuban doctor resident in Colombia. The doctor, identified as Emilio Muñoz Franco, supplied the guerrillas with “medicine, glasses, and medicinal formulae,” said Pilar Hurtado, head of the Colombian Administrative Department for Security (DAS), at a press conference. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 20/2/08)



## US-CUBA RELATIONS

**February 3:** Florida's surgeon general has filed a complaint with the state Board of Psychology against Carlos Alvarez, a psychologist and former Florida International University professor convicted of conspiring to act as an unregistered agent for Cuba. The administrative complaint is being reviewed by the department's attorneys before it goes to the board, said Eulinda Jackson, a spokeswoman for Ana Viamonte Ros, the state surgeon general and Florida health secretary. Viamonte Ros' complaint, filed in December, asks the board to consider penalties against Alvarez, including revocation or suspension of his license, limiting of his practice, a fine or a reprimand. Steven Chaykin, Alvarez's attorney, said the complaint will have no impact on his client, because he did not practice psychology. (*The Miami Herald*, 3/2/08)

**February 3:** A group of Cuban rafters who had been detained in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo has arrived in Miami. It is also believed that Mexican authorities will soon be releasing another group of 40 Cubans held in the municipality of Tapachula, near Chiapas. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 4/2/08)

**February 4:** At least 65 journalists were killed in 2007, nine more than the previous year, as violence in Iraq and Somalia continued to put reporters in danger, a press freedom watchdog said in Hong Kong. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) report also singled out China, Russia, the Philippines and Cuba as the worst offenders in recent years in limiting press freedom and failing to counter danger to journalists. (*AFP*, 4/2/08)

**February 5:** The US intelligence community sees Cuban leader Raul Castro pursuing a cautious economic-reform agenda as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez continues his

push to challenge US interests in Central and South America. The conclusions were part of Director of National Intelligence J. Michael McConnell's annual threat-assessment report, presented before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. In his written statement, McConnell, speaking on behalf of 16 US government intelligence agencies, painted a picture of Chavez as stung by a domestic electoral defeat and a worsening economy at home but determined to "unite Latin America, under his leadership, behind an anti-US, radical leftist agenda and to look to Cuba as a key ideological ally." In Cuba, Raul Castro is seen taking "cautious, incremental steps" on some expanded role for the private sector, especially in agriculture. The report also addresses the widely reported—but not publicly acknowledged—differences between Raul Castro and Chavez. The "sidelining of Fidel Castro in favour of his brother Raul may lead to a period of adjustment in Venezuela's relations with Cuba," McConnell says. But the two are expected to "smooth over" any differences. Venezuela is thought to provide a net subsidy of \$1 billion to Cuba, according to McConnell. [[Report by US Director of National Intelligence](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 5/2/08)

**February 8:** Three associates of anti-Castro Cuban militant Luis Posada Carriles were each sentenced to less than a year in prison for refusing to testify against Posada. Santiago Alvarez, Osvaldo Mitat, and Ernesto Abreu pleaded guilty last year to obstruction of justice for refusing to testify before a grand jury investigating allegations that Posada lied to federal investigators in a bid to become a US citizen. Posada's case was thrown out last year by a US district judge, but the government is appealing. Alvarez, a wealthy Cuban national from Miami who has been Posada's benefactor, was given the longest term at 10 months. Mitat was ordered to serve eight months, and Abreu was given two months in prison and five months of house arrest. All three were ordered to serve two years' probation. But Alvarez, a legal permanent resident in the United States, is likely to remain jailed because he now faces deportation proceedings in immigration court. Miguel del Aguila, Abreu's lawyer, said the sentence was fair. Gary Weiser, who represented Mitat and Alvarez, declined to comment. (*The Miami Herald*, 8/2/08)

**February 9:** The CODEPINK organization continued in Miami its campaign for the imprisonment of Luis Posada Carriles, who is walking freely in that city despite his criminal records. "We hope the Miami police protect our constitutional right to stage a rally in this community," said Medea Benjamin, founder and co-director of the organization, who early January had to suspend a similar campaign because of the Cuban-American extreme right's hostility in the city. CODEPINK will demand the Bush government to include Posada Carriles on the list of the most wanted terrorists by the Federal Bureau of Investigations. The organization will also request the extradition of the criminal to Venezuela, whose justice calls him for the explosion in mid air of a Cubana de Aviacion plane in 1976 that killed 73 passengers. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/2/08)

