

FOCAL Chronicle on Cuba March 2003

Domestic Affairs

March 1: Relatives of blind Cuban dissident Juan Carlos González Leyva, held without due process for almost a year owing to his political activities, have denounced to the press his precarious health and demanded that he be brought to trial. According to his relatives, the dissident was arrested last March 4, 2002 in Ciego de Ávila and charged with contempt, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest for which the prosecution is seeking a six-year prison sentence. (AFP, 1/3/03)

March 2: Cuba's newly elected parliament has rescheduled its first meeting, evidently postponing the installation of new deputies by one day to give Fidel Castro time to return from and rest up after his Asia tour. The short government announcement didn't give a reason for the delay. (AP, 2/3/03)

March 3: Amid a crackdown on drug trafficking and other illegal businesses in Cuba, communist authorities acknowledged a recent rise in attacks on police agents and reminded citizens of the severe penalties for such assaults. The Communist Party daily Granma dedicated an inside page to a story about the problem, accompanied by the text of the criminal code applying to attacks on police. The article provided no specifics on the size of the problem, including how many police officers had been assaulted. (AP, 3/3/03)

March 3: Cuba has fired four of six deputy ministers at the Economy and Planning Ministry in a major shake-up amid mounting economic problems and faltering recovery, government officials said. Local analysts could not recall when a majority of deputy ministers at a single ministry had been replaced in one fell swoop, and wondered if Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez would go too. The powerful ministry, which government members refer to as Fidel Castro's economic command center, coordinates plans and budgets for all sectors of an economy that is 90 percent controlled by the state. (Reuters, 3/3/03)

March 4: More than 35,000 Cubans, ranging from dissidents to militant supporters of the governing Communist Party, took part in a survey on a "Charter of Fundamental Rights and Duties," opposition groups said. A coalition of 67 Cuban organizations from across the political and social spectrum - including groups on the island and some in exile - promoted the initiative. The promoters of the "Citizen Charter," the final draft of which is scheduled to be ready in April, hope this "will be an instrument for supporting the rule of law in Cuba, for initiating a national dialogue on human rights and for forming a popular culture of citizenship." "We are very satisfied with this national survey, a democratic, participative process," Manuel Cuesta, a member of the illegal opposition alliance that sponsored the survey, said at a press conference. (EFE, 5/3/03)

March 4: Cuban moderate opposition groups announced that they will submit before the UN Human Rights Commission (HRC) a letter endorsed by over 30 thousand citizens, denouncing human rights violations in Cuba. (Notimex, 4/3/03)

March 4: A court in Havana has issued stiff sentences against 2 Colombians and 3 Cubans convicted of drug trafficking. Cuban Diego Evelio Sombert Fernández, a resident of Colombia, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for having participated in the repeated introduction into Cuba and distribution of several kilograms of cocaine. Sombert Fernández was found to have brought the drugs to Cuba hidden in his digestive system, in swallowed capsules, while he posed as a business representative. Cuban Juan Ramírez Aguero was sentenced to 27 years for accepting cocaine from the traffickers and selling it in Cuba's national territory. Cuban Juan Carlos Morales

Fundora was sentenced to 25 years in the same case. Morales Fundora worked in a tourism hotel restaurant, where one of the Colombians stayed during a first visit to Cuba, and agreed to try to sell approximately one kilo of cocaine also brought to the island by the drug traffickers. Edna Ruth Duarte Bejarano and Jaime León Roballo were sentenced to 20 years in the same case. Cuba's Granma news daily front-paged the story, affirming that the severity of the sentences once again demonstrate that there will be no clemency for individuals who "endanger the health and well-being of Cuban youths". (Radio Havana Cuba, 4/3/03)

March 6: The Cuban National Assembly unanimously elected Fidel Castro to a sixth five-year term as president. Running as the only candidate, he won January's general election with 97 percent of the vote amid calls by Cuban dissidents to ignore the polls. Fidel Castro has been in power for 44 years. He is the world's longest serving national leader. (VOA, 7/3/03)

March 8: With the approval of a Final Declaration and other resolutions on the regional problems and a clear rejection to US war threats, the 16th Assembly of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) concluded in Havana. (Prensa Latina, 8/3/03)

March 8: Fidel Castro made what he called a gesture of "peace and justice" to the Catholic Church, attending the opening of a convent of Brigittine nuns in Havana. Cuba's communist government donated the colonial palace of a Spanish count to house the convent in Old Havana. Castro said the convent's opening marked the fifth anniversary of the 1998 visit to Cuba by Pope John Paul II, who he praised for his efforts to prevent war in the Gulf. The event was attended by two cardinals, the Pope's envoy, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, and the Archbishop of Guadalajara, Mexico, Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iñiguez, and Italy's deputy foreign minister, Mario Baccinni. But the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, was notably absent, pointing to tensions between the church's leader in Cuba and the Castro government, which the prelate publicly criticized in a recent pastoral letter. (Reuters, 9/3/03)

March 8: Warming up to the Roman Catholic Church while maintaining a distance from local church officials, Fidel Castro exchanged medals with the worldwide leader of an order of nuns that opened a convent in Havana. During a ceremony at the Palace of Revolution where he keeps his offices, Castro bestowed the medal of the Order of Felix Varela, First Grade, to Mother Telka Famiglietti, general abbess of the Order of the Most Holy Savior of St. Brigid. The abbess then bestowed on Castro one of her religious order's honor, the Ecumenical Cross with the Star of the Commander of St. Brigid. (BBC, Reuters, 9/3/03)

March 11: Six prominent Cuban dissidents began a hunger strike of indefinite duration to demand the release of the island regime's political prisoners. They put particular emphasis on the release of opposition activist Oscar Elias Biscet. Marta Beatriz Roque, Felix Bonne, Rene Gomez Manzano, Nelson Aguiar, Orlando Zapata and Nelson Molinet began a fast in an apartment in Havana's Vedado neighborhood. The effort is backed by the Assembly to Promote a Civil Society, an "alternative" Congress organized by Roque and others that comprises some 300 Cuban opposition groups. (EFE, 11/3/03)

March 12: A group of Cuban dissidents is calling on the European Union to exclude Cuba from joining an agreement that offers trade advantages and help to developing nations. The dissidents include human rights activist Vladimiro Roca. They sent the request to EU Development Commissioner Poul Nielson, who opened a new EU office in Havana. The dissidents say Cuba should be barred from the EU's Cotonou Agreement on the grounds that Fidel Castro's administration violates human rights. (VOANews, 13/3/03)

March 17: Nine undiscovered indigenous sites, probably more than 5,000 years old, were found in Mayari in the eastern region of Cuba, Granma newspaper reported. According to researcher Elena Guarch, from the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA), this and other previous discoveries in the zone are particularly relevant since they give clues of the

time and characteristics of the earliest presence of humans in Cuba. Guarch believes estimates can be made as to the origin of these groups from the weather conditions of the period, the emergence of land that brought Cuba closer to the Bahamas and the latter to Florida, facilitating the crossing of the great fauna existing and later the native peoples. (Prensa Latina, 17/3/03)

March 18: Cuba's communist government announced that it had rounded up several dozen opponents. An official statement accused the chief of Washington's diplomatic mission in Havana, James Cason, of trying "to foment the internal counterrevolution." The announcement said several dozen government opponents had been detained but did not elaborate or say if any charges were pending. Veteran human-rights activist Elizardo Sanchez said by telephone that he had confirmed the detentions of at least 10 dissidents and was checking on reports of another 20 or so picked up by state security agents. [See also Economy, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations.] (The Globe and Mail, 19/3/03)

March 18: The Episcopal Conference of Cuba mourned the passing of Eduardo Boza Masvidal, one of 131 priests banished from the Island in September 1961 amidst a serious State-Church confrontation. (Notimex, 18/3/03)