**February 11:** Cuban leader Fidel Castro denied US presidential hopeful John McCain's claim that Cuban agents helped torture American prisoners of war in Vietnam in the 1960s, calling the assertion "a strange legend." "Let me remind you, Mr. McCain: the commandments of the religion you practice prohibit lying," Castro wrote in an essay published by the Communist Party newspaper Granma. "The years in prison and the

wounds received because of the attacks on Hanoi do not excuse you from the moral obligation of the truth," the essay added. McCain, Republican front-runner for the November presidential contest, was a military pilot taken prisoner in 1967 and held for five years in communist North Vietnam. McCain has said that while he was held in Hanoi, a Cuban agent came to show his Vietnamese captors "some new interrogation techniques." While he has said that Cubans helped torture other American prisoners, they were not among those who tortured him. [[The Republican Candidate](#)] (*The Miami Herald, Prensa Latina*, 11/2/08)

**February 11:** Ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro took on front-running US Republican presidential candidate John McCain, accusing him of lying about Cubans torturing American prisoners of war in Vietnam. Castro's criticism brought a sharp retort from McCain as he campaigned in Annapolis, Maryland. "For me to respond to Fidel Castro, who has oppressed and repressed his people and who is one of the most brutal dictators on earth, for me to dignify any comments he might make is certainly beneath me," he said at a press conference. "It's a matter of record and you can ask several of the POWs who had direct contact with some, some thug that came to Hanoi with an underling assistant." In Miami on January 25, McCain had said: "There's a person I want you to help me find when Cuba is free, and that's that Cuban that came to the prison camps of North Vietnam and tortured and killed my friends. We'll get him and bring him to justice, too." (*Reuters*, 11/2/08)

**February 12:** Though the average American can't travel to Cuba, 10 Brown students will have the opportunity to spend next semester in Havana studying with 10 Cuban students at the Casa de Las Americas, taught entirely by Cuban professors. "This is the perfect opportunity to look at the past, present and future of Cuba while sitting next to Cuban nationals," said Kendall Brostuen, director of international programs and associate dean of the College. Brown has a license from the Department of the Treasury authorizing semester programs in Cuba for its students, Brostuen said, meaning students can travel only by going through Brown's program. (*The Brown Daily Herald*, 12/2/08)

**February 12:** Ten members from Fayetteville First United Methodist Church and one member from Peachtree City United Methodist Church experienced first-hand what La Iglesia Metodista en Cuba (The Methodist Church in Cuba) is doing to spread the Gospel in that country. The Rev. Mark Westmoreland, pastor of Fayetteville First UMC, said of the trip, "We saw a glimpse of the Kingdom of God." The group worshiped with and worked with Iglesia Metodista Nuevitas in Nuevitas, a port city of 40,000 on the northern coast of Cuba 350 miles east of Havana. (*The Citizen.Com*, 12/2/08)

**February 12:** Vietnam and China are led by Communists, but they aren't anti-American like Cuba. That puts the Caribbean island 90 miles south of Florida in a special category among the pantheon of nations - one that demands tighter trading controls, said the US secretary of commerce. Speaking to the board of directors of US Wheat Associates, Carlos Gutierrez said the bottom line is Cubans don't want US friendship. "I know this sounds dramatic (...) but Cuba is essentially an anti-US country," he said. "You may not see that when you go there and are wined and dined, but since the early 1960s, Cuba's

dream scenario is a world without the US. It's difficult to do business with a country that would like to see yours disappear." At the USW meeting, Gutierrez made it clear he is in full support of his boss's continued hard line against Cuba. "They don't want our friendship, but blame everything wrong in Cuba on us," Gutierrez said. Cubans claim poverty on the island is because of the embargo, he said, and not because they put all their money into the military. They claim there are Central Intelligence Agency agents all over the island, which is why they imprison political dissidents and have such an imposing police state. (*Capital Press*, 12/2/08)

**February 12:** Former Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp officials denied claims made by Senator John McCain, and supported by US government research, that Cuban interrogators tortured American POWs in Hanoi during the Vietnam War. Campaigning last month, Republican presidential candidate and former Vietnam POW McCain said fellow POWs had been tortured by "a couple of Cubans." Fidel Castro denounced McCain for making the claim, calling it "a strange legend." Vietnamese officials and former POW camp administrators supported Castro. "I don't think there was any Cuban involvement in any camp for US POWs," said Tran Trong Duyet, who was director of Hoa Lo prison, known by the Americans as the "Hanoi Hilton," from 1970 to 1973. "No Cubans ever came to the prison while the US pilots were there," said Nguyen Thi Don, former manager of the Hoa Lo prison museum. "It is incorrect for John McCain to have made such a statement." (*DPA*, 13/2/08)

**February 12:** Fidel Castro stated that proposals by US republican candidate for the presidency John McCain sound like the dreams of a castaway in the middle of a storm. In the second part of his article entitled "The Republican Candidate," the Cuban Revolution leader continues analyzing McCain's words. More than 2400 years ago, wrote the statesman, Socrates, the famous Athenian wise man, celebrated for his method and martyr to his ideas, conscious of human limitations, said: "One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing." Today, McCain, the Republican candidate, proclaims before his fellow citizens: "One thing only I know, and that is that I know everything." [[The Republican Candidate, second part](#)]

**February 13:** Fidel Castro took another swipe at Republican US presidential hopeful John McCain, in an editorial published in Cuban official media. Fidel Castro, 81, wrote in the Communist Party newspaper Granma that McCain was in the pocket of conservative Cuban-Americans, most of whom live in Florida and strongly oppose his policies. "It is incredible that at this point in history, the Republican candidate, decorated as a hero, would become the pawn of that mafia. No one who believes in himself would commit such a serious ethical mistake," Castro wrote in his third in a series of articles picking apart McCain. [[The Republican Candidate, third part](#)] (*AFP*, 13/2/08)

**February 13:** The next Pastors for Peace Caravan to Cuba will be on the road on June/July visiting more than 120 US and Canadian cities along 14 routes. It will collect donations of medical and educational supplies all across the US and Canada as a collective challenge to the inhuman and immoral US blockade and travel ban, said organizers. Five of the buses will be named in honor of the Five Cubans incarcerated in

US jails. This year's caravan will also host the second Hiphop Without Borders Exchange. Accompanying the caravan will be many hiphop artists to participate in an international hiphop festival, as well as carrying turntables, keyboards and other musical equipment to support Cuban hiphop. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/2/08)

**February 14:** The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture called on the Bush Administration to interpret the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act as broadly as possible, to enable US companies to compete with other countries in Cuba. "Our trade policy with Cuba is completely inconsistent with respect to our relations with other countries," said North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson, the president of NASDA. "Cuba is a major potential market for US products, especially agricultural products, but our efforts to increase trade there are severely restricted by our own federal government." Johnson leads a 12-member trade North Dakota trade delegation to Cuba. The policy amendment, offered by Nebraska Agriculture Director Greg Ibach, was adopted unanimously. (*USAgNet*, 14/2/08)

**February 14:** Agribusiness professionals can learn more about marketing products to Cuba at a conference scheduled for March 6 at the Texas Department of Agriculture in Austin. "Exporting to Cuba" will help agribusiness, export service providers, producers and government officials better understand how to distribute goods to the Cuban export market, said Dr. Parr Rosson, Texas AgriLife Extension Service economist and director of the Center for North American Studies at Texas A&M University. "Participants can expect to learn more about the marketing opportunities and the steps necessary to travel to Cuba and do business there, and what steps you have to go through getting your product licensed," Rosson said. "We're also going to talk about potential markets and what they are looking for, and what a company can expect once they go into business." The Cuban market has been focused on such bulk commodities as wheat, soybeans and soybean meal, rice and corn, Rosson said. (*USAgNet*, 14/2/08)

**February 15:** Fidel Castro stated that the basic problem at this time is to know whether the Republican candidate John McCain is aware of the economic crisis which, shortly or immediately, will beset the United States. In the fourth part of his article entitled "The Republican Candidate," the Cuban Revolution leader wrote: "Only from that point of view will it be possible to evaluate any candidate with the possibility of assuming the leadership of that powerful country." [[The Republican Candidate, fourth part](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 15/2/07)

**February 15:** After two years of shrinkage, US sales to Cuba of agricultural goods during 2007 bounced back to \$437.7 million, the highest annual total since such sales were authorized in 2000. The 2007 total represented a strong increase over the \$340.4 million recorded in 2006 and the \$350.2 million recorded in 2005, according to figures compiled by the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a New York group that monitors bilateral trade. The \$437.7 million made Cuba the United States' 37th largest trading partner for the year, according to the council, which obtains its data from the US government. Since Washington first authorized such sales to Cuba as a humanitarian

exemption to the US trade embargo, Havana has bought nearly \$2 billion in those goods from US companies. (*The Miami Herald*, 15/2/08)