March 20: Cuban police arrested dissident economist Martha Beatriz Roque on the third day of a crackdown against opponents of Cuba's communist government. The Cuban Human Rights Commission said between 55 and 70 people had been arrested in their homes across the island since Fidel Castro's government began a roundup saying it was detaining Cubans with ties to US diplomats. Writer and independent journalist, Raúl Rivero, was also arrested, while police agents surrounded the homes of dissident leaders Héctor Palacios and Gisela Delgado. Opposition activists in Havana fear that those arrested will be tried under the much-criticized, but never-yet-applied "Law Against National Independence," which carries sentences of up to 10 years. [See also Economy, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations.] (Reuters, El Nuevo Herald, AP, 21/3/03)

March 20: According to one of its leaders, one of the top priorities for the Cuban neighbourhood organization, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), is "revitalizing civilian neighbourhood watch in urban and rural areas of the country." Reinaldo Aguiar Torres, CDR Vigilance Secretary, said that a neighbourhood watch schedule is part of "the ongoing war on crime." (World Data Service, 20/3/03)

March 21: The crackdown on the dissidents "could be used to close all the political spaces that the opposition has opened," said Manuel Cuesta Morúa, of the illegal opposition party Socialist Democratic Current. Almost half of those arrested had helped gather signatures for the Varela Project, said Ernesto Martini, a project coordinator. Oswaldo Paya, the leader of Varela Project, said the crackdown will only accelerate the end of the regime. "Cuba needs change urgently. Cubans want change urgently," he said. The sweep also netted dozens of independent journalists. About 20 small, independent lending libraries with books donated by foreign embassies and international non-governmental organizations were dismantled, said Ramon Colas, who founded the library movement several years ago and moved to Miami in 2001. "The government has wanted to stamp out the peaceful pro-democracy movement for years. It is worried about the space the dissidents have gained at home and abroad," veteran rights activist Elizardo Sanchez said. [See also Economy, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations.] (AP, Reuters, The Miami Herald, 22/3/03)

March 24: Cuba's Roman Catholic Church condemned the recent arrests of scores of government critics and urged authorities to accept differing political opinions. "We lament the inappropriate methods being used to arrest people for thinking and acting differently from the official ideology," a statement from the Conference of Cuban Catholic Bishops said. The church's one-page statement urged the government not to treat government critics as "people who have committed a crime." It called on Cuban authorities to "encourage the public debate of ideas and dialogue." [See also Economy, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations.] (AP, 24/3/03)

March 24: Oswaldo Payá vowed that his civic movement to bring reforms to Cuba would not be crushed. Mr. Payá, the organizer of the Varela Project, a petition drive signed by more than 11,000 people seeking a referendum on personal, political and economic rights, is among a handful of dissidents who remain free after a crackdown by the Cuban authorities. He said about 80 people comprised of independent librarians, journalists and many of his group's regional leaders were in jail on charges that could bring lengthy prison sentences. "They are trying to close the door on peaceful change," he said in a telephone interview from Havana. "In no way will the project be stopped," he said. "There had been a flowering in Cuba of a peaceful movement for rights and reconciliation, to defeat this culture of fear. Cuba's spring is the Varela Project, which has been sustained by thousands and which will grow." Cuban officials have compared their roundup of dissidents to the United States' mass arrests after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Mr. Payá said such accusations were part of the government's relentless defamation campaign against him. "That mocks people's intelligence," he said. "We are claiming our rights." [See also Economy, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations.] (The New York Times, 24/3/03)

March 24: Fidel Castro attended the 4th National Conference of the Cuban Union of Journalists held in Havana. (Radio Havana Cuba, 25/3/03)

March 24: Dissidents on the island expressed fear that the level of repression will continue to intensify. "There were no arrests over the weekend, but we have to be prepared for more waves of repression," said human-rights activist Elizardo Sánchez, who was reached by phone. "Until this moment, all of the detainees are in police custody and out of communication." "Despite the fact that this has been the most intense and threatening crackdown in recent years, nondissidents have approached the families of dissidents offering their help to keep things in their houses or warning them when they were under surveillance," Sánchez said. "This is an awakening of the Cuban people." (The Miami Herald, 25/3/03)

March 25: Cuban authorities arrested Marcelo López, spokesperson for the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCHRNR), presided over by veteran activist Elizardo Sánchez Santacruz. From the beginning, the CCHRNR has kept a count of the arrests, handing the lists of names over to the international press. (AFP, 26/3/03)

March 26: Charges against the 75 arrested dissidents have not yet been laid by Cuban authorities nor have they been allowed access to legal counsel, Elizardo Sánchez Santacruz, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCHRNR), told the press. According to Sánchez Santacruz, some of their relatives have said that some dissidents are sharing cells with common criminals, many of which have been arrested during the government's crackdown on the drug traffic and related crimes. (AFP, 26/3/03)

March 31: Cuba has enough evidence to prosecute dozens of dissidents arrested on accusations of working with US diplomats to undermine the government, the head of the island's parliament said. "Cuba is going to do everything necessary to ensure that its enemies don't do as they like," National Assembly speaker Ricardo Alarcón said. Alarcón offered no details about the evidence gathered for the trials. The dissidents are in jail awaiting charges. They include independent journalists, directors of non-governmental libraries, members of opposition political parties and activists seeking laws to ensure civil rights such as freedom of speech.

Economy

March 3: The president of the Cuban-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce, Johannes Hauser, indicated that German businesspeople have shown reserve regarding the Cuban market. According to German newspaper Berliner Zeitung, this is partly due to salary costs being higher there than in other Latin American countries as wages are paid to the Cuban state in US

currency, a fraction of which goes to pay the employees in Cuban pesos. (Notimex, 3/3/03)

March 5: During the Balance Meeting of the Ministry of Transport in Havana, Vice-president of the Cuban State Council, Carlos Lage, made reference to worsening conditions in the capital's public and freight transport services. "This year there will be no increase in the allotment of equipment or fuel to improve public and freight transportation services," pointed Lage. (World Data Service, 5/3/03)

March 6: Organic tomatoes, ginger, broccoli, oregano and other produce and spices are readily available in Cuba's free farmers' markets, thanks to the country's urban gardening programme. Small farmers in Cuba produced three million tons of organic vegetables and herbs in 2002, compared to just 4,200 tons in 1994. But the vegetable crops grown without chemical pesticides and fertilisers in the organic family gardens of this Caribbean island nation currently go towards domestic consumption, unlike organic sugar and coffee, which have made headway in European markets. Exporting organic products requires international certificates that entail relatively high costs for small farmers. (IPS, 6/3/03)

March 7: Sherritt International will spend \$110 million to develop its oil and gas holdings in Cuba this year while it negotiates with the government over the way the business is taxed, the resource company said. Last year, Cuban officials challenged Sherritt's interpretation of how its oil and gas business should be taxed, resulting in a bigger than usual tax bill for the Toronto-based company. While oil and gas is the biggest part of Sherritt's business in Cuba, the company is also involved in nickel mining, hotels and tourism, power generation, soybean processing and wireless phone service in the Caribbean country. (Canadian Press, 7/3/03)

March 9: The sugarcane harvest is facing serious hurdles to meet its government-set goals. The Cuban Communist Party issued an appeal to the sugar industry workers to increase their efforts to reach the 2,700,000-ton mark set for this year's output. But according to a local expert, it will be rather difficult to meet that figure as the harvest is "behind schedule." (World Data Service, 9/3/03)

March 12: A strong appeal to conserve fuel oil appeared in the Cuban official press, which called for the enforcement of energy-conserving measures. The note was published at a time when long power outages are affecting the capital and other cities and communities throughout the country. In Havana, neighbourhoods endure daily 2-4 hour blackouts while air conditioning in public office buildings can only be turned on for as little as two hours per day, and there have been drastic cuts in fuel allotment for state-owned vehicles. (World Data Service, 12/3/03)

March 13: Brazil's oil giant Petroleo Brasileiro (Petrobras), is interested in resuming oil exploration and production activities in Cuba, a spokeswoman for the Cuban embassy in Brazil said. The Cuban government is inviting oil companies to drill for oil in its offshore fields in the gulf of Mexico. According to spokeswoman Marcia Muñoz, Petrobras has been in talks with the Cuban government and has shown interest in working new E&P blocks in that country. "Cuba is looking to partnerships with foreign companies to develop its oil reserves, and Petrobras would be a fantastic partner," the spokeswoman said. Petrobras didn't reply to calls asking for comments. (Dow Jones, 13/3/03)