**February 16:** Cuban President Fidel Castro ended his reflections on John McCain, republican candidate for the US presidency, with quotations and references to arguments on the article "Why The Debt Crisis is Now the Greatest Threat to the American Republic," by Chalmers Johnson. In the fifth and last part of his article entitled "The Republican Candidate," the Cuban revolution leader stated, "When I refer to Chalmers Johnson's article, I am strictly abiding by the irrefutable arguments he used. I use the method of selecting essential paragraphs textually." [[The Republican Candidate, fifth and last part](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 16/2/08)

**February 16:** Key West's much-ballyhooed connection with Cuba has some folks worried. With Cuban dictator Fidel Castro ailing and a US presidential election looming, many speculate that change, perhaps dramatic, might soon surface in the half-century old standoff between the United States and communist Cuba. "Americans are going to be so curious and are going to want to go to Cuba," said Harold Wheeler, head of the Monroe County Tourist Development Council. "I don't see it as a threat, but you have to be prepared and have a plan available to offset any potential negative impacts." Should Cuba undergo radical, rapid change, Key West could see anything from a chaotic influx of Cuban-Americans hoping to make their way by boat to Cuba to a sudden drop in vital tourist bookings as Americans flock to the long-forbidden island, forgoing more familiar domestic destinations. A 2002 study by the University of Colorado projected that up to 1 million Americans would visit Cuba in the first year should the island open to the United States, with the numbers leaping to 3 million within five years. Another study found one in five Florida tourists surveyed would choose Cuba over Florida as a vacation destination. (*Cox News Service*, 16/2/08)

**February 19:** President Bush expressed hope that the end of Fidel Castro's presidency will launch a transition to democracy in Cuba after nearly 50 years of ironclad, communist rule. "What does this mean for the people in Cuba?" Bush said at a news conference during his trip to Africa. "They're the ones who suffered under Fidel Castro. They're the ones who were put in prison because of their beliefs. They're the ones who have been denied their right to live in a free society. So I view this as a period of transition and it should be the beginning of the democratic transition in Cuba." Bush said he anticipates debate about Cuba's future, and that some people will say "Let's promote stability." "In the meantime, political prisoners will rot in prison and the human condition will remain pathetic in many cases," he said. "The international community should work with the Cuban people to begin to build institutions that are necessary for democracy," Bush said. "Eventually, this transition ought to lead to free and fair elections -- and I mean free, and I mean fair -- not these kind of staged elections that the Castro brothers try to foist off as true democracy," Bush said. "The United States will help the people of Cuba realize the blessings of liberty," Bush said. [[Video of George W. Bush's statements to the press](#)] (*Globe and Mail*, *Reuters*, *CNN*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte said the United States will not soon lift its embargo on Cuba despite Fidel Castro's resignation. Asked by reporters at the State Department if Washington planned to change its Cuba policy now that Castro has stepped down, Negroponte replied: "I can't imagine that happening anytime soon." He declined further comment. (*AP*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Senator Mel Martinez said Fidel Castro's announcement that he will not seek reelection as president made Tuesday "a good day for the Cuban people." Martinez, (Republican-Florida), also noted the irony of the Havana government first posting the Castro decision on the Internet, which the "Cuban people are not allowed to freely access. It's unavailable to the average Cuban." It's "a good day for the Cuban people, who are no longer ruled by the Cuban dictator," Martinez said in an interview with the press from Orlando. He added that with Raúl Castro in charge, Cuba continues to be ruled by a dictator. "But we have one down, maybe one to go." Martinez said the issue now is "how do we move forward so the Cuban people have an opportunity for a better day, for democracy?" Martinez said he doubts Raúl Castro will be much of an improvement: "If we saw some difference, some change, but there's been no hope that Raúl Castro, who has been his older brother's enforcer, will be the kind of agent of change Cuba needs today. "We'll see hopefully in the future a new set of leaders who will come with new ideas," he added. (*CNN*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton, called for the release of political prisoners in Cuba following Fidel Castro's resignation. "We need a president who will work with countries around the world — Europe, Western hemisphere — to push Cuba now to join the community of nations and become a democracy, and I will certainly do that as president," Clinton told patrons at a diner in Parma, Ohio, where she is campaigning ahead of the state's March 5 Democratic primary. In a statement released by her campaign, the New York senator said that if elected president, "I will engage our partners in Latin America and Europe who have a strong stake in seeing a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba, and who want very much for the United States to play a constructive role to that end. The United States must pursue an active policy that does everything possible to advance the cause of freedom, democracy and opportunity in Cuba." (*AP*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Presidential candidate Barack Obama urged that the US be prepared to take steps to normalize relations with Cuba and to ease the trade embargo of the last five decades if the Cuban leadership "begins opening Cuba to meaningful democratic change." Castro's resignation "should mark the end of a dark era in Cuba's history (...) Fidel Castro's stepping down is an essential first step, but it is sadly insufficient in bringing freedom to Cuba," said Obama, an Illinois senator. "Cuba's future should be determined by the Cuban people and not by an anti-democratic successor regime," Obama said. "The prompt release of all prisoners of conscience wrongly jailed for standing up for the basic freedoms too long denied to the Cuban people would mark an important break with the past. It's time for these heroes to be released." (*AP*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Republican presidential candidate John McCain underscored that "freedom for the Cuban people is not yet at hand" despite Castro's resignation. "We must press the Cuban regime to release all political prisoners unconditionally, to legalize all political parties, labor unions and free media, and to schedule internationally monitored elections," the Arizona senator said in a statement. "Cuba's transition to democracy is inevitable; it is a matter of when not if. With the resignation of Fidel Castro, the Cuban people have an opportunity to move forward and continue pushing for the moment that they will truly be free. America can and should help hasten the sparking of freedom in Cuba. The Cuban people have waited long enough." (*AP*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Several US government officials and lawmakers reacted to Fidel Castro's resignation. "We would hope that the departure from the scene of Cuba's long-ruling dictator Fidel Castro would allow for a democratic transition (...) We would be willing to provide assistance to Cuba in a period of real democratic transition, " said Tom Casey, deputy spokesman at the State Department. "Today's news from Cuba should not focus on one man who is merely formalizing the transfer of power he initiated a year and a half ago. It should focus on the more than 11 million Cubans who still seek the freedom they deserve, " said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat-Nevada). "The resignation of Fidel Castro is a reason to hope that freedom is closer than it was when he was the public face of an oppressive regime, but is not a guarantee of a democratic future for the people of Cuba," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Democrat-California). "Fidel's comings and goings are irrelevant (...) The Cuban people want freedom. Replacing one dictator for another doesn't amount to a hill of beans," said Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican –Florida). (*Washington Post*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Florida officials are watching and waiting for developments in Cuba, but the surprise resignation of an ailing Fidel Castro had not prompted an alert by mid-morning. The state and federal government have elaborate plans to respond to a repeat of the Mariel-style mass exodus that swamped South Florida with up to 125,000 Cuban refugees from April 15 to October 31, 1980. Responding to a sharp economic downturn, Castro allowed anyone who wanted to leave the island nation to flee, causing an administrative nightmare in South Florida. But emergency management officials have not moved to put the plan in place, at least not yet. "Like everyone else, we're just maintaining awareness," said Technical Sgt. Thomas Kielbasa, a spokesman for the Florida National Guard from its headquarters in St. Augustine. (*Florida Today*, 19/2/08)