March 17: Assessment of the Delta Junior windmill, designed by Canadian experts and manufactured by the Dutch firm Dutch Industries Limited, is one of the projects currently implemented in Cuba to ensure potable water supply. As an energy source, wind power stands out for allowing electricity production without fuel costs, as well as water extraction for land irrigation and human and animal consumption. (World Data Service, 17/3/03)

March 19: The Cuban government is readying for "the worst economic variant" the imminent war in Iraq may pose for the country, and stressed that fuel conservation lies at the core of that program. "It is our duty to be prepared and, for several months now, we have been planning for

the worst possibility," said Carlos Lage, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Ministers' Council, according to a Cuban official press summary of his statements during a meeting of the Ministry of Planning and the Economy. (World Data Service, 19/3/03)

March 17: For the first time in more than 40 years, trade between the Bahamas and Cuba has been established by means of a freight service that will provide weekly service between the two countries allowing Bahamians to import goods from the communist country at lower customs prices. (Weekly Bahamas, 17/3/03)

March 25: Kazakhstan and Cuba note the availability of preconditions for broadening and stepping up bilateral economic relations. Issues of bilateral cooperation were discussed at a meeting between the speaker of the Majlis (lower house) of the Kazakh parliament, Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, and Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Angel Dalmau in Astana, the Kazakh capital. "In particular, interaction between the two countries in the sectors of petrochemistry and biotechnology may become one of the factors of cooperation, and partnership in tourism has great potential," the Majlis press service has said in a report issued on the results of the negotiations. (BBC, 25/3/03)

March 26: Distinguished world specialists and experts on the Gulf of Mexico are considering the possibility of large oil deposits in the Cuban economic zone of this important coastal region. Researchers from the United States, Mexico, Canada, Britain, France, Spain and Cuba, amongst other countries attended an international workshop to examine the subject of hydrocarbons, as part of the Geology and Mining Congress being held in Havana's Hotel Nacional. (Granma International, 26/3/03)

March 28: The Dutch Ministry of the Economy has decided against sending a trade mission to Cuba on account of the Cuban regime's increased repressive actions. [See also Domestic Affairs, Foreign Relations and US-Cuba Relations. (Radio Nederland, 28/3/03)

March 28: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque met with Ukraine's Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, ending three days of talks aimed at spurring trade, investment and humanitarian ties with the former Soviet republic. Yanukovych called Cuba "a traditional partner" and stressed that his government is working to create "optimal conditions" for foreign investors, according to a statement. The two also discussed Ukraine's bid to join the World Trade Organization and revitalizing tourism. (AP, 28/3/03)

Exile Community

March 1: Monsignor Agustín Román, auxiliary bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Miami, urged Cuban exiles to promote the pastoral letter on social and economic reform issued by Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, archbishop of Havana. Román also asked exiles to refrain from insulting or making personal attacks against the Cuban prelate. Exile leaders and analysts called comments by Ortega, the highest Catholic Church official in Cuba, the latest sign of frustration with the regime's resistance to economic and social reforms. (The Miami Herald, 1/3/03)

March 6: A news conference intended to boost support for a meeting in Havana next month between Cuban government officials and exiles turned into a parking-lot protest against the hotel management, which unexpectedly kicked participants off the premises. The morning gathering was to take place at the Holiday Inn in Coral Gables. But hotel manager Keith Wynne canceled it minutes before it was scheduled to start. Conference participants had intended to discuss the "Nation and Emigration" gathering scheduled for April 11-13 in Havana. (The Miami Herald, 7/3/03)

March 6: Cuban exiles opposed to dialogue with Fidel Castro plan a protest at the end of the month in Little Havana. Organizers say the "March for Dignity" is intended to show that the exile

community has not softened its stance against Castro -- as indicated in several polls -- and to raise awareness about the perils of negotiating with him. (The Miami Herald, 6/3/03)

March 11: Ex-commander Huber Matos, a legendary figure among anti-Castro exiles, criticized Miami-based Cuban organizations that attempt to use the call for a popular demonstration to undermine the strategies of the internal opposition on the Island. "We do not believe that demonstration is opportune," said Matos, president of Cuba Independiente y Democrática (CID) (Independent and Democratic Cuba). "Although it is not said in so many words, this summons is a veiled attempt to discredit (Oswaldo) Payá and the Varela Project, and this political fractiousness only serves the interests of Castro's tyranny," added the anti-Castro activist. (El Nuevo Herald, 11/3/03)

March 21: Miami-based Cuban exile groups denounced the wave of arrests of political opposition members on the Island. Orlando Gutiérrez, National Secretary of the Directorio Democrático Cubano (Cuban Democratic Directory), told the press that "international denunciation is required to put an end to the methods Fidel Castro has used for four decades to remain in power." Also, Tomás Rodríguez, of Agenda Cubana, called for intensified pressure against a government that is "scared by the level of organization of the opposition movement and its growing popularity with the Cuban population." More than twenty Cuban exile organizations, including the Fundación Nacional Cubano Americana (Cuban American National Foundation), the Cuban Liberty Council and the Spiritual Guides, an association of Cuban priests, have joined forces to obtain the release of those arrested. [For more on this, see Domestic Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Cuba-US Relations.] (EFE, 21/3/03)

March 22: A hijacked Cuban airliner will be auctioned to help the ex-wife of a Cuban spy collect part of a \$27.1 million court award she won against Cuba under an antiterrorism law. Monroe County deputy sheriffs served a court order at Key West International Airport and secured the plane for a future auction to benefit Ana Margarita Martinez, sheriff's spokeswoman Becky Herrin said. [For more on this, see US-Cuba Relations.] (AP, 22/3/03)

March 26: Miami relatives of young Cuban refugee Elián González cannot sue former attorney general Janet Reno and other federal officials for allegedly using excessive force when agents seized the boy from the family's home, an appellate court has ruled. Reno, former Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner Doris Meissner, and former deputy attorney general Eric Holder have immunity for their official actions unless it can be shown that they knew the agents would violate the Gonzalez family's rights, the US Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit said. The family did not meet that standard, the Atlanta-based court said, reversing a lower court ruling. Armed federal agents removed Elian, then 6, from the family's home before dawn on April 22, 2000, five months after he was rescued from the Atlantic Ocean. His mother and others died trying to reach Florida by boat. (The Boston Globe, 27/3/03)

March 29: A 12-block-long surge of demonstrators, most of them Cuban Americans, flowed across the heart of Little Havana to pump up support for a litany of struggles that stretched from the future of Cuba to the war in Iraq. Cuban exile leaders had called the march to refute recent polls that say exiles increasingly support dialogue with Cuban leaders. Sylvia Iriondo, president of Mothers and Women Against Repression, told the crowd three things must happen regarding Cuba. One, all political prisoners must be freed. Two, political parties, labor unions and the press must operate without government interference. And, three, elections in Cuba must be held without repression and must involve multiple parties. "Until these three things are achieved," she said, "we insist that all US sanctions on the Castro regime must be maintained." (Sun Sentinel, The Miami Herald, 30/3/03)

Foreign Affairs

March 1: Fidel Castro arrived in Tokyo for a three-day unofficial visit to meet with government officials, senior lawmakers and Japanese business representatives. It is the second time for the 76-year-old Cuban leader to visit Japan, following his first visit in December 1995. Castro attended a dinner hosted by a group of Japanese companies doing business with Cuba. (Kyodo Times, 1/3/03)

March 2: Fidel Castro visited the Pudong New District in Shanghai, accompanied by Chinese President Jiang Zemin. During the visit, Castro spoke highly of China's great achievements in reform and opening-up, expressing his wish to enhance bilateral economic and trade cooperation. (The People's Daily, 2/3/03)