**February 19:** Despite Fidel Castro's resignation, Cuba's abusive legal and institutional mechanisms continue to deprive Cubans of their basic rights, Human Rights Watch said. The counterproductive US embargo policy continues to give the Cuban government a pretext for human rights violations. "Even if Castro no longer calls the shots, the repressive machinery he constructed over almost half a century remains fully intact," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. "Until that changes, it's unlikely there will be any real progress on human rights in Cuba". The Cuban government still needs to take concrete steps to decriminalize political dissent, Human Rights Watch said. Specifically, it should unconditionally release all political dissidents. It should also repeal the provisions of the penal code that provide the basis for gross

violations of human rights. "This would be a good time for the US government to revisit its failed embargo policy," said Vivanco. "By lifting the embargo, Washington could deprive Raúl Castro of the underdog image that his brother exploited so effectively." [[Cuba: Fidel Castro's Abusive Machinery Remains Intact](#)] (*HRW Press Release*, 19/2/08)

**February 20:** As word spread that Fidel Castro would not vie for the presidency of the Council of State, business leaders said the expected Cuban power shuffle is unlikely to bring immediate changes -- if any at all. For most, that meant business as usual. Miami charters to the island were flying on schedule, phone traffic to Cuba was reportedly normal, and in the exile-rich heart of Hialeah, Jesús Ovidez was in the back of his Chico's Restaurant counting cash like he would on any rainy week day. "What's to celebrate?" asked Ovidez, who fled Cuba 40 years ago. "While his brother Raúl is in power, nothing changes." The reaction was a marked shift from July 2006, when news that Castro was temporarily handing over power to Raúl sparked a wave of interest and hopes for renewed business activity with the island, said John Kavulich, senior policy analyst at the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council in New York. "This time I haven't had a single company executive call me, as opposed to 18 months ago, when they were calling asking what to do," he said. Kavulich said he thinks the business community has learned a few things about Cuban reality over the past several months. "It's another moment in the series of moments that is Cuba," he said. Locally, Akerman Senterfitt lawyer Pedro Freyre wasn't getting many calls either, but he said the firm continues to work with clients interested in doing business on the island some day. "The reality is, we need to look at this in a very dispassionate way," said Freyre, who is also on the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Cuba committee. "As far as US policy and law, this is a nonevent." (*The Miami Herald*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** Some in Congress and foreign-policy leadership roles would like to see the United States change a policy that, they contend, has brought hardship on the Cuban people while achieving little that is in the United States' interest. "Our policy toward Cuba is a relic from the Cold War," said Representative Jim McGovern (Democrat-Massachusetts). "It makes no sense, and quite frankly it's an embarrassment. "We should use this as an opportunity or an excuse to review our entire policy. It is time for a grown-up policy," he said. He said more than 100 bipartisan members of Congress were signing a letter to the administration asking for a thorough review of US policy toward Cuba. Among the needed moves, he said, was removal of restrictions on US citizens to visit Cuba: "Enough is enough. The Cold War is over. It's time to move forward." Retired colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, co-chair of the US-Cuba Policy Initiative and chief of staff to former secretary of State Colin Powell, said it was clear to most Americans that "our Cuba policy is a failure." Senator Christopher Dodd (Democrat-Connecticut), chairman of Senate subcommittee involved in Cuba policy, called the US embargo on Cuba "one of the most backward and ineffective foreign policies in history." Representative Howard Berman (Democrat-California), acting chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he plans hearings on reviewing US policy toward Cuba. (*USA Today*, 20/2/08)

**February 20:** A multibillion-dollar battle over property confiscated after Cuba's 1959 revolution edged closer with the retirement of veteran leader Fidel Castro, a leading lawyer for Cuban exiles believes. "Historically, it's a milestone," Miami lawyer Nicolas Gutierrez told the press. He is handling nearly 400 claims against Cuba's government, mostly on behalf of exiles who left their homeland in a hurry and had their property seized after Castro's guerrillas entered Havana and took power nearly half a century ago. Castro's retirement raises hopes that the property claims will finally be settled, Gutierrez said in an interview. "We may still be years away but we're closer to the end." He says US citizens and companies lost roughly \$8 billion at today's prices in confiscated property in Cuba and have 5,911 claims pending with the US government's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission. The nationalized property of Cubans far exceeds that, however, and Gutierrez said it could total as much as \$200 billion. "You're talking about some serious, serious value." (*Reuters*, 21/2/08)

**February 21:** Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama said in a nationally televised debate that if elected president, he would meet with Fidel Castro's successor in Cuba "without preconditions" following preparation of an agenda that called for the release of political prisoners, respect for human rights and a free press. "This moment, this opportunity when Fidel Castro has finally stepped down, I think, is one that we should try to take advantage of," Obama said. Rival Hillary Clinton said she would not meet with Castro's presumed successor, brother Raúl, "until there was evidence that change was happening, because I think it's important that they demonstrate clearly that they are committed to change the direction (...). Then I think, you know, something like diplomatic encounters and negotiations over specifics could take place." The question about Cuba was the first in the debate at the University of Texas sponsored by CNN, the Spanish-language Univisión TV network and the Democratic Party. Obama said the first step should be reversing President Bush's policy that limits Cuban Americans who want to visit family on the island and send them money. "It is important precisely because the Bush administration has done so much damage to American foreign relations that the president take a more active role in diplomacy than might have been true 20 or 30 years ago," he said. (*The Miami Herald*, 21/2/08)

**February 22:** Three days after stepping down as Cuban leader, Fidel Castro was back in the fray calling on the United States to change its longtime policy of sanctions toward Cuba. Castro said in an article that he had intended to take a few days off from writing when he announced his retirement on Tuesday after 49 years in power, but could not keep silent. The international reaction to his departure, including calls for "liberty" in Cuba, forced him to "open fire" again on his ideological enemies in the United States, he said. "I enjoyed seeing the embarrassing position of all the U.S. presidential candidates," he wrote in a column published by the Communist Party newspaper Granma. "One by one, they felt obliged to make immediate demands on Cuba to avoid risking a single vote," Castro said. "Change, change, change!" they cried in chorus. I agree, 'change!' but in the United States," he wrote. [[What I wrote on Tuesday 19](#)] (*Reuters*, 22/2/08)