March 2: Fidel Castro offered to help mediate in the twin crises of looming war with Iraq and North Korea's nuclear development program. Castro said that if asked he would do whatever he could to help lessen tensions. He made the remark during talks with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi who noted that Cuba maintains friendly relations with North Korea. In reply, Castro said, "The Cuban leadership has not made any direct contacts with (North Korean's current) leader (Kim Jong Il) since former leader Kim Il Sung died." However, he added, "It is important to solve the issues (of North Korea's nuclear development) in joint political efforts with China, Russia and South Korea. Cuba will also do what it can (for the solution)." As for Iraq, Castro referred to reports that Iraq had begun destroying its Al-Samoud missile system. "Although it is a small step, the possibility is growing that Iraq will obey UN resolutions and avert a war (with the United States and Britain)." (The Asahi Shimbun, 3/3/03)

March 2: Fidel Castro had been scheduled to leave Japan but was delayed by bad weather. After relaxing an extra day in the western city of Hiroshima, he departed for Cuba on an evening flight via Tokyo's Narita International Airport, said Foreign Ministry spokesman Tetsuya Otsuru. After being feted in Hanoi by students chanting "Viva Fidel!", applauded in Kuala Lumpur by sheiks and kings, then rewarded with an aid package from Beijing, his three-day visit to Japan was relatively low-key. (AP, 4/3/03)

March 3: Fidel Castro touched down at Vancouver's airport to refuel his plane while flying back from Asia. "He was there for a few hours for rest and to refuel," said Nadia Scipio del Campo, a Department of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman in Ottawa. It wasn't an official visit and Castro did not meet with any Canadian politicians, she said. (Canadian Press, 3/3/03)

March 4: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Fidel Castro have been listed among the world's richest rulers, although their estimated fortunes pale in comparison with those of established monarchs. Forbes magazine, which has compiled the list of the richest kings, queens and despots and published it in its latest issue, puts Castro's holdings at 110 million. The publication admitted though, that "valuing these fortunes is a tricky business." It said it calculated Castro's wealth, for example, as a percentage of Cuba's gross domestic product. (AFP, 4/3/03)

March 4: Computer hackers, apparently from Brazil, entered Cuban Web sites and posted a message against President Bush and a possible US war against Iraq. "Our Web site was disrupted by this problem. They inserted their anti-war slogans and the Brazilian flag," said a Web page designer at Granma. "It was impossible to read the newspaper all morning," a staff member at Granma International told the press. (Reuters, 4/3/03)

March 4: On his way back to Cuba from Japan, Fidel Castro made a surprise visit to Vancouver to refuel his plane, but ended up answering questions from reporters. Asked about the possibility of meeting Canadian Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, Castro answered: "I should have talked to him, really. But I began working as soon as I arrived here and I fell asleep. Possibly, I can talk to him before I go. I will try to because we really agreed upon talking. I am glad you have just reminded me. I will try to see if I can at least say hello to him on the phone." Talking about Canadian activities at the UN in relation with the Security Council resolutions on Iraq, Castro added: It seems to me that Canada has been working on a compromise, but I would not be able

to give you a definitive answer. It seems to me it is possible that something is in the works, though as far as I know, some people don't agree with such a formula because they believe it will bring closer the dangers of war." (National Post, Vancouver Sun, 5/3/03)

March 4: Government officials from Eritrea have arrived in Havana seeking further bilateral cooperation, particularly in the health sector. The Second Eritrea-Cuba Mixed Commission for Economic and Scientific Cooperation began gathering in the Cuban capital, with the Eritrean delegation headed by that country's foreign minister, Ali Said Abdella. The delegation, which also includes Eritrean Health Minister Saleh Meki, will also hold talks with Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, Education Minister Rolando Ortega and Foreign Trade Minister Luis Padrón. (Radio Havana Cuba, 4/3/03)

March 4: The World Federation of Democratic Youth has begun its 16th general assembly in Havana, and is expected to issue a strong anti-war statement. Close to 150 representatives of 80 youth organizations in 60 countries will also debate proposals for the site of the next World Youth and Students Festival. Founded in London in November, 1945, the federation is comprised of more than 100 organizations from the five continents that gathered in a general assembly every 4 years until the collapse of the Soviet bloc. (Radio Havana Cuba, 4/3/03)

March 4: Cayman Islands authorities detained 14 Cuban migrants who had been trying to get to Honduras when they ran out of fuel and one of their two boats sank. The Cubans had landed on Cayman Brac, one of the three islands in this British Caribbean territory, to stock up on fuel and food for the journey, police said. (AP, 4/3/03)

March 5: High-ranking Mexican government officials will resume their visits to Cuba following a series of incidents last year which strained relations between the two countries, government spokesmen said. Mexican Environment Minister Victor Lichtinger is traveling to the island on a two-day state visit, the spokesmen told the press. Lichtinger's agenda includes meeting with Cuban Tourism Minister, Ibrahim Ferradaz; Science, Technology and Environment Minister, Rosa Elena Simeón; Foreign Investment Minister, Marta Lomas; and Public Health Minister, Damodar Peña. (EFE, 5/3/03)

March 6: The European Union's head office said it plans to ask the EU's 15 national governments by July to accept Cuba's request to join the bloc's trade and aid pact with African, Caribbean and Pacific nations. EU Development Commissioner Poul Nielson made the announcement five days before heading to Havana to open an EU office in the Cuban capital as part of intensifying contacts with the government of Fidel Castro. Nielson said the European Commission would accept the eligibility of Cuba's request and pass it to EU governments in June or July. EU officials said it was unclear if governments would approve the deal. (AP, 6/3/03)

March 6: Fidel Castro has urged Baghdad to destroy "the last cubic centimetre of chemical or biological weapons" to remove any pretext Washington might have to attack it. At the close of the new Cuban parliamentary legislature, in which Castro's re-election as head of the government and the state came as no surprise, the Cuban leader praised Iraq's decision to destroy its Al-Samoud 2 missiles. "The American Government will no longer have the least legal or moral pretext to attack Iraq," Castro said. (The Australian, 7/3/03)

March 7: Bilateral cooperation between Angola and the Socialist Republic of Cuba will be under analysis in Luanda, Cuban deputy Defence Minister, Julio Casas Ragueiro, said in the Angolan capital. The Cuban deputy minister said so on his arrival at the capital city, where he was received by Education minister Burity da Silva, chairman of the Angola-Cuba Joint Commission. (Angola Press Agency 7/3/03)

March 7: Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army Kim Jong-il, sent a message of greetings to Fidel Castro Ruz upon his re-election as president of the Council of State of the Republic of Cuba. "Your re-election as president of the Council of State of the Republic of Cuba

is an expression of the steadfast will and faith of the revolutionary Cuban people to defend and accomplish the socialist cause to the last under your leadership," the message said. (BBC, 7/3/03)

March 8: Mexico's Environment Secretary has announced that he will pressure the United States to sign a multilateral agreement with Mexico and Cuba for the protection of the Gulf of Mexico's ecosystem. The announcement was made by the Mexican Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources, Victor Lichtinger, who concludes a four-day working visit to Havana. (Radio Havana Cuba, 8/3/03)

March 10: The 16th World Congress of Sexology, organized biannually by the World Association of Sexology (WAS), convenes for the first time in Cuba. The Director of the National Sexual Education Centre and chairman of the Congress, Mariela Castro [Fidel Castro's niece], said that experts from different fields and every continent are expected to attend. (Juventud Rebelde, 10/3/03)

March 10: The European Union opened a new office in Cuba in an attempt to deepen relations with the communist island. The 15-member EU is Cuba's largest trade partner, accounting for 80 percent of Cuba's imports in 2001. "We are opening a new relationship," EU Development Commissioner Poul Nielson said. Nielson said that in Cuba the EU planned to put into practice a wide range of projects, from social programs to modernizing the economy. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who met with Nielson, said he hoped the EU mission would usher in "a new era based on respectful dialogue." EU officials have said it is unclear if the governments would approve the deal. Britain, Sweden and others are expected to press Havana on human rights before approving Cuba's membership. (AP, 10/3/03)

March 11: Italian Deputy Foreign Minister Mario Baccini regarded as excellent the links between Cuba and his country during his talks with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque in Havana. "We have all the necessary elements to foster common development in both trade and culture", the Italian minister told the press. (Radio Havana Cuba, 11/3/03)