**February 23:** Tour operators believe that the US travel embargo of Cuba could be lifted in the wake of this week's announcement that Fidel Castro is stepping down - ending a

“golden era” of tourism to the Caribbean island. Companies say that Castro's departure is likely to combine with a more open approach to the island after November's presidential elections. This could bring an end to the US travel ban. The embargo has been in place since Castro took charge in an armed revolution 49 years ago and introduced communism. The effect has been to keep mainstream Westernisation out of the country. But news of Castro's departure had an immediate effect on tour operators, with people booking trips to see the country before it changes. “It's been mad,” said John Faithfull, of Trips Worldwide, a Cuba specialist. Bookings with the company have risen by a third since Castro's last public appearance 19 months ago. “It looks likely that the embargo will be reviewed and relaxed under a new US president. It's not a question of that happening immediately, but it could happen in a year or two,” he said. “When the embargo is over, I'm not sure where Cuba will find the beds to accommodate its new guests.” Vesella Baleva, product manager for Cuba at Cox & Kings, said: “The end of the embargo would make it touristy. There's a charm now as it's not crowded with Americans. These are the golden years.” (*Times Online*, 23/2/08)

**February 23:** Twenty-four Cuban immigrants, including a pregnant woman, arrived at Key West, the first group to arrive after Fidel Castro announced he was stepping down from Cuba's presidency. The group arrived at Smathers Beach in a homemade boat after sailing for more than 26 hours, Christie Phillips, a spokeswoman for the Key West police said. “They were all dehydrated, but fine”, Phillips said. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 24/2/08)

**February 24:** US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urged Cuba to move toward "peaceful, democratic change" as Cuba's one-party legislature picked a communist successor to Fidel Castro. "We urge the Cuban government to begin a process of peaceful, democratic change by releasing all political prisoners, respecting human rights, and creating a clear pathway towards free and fair elections," Rice said in a statement. She stressed that "at this significant moment in Cuba's history, we reaffirm our belief that the Cuban people have an inalienable right to participate in an open and comprehensive dialogue about their country's future, free of fear and repression, and to choose their leaders in democratic elections." "We also urge the international community to work with the Cuban people to begin to build institutions necessary for democracy, and to support Cuban civil society. "The Cuban people, facing the legacy of five decades of tyranny, merit our solidarity and support as they seek to construct a brighter future." Rice's statement was released as Cuba's National Assembly met to pick a successor to Fidel Castro after his almost 50 years in power. [[Condoleezza Rice's statement](#)] (*AFP*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** The White House said its embargo on Cuba would remain and that the Communist-ruled island's decision to name Fidel Castro's brother Raul as president offered no sign of democratic change, a spokeswoman said. "The only thing that changed yesterday was a new leader emerged but there is no indication that the Cuban people are going to be allowed to pursue a free and prosperous future," said White House press secretary Dana Perino. "What we would hope is that they would be able to start on a path to democracy. We are going to continue to support their aspirations for a better life but the president's position on the embargo has not changed." (*AFP*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** Cuba picked a new government, installing Raul Castro as president after his ailing brother Fidel Castro retired following 49 years in power. In a sign that change is unlikely to be deep or abrupt, communist party ideologue Jose Ramon Machado Ventura was named first vice president, or Cuba's No. 2. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that, "at this significant moment in Cuba's history, we reaffirm our belief that the Cuban people have an inalienable right to participate in an open and comprehensive dialogue about their country's future, free of fear and repression and to choose their leaders in democratic elections." The US said Raul Castro's appointment offered potential for change but said its embargo would remain until there was a transition to democracy. "There is a possibility and potential for change in Cuba, but those changes will have to be born inside Cuba," said Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon. US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, who co-chairs a commission created by the Bush administration to press for a democratic transition in Cuba: "Our policy hasn't changed. We want (the release of) political prisoners, we want freedom. We want freedom of the press, we want freedom of religion, we want freedom for people to read what they want. We want Cuban people to live with a sense of hope and not with a sense of fear." While, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Cuba-born south Florida Republican said: "To the long oppressed Cuban people it does not matter one bit who the communist Castro brothers choose as the next face of their oppressive, tyrannical regime. What the Cuban people want is freedom to express their dissent from the oppressive regime and enjoy the liberty and freedom that other nations around the globe have." (*Reuters*, 25/2/08)