March 11: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said here it will provide computer technology to Cuba for teaching purposes. At a meeting between visiting UNESCO official Walter Erdelen and Cuban Science Minister Rosa Simeon, they hailed as fruitful the ties between Cuba and the UN body. (Xinhua, 11/3/03)

March 12: The island's leading opposition groups asked the European Union not to include Cuba in an agreement offering trade advantages and help to developing nations until the nation improves its civil rights record. The government opponents made their request in a declaration delivered to visiting EU Development Commissioner Poul Nielson, in Havana to open a new EU mission. "In the opinion of those signing this declaration, it is evident that the current Cuban government has not satisfied a minimum of the proposals," said the document. Those who signed it included veteran human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez; Vladimiro Roca, a former military pilot-turned-dissident and son of a late revered Communist Party leader, and Marta Beatriz Roque, a dissident economist who heads an umbrella group of opposition organizations. (AP, 12/3/03)

March 12: The EU Commissioner for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid discussed with Cuban dissidents the probable accession of Cuba to the Cotonou Agreement, finding divided positions on the matter. "We support the Cotonou Agreement because it would be the only binding accord signed by the Cuban government in the last 44 years which speaks loud and clear of democratization and respect for human rights," said Manuel Cuesta Morúa, moderator of the Moderate Opposition's Round Table. Oswaldo Payá asked Nielson not to make "any decisions without first having a broader dialogue with all the sectors of the Cuban society." "We don't think it is appropriate that a decision be made if the Cuban government does not express publicly its willingness to observe human rights and democratic requirements," he added. (AFP, 14/3/03)

March 13: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque's visit to Guatemala received wide coverage in the Cuban press. A press release on the visit was broadcast by all the local morning radio and TV news shows. (World Data Service, 12/3/03)

March 14: The Cuban government refused permission for a visit by a special United Nations representative, Christine Chanet, named to monitor the human rights situation in the Caribbean island. Cuba "will not allow (Chanet) to carry out her mandate," Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said. He clarified that the refusal to authorize the visit should not be understood as anything personal against the special representative herself or against UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Sergio Vieira de Mello, who appointed her. Pérez Roque underlined that his country viewed the designation of a special human rights representative to visit Cuba as invalid, as it forms part of a UN Commission on Human Rights resolution that it deems illegitimate. (IPS, 16/3/03)

March 14: A European Union commissioner supported Cuba's inclusion in the Cotonou Agreement, a pact with developing nations, saying it could help improve the communist-run country's human rights record and guide it toward democracy. "I see Cuban accession to (the agreement) as a step in taking the EU-Cuban discussions on all issues, including human rights and democracy, to a new level," Development Commissioner Poul Nielson said. "It was confirmed to me this week that Cuba also sees it this way. This is an important point." (AP, 14/3/03)

March 15: Angolan Education Minister Buruti da Silva stated in Havana his country's interest to re-establish cooperation with Cuba and highlighted the education and the development of professionals as one of the main areas. (Prensa Latina, 15/3/03)

March 15: Deputy foreign ministers of Iran and Cuba discussed the ways of improving the bilateral ties as well as the latest developments on the international stage. According to the Press and Information Department of the Foreign Ministry, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for the Euro-American Affairs Ali Ahani voiced Iran's readiness to improve bilateral cooperation with Cuba on regional and international issues, including the Iraqi crisis. (IRNA, 15/3/03)

March 17: One hundred twenty five young Ecuadorians have left for Cuba to begin studying medicine. A local TAME charter will bring them to Havana to register in ELAM (the Latin American Medical School) where more than 300 of their countrymen are at various levels of their studies. (Prensa Latina, 17/3/03)

March 17: Seven Cubans were found on Honduras' Caribbean coast searching for food and water on their way to the United States, officials said. The small boat carrying the six men and one woman landed on Honduras' coast in Puerto Cortes, 150 miles (250 kms) north of Tegucigalpa. The Cubans were being questioned by migration officials. (AP, 21/3/03)

March 17: Antigua & Barbuda's non-resident ambassador to Cuba Colin Murdoch left the island over the weekend at the head of a delegation from Antigua & Barbuda on an official visit to Cuba. The delegation is expected to hold bilateral consultations with the Cuban authorities on a number of co-operation projects, which are ongoing between both countries. (The Sun, 17/3/03)

March 17: Cuba criticized US President George W. Bush's warning to Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq within 48 hours or face military attack, saying that the United States was running roughshod over world opinion. "The arrogance of the empire has begun," Rogelio Polanco, editor of the Communist youth daily Juventud Rebelde, said on a regular nightly television panel that expresses the government's view of current events. Because the United States was moving ahead without United Nations support, the deadline signifies a "worldwide coup d'etat" by the American government, Polanco said. (AP, 17/3/03)

March 17: A war on Iraq would question and weaken the system of international relations and multilateral institutions created since the end of World War II, Cuba's top diplomat warned.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told Cuban television from Geneva the apparently looming war would have a significant impact on the work of the UN Human Rights Commission which holds its meetings there for six weeks each year. (AFP, 17/3/03)

March 20: Cuba invited the international community to back a peace initiative proclaiming the right of all peoples to peace and democratic, equitable international order. Speaking at the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Commission (HRC), Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque asked the forum to collectively reflect and not be defeated by uncertainty and pessimism. (Prensa Latina, 20/3/03)

March 20: The French Foreign Affairs Ministry's spokesperson released a statement by the French government concerning the arrests of dissidents in Cuba. "Apparently," says the communiqué, "this operation is targeting many independent journalists, opposition members, intellectuals, (who are being) arrested because of their personal opinions. France demands details from the Cuban authorities regarding this matter. That wave of arrests would be at odds with the freedoms and democratic pluralism, (and) principles that France and the European Union wish to promote in their relations with the rest of the countries." [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (Partido Socialdemócrata de Cuba, 22/3/03)

March 21: Reporters without Borders, a free press watchdog, voiced its outrage at the arrest of more than 20 independent journalists in Cuba. "The arrest of Raúl Rivero, one of the leading figures of Cuba's independent press, has taken the current wave of repression beyond another threshold," secretary-general Robert Ménard said. In a letter to European commissioner for development Poul Nielson, Ménard called on the European Union to suspend consideration of Cuba's application to join the Cotonou trade accords. "It is essential that the European Union should send a clear signal that it will not tolerate the current wave of repression. The European Union must above all be consistent. It is official policy that the expansion of relations with Cuba depends on Cuba's respect for human rights", the letter said. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (Reporters without Borders, 21/3/03)

March 21: Human rights groups criticized the crackdown on Cuban dissidents. "This is the most serious setback in years," said José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for Human Rights Watch. Also, Amnesty International and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States condemned the arrests. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (Reuters, AP, The New York Times, 22/3/03)

March 21: Canadian authorities expressed concern on the crackdown on Cuban dissidents. "Canada will be raising our concerns with the Cuban government regarding the crackdown on dissidents," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Nadia Scipio. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (AFP, 22/3/03)

March 21: European diplomats in Havana planned to meet to draw up a statement on the arrests of Cuban dissidents. They said the detentions could hurt Cuba's chances of being admitted to the Cotonou Agreement, an economic assistance pact between the European Union and 78 African, Caribbean and Pacific nations, mostly former colonies. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (BBC News, 22/3/03)

March 21: The American Society of Newspaper Editors sent a letter to Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque urging the release of the Cuban independent journalists detained. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (AP, 22/3/03)

March 21: Peru, Costa Rica and Uruguay introduced a resolution critical of Cuba at the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. According to sources with the Commission, the resolution expresses satisfaction with the appointment last year of a special representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and requests Fidel Castro's government to cooperate with her. (The New York Times, 22/3/03)

March 21: Mexican Ambassador to Cuba, Roberta Lajous, presided over a wreath-laying ceremony at the monument to her country's hero, Benito Juárez, on the occasion of the 197th anniversary of his birth. (Notimex, 21/3/03)