**February 25:** University of Miami professors who specialize in Cuban issues gave a grim assessment of the political climate in Cuba now that Raul Castro has officially succeeded his brother as the island's leader. "There is no reform. We are not looking at a Chinese model. We are not even looking at a Vietnamese model. This presents a very bleak outlook for Cuba," said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the university's Institute for Cuban & Cuban-American Studies, during a panel discussion at the school. Noting the advanced age of Raul Castro and the rest of the reconstituted leadership, Brian Latell, a senior research associate at the institute and the author of "After Fidel", said: "This signals no rejuvenation at the top." Added Andy Gomez, a senior fellow at the institute: "The pressure cooker is now at the highest level it has been in the last 19 months (since Fidel stepped aside to temporarily recuperate). He said South Florida needs to watch developments on the island carefully. "If there is a mass exodus, we do not have the infrastructure in place. Our social services and educational system are already strained. The immigration bill in the US has not been dealt with," Gomez said. (*The Miami Herald*, 25/2/08)

**February 26:** Luis Posada Carriles, the anti-Castro Cuban militant, celebrated his 80th birthday this month at an undisclosed location in Miami, but many serious legal and political questions about his alleged crimes as a younger man still loom as large as ever. In New Jersey, Posada is the "target" of a federal grand jury investigation into the series of 1997 tourist-site bombings in Havana, his attorney Arturo Hernandez confirmed to the press. Posada has denied any involvement in the bombings. In Washington, Posada's alleged role in the bombing of a 1976 Cuban airliner that killed 73 people is being

revisited by a Democratic lawmaker from Massachusetts, who plans to hold congressional hearings on the matter in the spring. And Posada's immigration status remains an issue with the Justice Department, which is pressing its appeal of a Texas judge's decision to dismiss an indictment that charged the Cuban with lying about his 2005 entry into the United States. Perhaps Posada's most serious legal challenge is in Newark, New Jersey, where a federal grand jury, now in its third year, is weighing whether to indict Posada on conspiracy charges for the killing of an Italian tourist in a 1997 hotel bombing in Havana. Justice officials won't comment, but they have a fax and other documents showing that Posada allegedly coordinated \$3,200 in wire transfers from Cuban exiles in New Jersey to co-conspirators in Central America for the bombing campaign. (*The Miami Herald*, 26/2/08)

**February 26:** Fidel Castro's resignation is a positive step for rice producers in Southeast Texas and others hoping for an end to a trade embargo with Cuba, a Beaumont rice mill executive said. However, obstacles remain and any change likely will be gradual, said Louis Broussard Jr., president of Beaumont Rice Mills Inc. "I think it's a positive step, but (the embargo is) something we don't have much of a say in," Broussard said. Before the United States imposed the embargo in the early 1960s, Cuba was a major market for the long-grain rice grown in Southeast Texas, where farmers planted 13,500 acres last year. Broussard said the majority of rice grown in Southeast Texas is sold in overseas markets that include Iraq, Ghana and Central America. "Cuba would be a plus," he said, noting that the Caribbean nation would probably consume about 1.2 million tons of US rice each year if the embargo were removed. (*The Enterprise*, 27/2/08)

**February 27:** Cuban instability could rise in the next half-year after a period of initial calm following Fidel Castro's retirement, US intelligence leaders told Congress. The officials said they expected no change in the communist country's hard-line policies under Castro's brother, Raul, who has named old-guard allies to top posts. The officials likened Cuba's current transition to leadership changes which maintained communism after the Soviet revolution. But rising public expectations and political open-mindedness in a younger generation could incite change. "The political situation probably will remain stable during at least the initial months now that Fidel Castro has handed off power to his brother Raul," Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. Economic subsidies from Venezuela under Castro ally Hugo Chavez have helped stave off any immediate pressure on the Cuban government, but missteps in policy or crisis management could spark instability, McConnell said. The transition itself may awaken desire for change, said Lt. Gen. Michael Maples, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. "That is something we need to watch over the next six or seven months," Maples told the committee. "There may be an expectation on the part of the population to see where a new presidency will go, and a failure to deliver could increase concerns." (*Reuters*, 27/2/08)

**February 28:** President George W. Bush slammed Cuba's new communist President Raul Castro as a "tyrant" lacking legitimacy and unworthy of bilateral leadership-level talks. Speaking with Raul Castro, who took over the presidency of the Americas' only one-party communist regime, would be "embracing a tyrant," the US president said. Bush

said such talks would be endorsing someone who "puts his people in prison because of their political beliefs. It will send the wrong message. It will send a discouraging message to those who wonder whether America will continue to work for the freedom of prisoners. "It will give great status to those who have suppressed human rights and human dignity," Bush said at a White House press conference. [[Press Conference of the President](#)] (*AFP*, 28/2/08)