March 24: Moscow considers Cuba its key partner in Latin America. This was disclosed by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov when opening the talks with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque. The North Korean crisis should be resolved through diplomacy, by providing security guarantees for the countries of the region and keeping the Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons, says a joint communique signed by Ivanov and Pérez Roque following the talks. They also called for an immediate halt in the US-led war on Iraq while warning against the detrimental consequences of the war in the region. In their joint statement, Ivanov and Pérez Roque stressed the US and British military action in Iraq must be stopped as soon as possible. The two ministers also called for a fair settlement of the Mideast conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and all other related resolutions adopted by the United Nations. They pointed out that the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and statehood within stable and safe borders and the Israelis' right to a terror-free life constituted the foundation for building a peaceful future in the Middle East. (Pravda, IRNA, Novosti, 24/3/03)

March 24: The Inter American Press Association (IAPA) wound up its Midyear Meeting in El Salvador adopting a strongly-worded resolution calling on the Cuban government to cease its campaign against freedom of the press on the island and to immediately release jailed journalists - among them IAPA vice chairman for Cuba Raúl Rivero. It urged democratic governments, human rights organizations and the international community to join it in the call for an end to the hostility towards free speech and press freedom. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (IAPA, 25/3/03)

March 25: Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Pérez Roque began an official visit to Erevan, where he will analyze bilateral affairs with his Armenian counterpart, Vardan Oskanian. They expect to sign an economic-trade cooperation agreement after official talks between both foreign ministers, diplomatic sources told the press. (Prensa Latina, 25/3/03)

March 25: Trinidad and Tobago's Foreign Minister, Knowlson Gift met in Havana with Cuban Public Health Minister, Damodar Peña, to study a plan to increase health cooperation between the two nations. (Radio Havana Cuba, 26/3/03)

March 26: The European Union condemned a crackdown against political dissidents in Cuba, joining calls from international human rights groups for their immediate release. "The European Union is deeply concerned at the arrests of dozens of independent journalists and opposition members by the Cuban authorities," a statement said. The statement was issued in Greece, which holds the current presidency of the EU. "The European Union condemns those arrests and demands that those persons, whom it considers prisoners of conscience, be released without delay," it said. "Violations of fundamental civil and political rights will be monitored very closely by the European Union and they will continue to influence the Union's relations with Cuba." [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and US-Cuba Relations.] (AP, 26/3/03)

March 26: A resolution presented to the top UN human rights body does not include a condemnation of Cuba's record, a rare move that immediately drew protests from rights campaigners. The activist groups charged that just last week Cuba arrested scores of dissidents, accusing them of conspiring with American diplomats in Cuba to encourage opposition to the communist government. In wording that will likely draw US protest as well, the draft measure produced by Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Peru and Uruguay simply asks Cuba to accept a visit by a UN monitor appointed earlier this year by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. (AP, 26/3/03)

March 26: Armenian and Cuban Foreign Ministers Vardan Oskanyan and Felipe Perez Roque

signed in Yerevan an intergovernmental agreement on trade-economic cooperation between Armenia and Cuba. (CAN, 26/3/03)

March 27: The Cuban Parliament criticized the US aggression on Iraq, and called for unity among nations. "They want to impose a new world order based on barbarism, death, and violation of international law and countries' sovereignty by force," denounces the text drafted by the legislative Commission for Constitutional and Juridical Affairs. (Prensa Latina, 27/3/03)

March 27: Laos' Vice President Choummaly Sayasone confirmed that the traditional relations of friendship and solidarity with Cuba, its leaders and its people continue closer than ever. In a meeting with the Cuban ambassador to this capital Maria Aida Nogales, soon to conclude her over four year mission in Laos, the vice president expressed his wishes of success to Cubans in their effort to strengthen their socialist system. (Prensa Latina, 27/3/03)

March 27: More than 70 Cuban doctors are expected to arrive in Trinidad within the next two months to take up appointments at the nation's hospitals, Health Minister Colm Imbert told the press. Imbert, who returned to Trinidad after a four-day visit to Cuba with the ministry's recruiting personnel, said: "The interviewing team headed by Dr. Rampersad Parasram, acting Chief Medical Officer, has already interviewed a number of doctors who are eligible for employment in Trinidad. (The Trinidad Express, 28/3/03)

Security

March 10: Military teams from Angola and Cuba are discussing in Luanda the training of Angolan cadres in the field of defense. The delegations are led by Aldiral Gaspar Rufino, Deputy Defense Minister for the National Policies, and the Cuban Prime Vice-Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, General Julio Casas Regueiro. The Angolan delegation at the meeting, which occurs behind closed doors, is made up by the head of FAA's General Staff, General Armando da Cruz Neto, his Deputy, General Geraldo Nunda, the chief of the Airforce, General Pedro Neto, among others. No more details were given about the meeting which is taking place in the Ministry of Defense. Angola and Cuba have relations in the field of Defense since 1975. (Angop, 11/3/03)

March 17: Armed Forces Minister, Army General Raúl Castro, met at the Armed Forces Ministry headquarters with the delegation from China's Popular Liberation Army, headed by Col. General Qian Shugen, Deputy Chief of Staff. The Chinese delegation was accompanied by their country's Ambassador to Cuba, Wang Zhiguan. (Granma, 18/3/03)

US-Cuba Relations

March 1: In its "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report" for 2002, the US Department of State states that Cuba doesn't seem to be "a significant producer of drugs or precursor chemicals, although government reports indicate that marijuana is being cultivated for a growing domestic market". The report emphasizes the "little cooperation" that has existed between the Cuban authorities and the US on international drug trafficking issues. (US Department of State, 1/3/03)

March 2: Two US lawmakers expressed support for Cuba's Varela Project after meeting with the top organizer of the drive to ensure freedom of speech and other civil rights for Cubans. US Representatives Jim Davis (Democrat-Florida), and Jim Kolbe (Republican-Arizona), were the first American congressmen to meet with Oswaldo Payá at his Havana home. "We are in the presence of an individual who has truly moved ahead the dialogue in Cuba," said Kolbe, who chairs the US House of Representative's appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations. Later, the congressmen met with opposition members Vladimiro Roca, Héctor Palacios, Osvaldo Alfonso, Oscar Espinosa Chepe and Miriam Leiva. This time, they discussed the "Proposed measures to emerge from the crisis," issued by the Todos Unidos (All United) movement and the

Independent Libraries Project. (AP, Cubanet, 2/3/03)

March 2: John Parker, a cattle farmer from Florida, USA, made history in Havana when he signed in front of TV cameras a contract to sell 150 cows to Cuba as part of a US-Cuba trade agreement allowing for Cuban imports from the US. Cuban viewers watched Parker and Pedro Álvarez, president of Cuban state-owned Alimport, sign the approximately 200,000 USD contract. (World Data Service, 2/3/03)

March 3: Illinois companies ranked first in overall value of US agricultural products sold to Cuba last year, followed by firms from Florida, a leading source of information on US-Cuba trade said. The US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council said in its weekly newsletter that Illinois companies in 2002 sold nearly \$69 million of about \$140 million in American agricultural products sold under an exception to four-decade-old trade sanctions. (AP, 3/3/03)

March 4: Almost all of the 103 Cuban scholars who had registered to attend the Latin American Studies Association congress, including 40 invited to present papers, will be absent. With only three weeks to go before the gathering, only four or five of the Cubans have received an entry visa from the United States. This contrasts with previous congresses, when almost all Cuban scholars applying for a visa to attend the gathering received one. Four of the 103 Cuban scholars planning to attend the congress have had their visa applications rejected, apparently under a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act that allows the president to ban the entry into the United States of any foreigners whose presence "would be detrimental to the interests of the United States." (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 5/3/03)

March 5: The United States, which had planned to sponsor a program to distribute textbooks and works of great literature to ordinary Cuban citizens, is protesting the recent decision by the Cuban government to forbid the US interests section in Havana from distributing books, said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "It is unfortunate that the Castro regime has made a 'firm decision' that books, many available in Cuba, could not be brought in by the US Interests Section, nor could they be purchased locally for distribution to the Cuban people through independent libraries." (...) "In the battle of ideas, the Cuban regime wants only one team on the field", Boucher said in his statement. (US Department of State, 5/3/03)

March 5: The 10 Cuban refugees who arrived in Key West last month, four aboard an armed Cuban patrol craft and six on a makeshift wooden vessel that landed on a US Navy installation, pale in comparison to the more than 2,000 migrants interdicted at sea since October, said a US Coast Guard spokesman. "We do feel that we have success in the interception of migrants (...) when you look at the magnitude of what we have to deal with," said Lt. Tony Russell, public affairs officer for the Seventh Coast Guard District in Miami. (The Keynoter, 5/3/03)

March 6: Fidel Castro criticized the United States, warning that Cuba doesn't need its foreign office. The 76-year-old leader made the veiled threat about the status of the US Interests Section in Havana as an angry response to a public visit last month by section chief James Cason to a meeting with Havana dissidents. "Anyone can see that this is a shameless and defiant provocation," Castro said of Cason's meeting with the dissidents. "Perhaps the numerous US intelligence agents working at the Interests Section could explain to him that Cuba can easily do without this office - a breeding ground for counterrevolutionaries and a command post for the most offensive subversive actions against our country." Castro seemed to take special exception to Cason's declaration that "the Cuban government is afraid, afraid of freedom of conscience, afraid of freedom of expression, afraid of human rights." "Actually, Cuba is so afraid that it will calmly take all the time needed to decide on its course of action regarding this bizarre official," Castro said. [For more on this, see Chronicle on Cuba, February 2003.] (AP, 6/3/03)

March 7: The United States protested derogatory remarks by Fidel Castro about the presence of a US diplomat at a recent meeting of dissidents in Havana. State Department spokesman Philip Reeker replied that Castro's "defamatory language and criticism of Mr. Cason's comments in

support of democracy and freedom underscore yet again that Castro abhors freedom of expression and fears any measure of support for human rights in Cuba." Reeker said the United States supports Cason's work in Havana and reaffirmed US support for a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. (AP, 7/3/03)

March 7: The largest single delegation of American lawmakers to ever visit communist Cuba arrived on the Caribbean island, Cuban officials said. The eight lawmakers are members of the Cuba Working Group, which is pushing for changes in American policy toward Cuba, including an end to travel restrictions for US citizens and an easing of four decades of trade sanctions. The group includes Republican US Representatives Jeff Flake of Arizona, Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri, Denny Rehberg of Montana and C.L. Otter of Idaho. Also in the delegation are Democratic US Representatives John Tanner of Tennessee, Nita Lowey of New York, Dennis Moore, of Kansas and William Delahunt of Massachusetts. The Lexington Institute organized the trip. (AP, 7/3/03)

March 9: Cuba charged that the United States was holding five Cubans convicted of spying incommunicado to thwart an April 7 appeal of their sentences, and demanded they be allowed to see lawyers. Cuban lawmakers said the agents, who are being held in five different federal prisons, were all placed in solitary confinement on February 28, and had since been denied contact with lawyers, family and Cuban officials. "This measure was adopted by Washington with the deliberate purpose of obstructing a just appeals process," the statement by Cuba's National Assembly said. (Reuters, 9/3/03)

March 10: Eight American lawmakers working to change US policies toward Cuba said they will ask the communist government to let as many as 25 US Congress members hold a public meeting with the Cuban people later this year. "It would be a demonstration of American democracy," said US Congressman William Delahunt, a Democrat. Ideally, Delahunt said, the gathering -- commonly known in the United States as a "town hall" meeting -- would be broadcast live on Cuban television and radio across the island, just as former President Jimmy Carter's speech to the Cuban people was aired live last year. (The Miami Herald, 11/3/03)

March 10: US Congressman James McGovern demanded that Cuba be removed from a list of states that according to Washington "harbour or sponsor terrorists". The US congressman read an open letter he sent to US Secretary of State Collin Powell, urging him to "remove Cuba from the list of states that allegedly sponsor or harbour terrorists", arguing that Cuba poses no threat to the United States. McGovern, a Democrat from Massachusetts, said that Cuba's inclusion in the US "blacklist" has only to do with Washington's own political interests, and affects scientific exchange between the two nations. The US lawmaker arrived in Havana Sunday accompanied by former US presidential candidate George McGovern, to participate in an Inter-American Conference on Pharmacology and Nutrition. (Radio Havana Cuba, 11/3/03)

March 11: Kansas Representative Dennis Moore returned from a congressional trip to Cuba optimistic about opening US barriers to trade and travel with the island nation. Moore and other supporters of increased trade with Cuba want American producers to be allowed to sell more food to Cuba. They argue the current embargo hurts Americans more than anyone else. "An American could go to Baghdad right now and use an American Express credit card. You can't do that in Cuba," Moore said in an interview. (AP, 11/3/03)

March 13: US Homeland Security agents arrested a motel clerk on charges he failed to formally advise federal authorities that he had been an intelligence officer in Cuba before coming to the United States. Lázaro Amaya La Puente, a night-shift clerk at the Le Jeune Motel on Southwest Eighth Street, was picked up by agents of the Department of Homeland Security's bureau of immigration and customs enforcement, one of three bureaus that replaced the Immigration and Naturalization Service on March 1. Amaya La Puente, 39, is the latest in a growing list of suspects with alleged Cuban intelligence connections arrested or convicted in South Florida and elsewhere in the country in recent years. (The Miami Herald, 14/3/03)

March 13: Cuba's Foreign Ministry has filed a protest with the United States over the treatment of five Cubans serving lengthy prison sentences after being convicted of spying. Cuban officials made the announcement, saying the five nationals are being held in solitary confinement. Cuba also says they have not been allowed to communicate with their relatives and attorneys. Washington did not immediately react to the protest, which comes as defense lawyers prepare to appeal the men's cases next month. (VOANews, 14/3/03)

March 13: The US claimed "reasons of national security" were behind the decision to enforce restrictions on five Cuban spies incarcerated in several US prison facilities. Without elaborating any further, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher indicated that "some restrictions have been applied to these Cuban inmates on the instructions of the Justice Department." All five Cuban spies were convicted of attempting against the national security by a federal court in Miami, Florida. (EFE, 15/3/03)

March 14: The US Coast Guard Service issued an appeal to Cuban "raftpeople" not to attempt against their own lives as a means to avoid being deported back to Cuba when intercepted on the ocean. The warning was issued after nine Cuban immigrants ingested pills upon detection by US authorities while attempting to reach the coast of Florida. Agreements between Havana and Washington stipulate that Cubans intercepted on the ocean must be repatriated. However, US legislation allows those who reach US soil to remain in the country and become residents after a year. (EFE, 14/3/03)

March 14: The State Department is restricting the freedom of travel of Cuban diplomats in the United States, responding to curbs imposed by Havana on US officials in Cuba. State Department sources said they believe the Cuban government made the first move as a means of cutting back on travel by the chief US diplomat in Havana, James Cason. (AP, 14/3/03)

March 14: A group of independent Cuban journalists conducted a professional ethics workshop at the residency of the chief of the US Interests Section in Cuba, James Cason. The workshop, with 34 participants from different opposition news organizations, was held on Cuban Press Day, also celebrated by the journalists. (AFP, 14/3/03)

March 18: Underscoring an increasingly prickly relationship with the US government, Cuba dedicated an entire television show to America's top diplomat in Havana, calling his contacts with dissidents "provocative" and "offensive." US Interests Section chief James Cason has drawn criticism from Cuban officials in recent months over his public relationship with anti-government supporters in Cuba. "He has traveled the island, meeting with dissidents and repeatedly showing rude behavior," government intelligence analyst Manuel Hevia Frasqueria said of the American diplomat. "His actions are provocative (...) and his language offensive." Hevia and other analysts and journalists on the nightly "Mesa Redonda" -- the Round Table -- said Cason's actions seemed part of a campaign to strengthen Fidel Castro's opponents. The program reflects the government's positions. "This is not improvised and is hardly casual," said Rogelio Polanco, director of the Communist youth daily Juventud Rebelde. (AP, 18/3/03)

March 18: Cuba's communist-run government announced it had rounded up several dozen opponents and slapped new restrictions on the movements of American diplomats in Havana as already bad relations between the two countries further deteriorated. An official statement read on state television's evening news program said that Cuba's actions were the result of "the shameful and repeated attitude by the chief of Washington's diplomatic mission in Havana, James Cason, to foment the internal counterrevolution." [See also Domestic Affairs.] (AP, 19/3/03)

March 18: Former President Jimmy Carter said that he is "disappointed" by the Cuban regime's lack of response to the request he made in Havana concerning the Varela Project. In an interview with the press, Carter called on Cuba's National Assembly to vote on the Varela Project, the petition signed by 11,020 Cubans on the island that asks for a referendum under the current

Cuban laws on whether the island should enact legislative changes guaranteeing freedom of speech, and free elections. Carter said that "we have to be constantly critical of any violation in Cuba of their own Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, which in my opinion authorizes the Varela Project." (The Miami Herald, 19/3/03)

March 18: During a daily briefing with the press, US State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, referred to the arrest of more than two dozen dissidents in Cuba. Communist authorities in the island have accused the oppositionists of subversion and conspiracy with American diplomats. "This is an appalling act of intimidation against those who seek freedom and democratic change in Cuba," Boucher said in a statement. "These people have been arrested for simply speaking out, one of the most basic internationally recognized human rights." [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and Foreign Affairs.] (The New York Times, 18/3/03)

March 20: US authorities say six Cubans who hijacked an airliner to Florida face air piracy charges. Federal officials say the knife-wielding hijackers surrendered peacefully after the DC-3 propeller plane landed safely at the airport on Florida's resort island of Key West. Earlier, the hijackers took control of the aircraft, which departed from Cuba's Isle of Youth, and diverted it from a scheduled landing in Havana. Thirty-five people were on board. None of the passengers or crew was injured. (The Miami Herald, 20/3/03)

March 20: Fidel Castro says the U.S.-led war with Iraq was decided by "stepping over the Security Council" and makes the United Nations meaningless. "The United Nations has been totally ignored and, in fact, one can no longer say the United Nations exists," Castro said in a 15-minute television interview broadcast by the Dominican Republic National News Network. "This has been a strong blow against the institution (the United Nations), the initiative of those countries that for diverse reasons are against war, and against the immense majority of international public opinion," said Castro. Some government that support the war "have been subject to a great deal of pressure," he added. (AP, 22/3/03)

March 21: Fidel Castro's government expressed satisfaction with the US decision to prosecute six men accused of hijacking a Cuban plane to the United States. The six men who diverted the DC-3 at knifepoint in an apparent bid to gain asylum were charged with conspiracy to seize an aircraft by force and violence, which is punishable by a minimum of 20 years in prison. "The decision to submit them to justice on piracy charges (...) constitutes, without doubt, a modest step forward," the Cuban government said in a statement. (AP, 21/3/03)

March 21: Former President Jimmy Carter urged the Cuban government to release the 70 plus dissidents arrested this week, as well as the government of George W. Bush to work towards easing the tensions between Washington and Havana. "I am profoundly concerned about reports of arrests of Cuban citizens known to support the Varela Project, promote human rights and practice independent journalism," said Carter. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and Foreign Affairs.] (El Nuevo Herald, 22/3/03)

March 21: Ten US senators from both sides of the aisle formed an informal group to fight the US trade embargo on Cuba, even as Fidel Castro ordered the arrest of dozens of dissidents at home. "The sanction policy of the United States has been ineffective since it was adopted in 1962," the legislators said in a letter to the Senate leadership. The group, which calls itself the Cuba Working Group, is similar to a group in the House, as supporters and foes of the embargo geared up for a legislative battle over trade and travel sanctions against Castro's government. (Reuters, 21/3/03)

March 23: To Fidel Castro, the real culprits behind air hijackings not only of Cuban airliners but the world over are the US governments that in the last 44 years have fought the revolutionary process he leads. "They are the ones who first thought of that crime and it was done against Cuba," said Castro in a several hour TV show during which he talked with crew members and passengers of the DC-3 flight diverted to Key Largo at knife-point. Castro defined the hijacking of

the plane as an act of terrorism. In the morning, the Cuban president welcomed the airliner's crew at Havana's José Martí international airport. (World Data Service, 23/3/03)

March 24: The Bush administration released new rules that will allow more Cuban Americans to visit relatives on the island, restrict the kinds of groups that can participate in exchanges and increase the flow of money to Cuba, including funds meant to reach government opponents. "Overall, these changes are expansive, these are not constrictive," said John Kavulich, president of US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, a New York-based group that tracks the island's economy. Among the most dramatic changes in licensing rules: "Travel permits no longer will be granted to organizations that take individuals to Cuba to participate in 'educational' exchanges that are not related to academic course work. The change will require more scrutiny of license applications". (AP, 24/3/03)

March 24: Senator Bill Nelson (Democrat-Florida), filed a resolution condemning the arrests of Cuban dissidents in the island, and urging the Bush administration ``to take all appropriate steps to secure their immediate release." (The Miami Herald, 25/3/03)

March 25: The US Coast Guard has repatriated 16 Cuban migrants after they were caught at sea trying to enter the United States illegally. The incident brings the total number of such repatriations to at least 230 this year. The 16 repatriations came after three boatloads of people were intercepted at the weekend as their crafts attempted to reach the south Florida coast, Coast Guard officials said. (The Australian, 26/3/03)

March 26: President Bush accused Cuba of launching "personal attacks" against US diplomats and urged Havana to release more than 75 Cuban dissidents who had been arrested in a recent crackdown. "President Bush condemns the Castro government's intensified repression of Cuba's growing prodemocracy and human rights activists," a White House statement said. More than 75 activists, it said, have been "unjustly imprisoned" in a sweep that began last week and that has been described by Cuban officials as a crackdown on US-backed antigovernment conspirators. "Arrest of these dissidents comes on the heels of recent personal attacks by the Cuban government against our diplomats in Havana," the White House said. (The Boston Globe, 27/3/03)

March 27: The Havana Film Festival, which began this week in New York, has been marred by the absence of a number of Cuban filmmakers who were unable to attend because of difficulties in securing visas, festival coordinator Carole Rosenberg said. Rosenberg said at the opening gala that Cuban filmmaker Julio Garcia Espinosa, who is being honored at the event, will not attend the festival because he was unable to obtain a visa. (EFE, 27/3/03)

March 26: Adolfo A. Franco, Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), announced that USAID will continue to provide funding to the University of Miami for the second year of their Cuba Transition Project. CTP, is a pioneer academic program that conducts research regarding multiple issues affecting Cuba's transition to democracy. (USAID, 26/3/03)

March 28: The director of the Independent Libraries of Cuba, 22 of whose centres have been affected by the recent arrests of dissidents on the island, asked ex-US President and Nobel Prize recipient Jimmy Carter to intercede for their release. The petition was made by Gisela Delgado Sablón who requested his mediation "before the Cuban authorities and governments of the world so that the detainees be released," in the letter addressed to Mr. Carter. [See also Domestic Affairs, Economy and Foreign Affairs.] (AFP, 29/3/03)

March 31: A man claiming to have two grenades tried to hijack a passenger plane from Cuba's small Isle of Youth to the United States, but was forced to land in Havana because of insufficient fuel. Cuban authorities were negotiating with the man, who was on board the grounded Soviet-made AN-24 plane along with 46 other people. A government statement said the plane was on a

regular flight from the Isle of Youth's main city of Nueva Gerona when the pilot reported it was being hijacked to the United States by a man armed with grenades. (AP, 1/4/03)

March 31: The Cuban regime of Fidel Castro continues to broadly violate the human rights of its citizens, according to a new report by the US State Department. Cuba's record on human rights remains "poor," the Department said in its 2002 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, released March 31. The report said Cuba is a totalitarian state controlled by Castro, who exercises complete control over all aspects of life through the Communist Party and its affiliated mass organizations. Cuba's people are not given the right to change their government peacefully, the report said. (US Department of State, 1/4/03)

© 2003 FOCAL Research Forum on Cuba