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Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba

March 2004

Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Relatives and human rights activists systematically denounce the serious situation of dissidents in jail. Cuban scientists are currently working with mother cells to regenerate organs in animals. The Cuban Government refutes charges that jailed dissidents have been ill-treated. The wives of 15 Cuban political prisoners jailed in last year's crackdown on dissent hold a public march in Havana's streets. Cuban dissidents appeal to Cuban authorities to allow international inspectors into prisons. The First Cuban Congress on Prison Medical Care takes place in Havana. Cuba opens the doors of two penitentiaries to international journalists.

Economy: Cuba closes the first month of 2004 with an increase in tourist arrivals. The Cuban government has taken more steps to restrict the circulation of the US dollar in the country. A Cuba-Canada joint venture in the energy sector makes important investments in East Havana. A Mexican foreign trade bank closes its representative office in Cuba. Venezuela approves the shipment of additional oil barrels. The total number of buses in Havana shrinks. The devastating effects of the drought affecting East Cuba become more evident.

Exile Community: Surveys show that a significant group of Cuban Americans disapproves of president George Bush's job. The Cuban government announces an easing of restrictions of entry visa requirements for Cuban exiles. Organizations of Cuban exiles demonstrate in commemoration of last year's crackdown on dissent. The US Supreme Court rejects a case brought by the Miami supporters of Elián González. World renown Cuban painter José María Mijares dies in Coral Gables.

Foreign Affairs: Cuban doctors continue to provide health service in Haiti. Uruguay's lower house of Congress passes a resolution denouncing Cuba's intelligence services. Vietnam's Communist Party chief, Nong Duc Manh, meets with Fidel Castro. Haitians seek refuge in Cuba. Cuban Foreign Minister says Cuba is willing to resume its dialogue with the European Union under certain conditions. Cuban TV channels interrupt their regular programming to announce the Spanish Popular Party's electoral defeat. A new report by Amnesty International reveals the current state of 75 Cuban prisoners of conscience. Over 600 writers request from Fidel Castro the release of Cuban journalists imprisoned in the island. Cuba rejects a UN expert's criticism of abuse in the country. Cuba condemns the assassination of leader Jeque Ahmed Yassin. Cuba protests UNESCO's decision to award jailed independent reporter Raul Rivero. An Argentine-born businessman with companies in Mexico is arrested in Cuba. Cuba accuses Honduras of agreeing to sponsor a US-proposed resolution in Geneva.

Terrorism: Fidel Castro expresses consternation and sadness at the terrorist bombing attack in Madrid. Cuban-born terrorists arrested in Panama are charged with conspiracy, possessing explosives and endangering the public's safety. A US official repeats previous allegations about Cuba's alleged weapons of mass destruction program. Cuba rejects renewed accusation by the US.

US-Cuba Relations: Cuba signs an agreement with the Port of Houston. The Cuban Foreign Ministry denounces the Bush administration for taking new actions against five Cubans imprisoned in the US. The Bush administration cracks down on travel to Cuba, even for scientists and scholars. Lawyers of five Cubans imprisoned in the US express great optimism after an oral hearing for a retrial. John Kerry promises to make Florida a battleground for his quest to oust President Bush. Washington bars 300 Cubans involved in last year's crackdown against dissidents from the US. Colin Powell requests solidarity with 75 dissidents imprisoned in Cuba. A Republican candidate to the Senate proposes a plan to infiltrate spies in US tourists groups visiting the island. US government figures show there are about 200 businesses licensed to offer travel and shipping services to Cuba.



Domestic Affairs

March 1: Raúl Castro's daughter called for an amendment of the Cuban constitution making it explicitly illegal to discriminate against homosexuals. Mariela Castro, head of the National Centre for Sexual Education (CENESEX), said that, while the National Constitution preserves the rights of all, it makes no specific reference to homosexuals. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 1/3/04)

March 1: According to relatives, dissident economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, serving out a 20-year prison sentence, was diagnosed with "cancerous tumours" at the Havana Carlos J. Finlay hospital. (*Encuentro en la Red*, 1/3/04)

March 2: The November 30 Democratic Party "Frank País" called on all relatives of political prisoners and the opposition in general to permanently fast with Gregoria Corrales Borges, 61 years old and mother of political prisoner Luis Campos Corrales. Mrs Corrales is fasting in solidarity with her son who is on hunger strike. In February, Luis Campos Corrales was transferred from the Guanajay Prison to Agüica, a maximum security prison in Matanzas province. Luis Campos refused the food he was offered stating that he will continue a hunger strike until they tell him the reason of his transfer. He also refuses to wear the common prisoner's uniform. (*Puente Informativo*, 2/3/04)

March 3: According to Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, leader of the opposition group Cambio Cubano (Cuban Change), Fidel Castro's government could "very soon" review the sentences of up to 28 years in prison given to 75 Cuban dissidents last year. Menoyo expressed certainty that there are Cuban government officials who believe the judgments to be excessive. In his opinion, "a mistake was made that has done the country more harm than good." (*EFE*, 3/2/04)

March 3: Cuban elementary school students from third to sixth grade will start studying English this year, as announced by an official from the Cuban Education Ministry. Up to now, the English language was just taught in secondary, senior high schools and universities in the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/04)

March 3: Corriente Agramontina, an illegal opposition group made up of dissident Cuban lawyers, denounced the harassment endured by three of its members in jail, including Juan Carlos González Leyva, the world's only blind political prisoner. The document, signed by the organization's president, René Gómez Manzano, points that González Leyva, though still confined, is yet to be sentenced. (*AFP*, 3/3/04)

March 4: Specialists from more than 15 countries discussed Autism -- absorption in fantasy as an escape from reality - during a session of the 4th Cuban Conference on Neurology. Participants at the conference, which is being held in Santiago de Cuba, talked about the neurological bases of this generalizing disorder, manifested by alterations referred to as sociability, language, imagination and the ability to play. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 5/3/04)

March 5: The first successful cellular heart transplant operation was recently performed in Cuba with stem cells taken from bone marrow. According to health officials, the surgery was not only the first of its kind in Cuba, but also in Central America and the Caribbean. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 5/3/04)

March 7: In commemoration of the International Day of Women, hundreds of representatives of the Cuban Women's Federation (FMC) announced their eighth congress next year. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 8/3/04)

March 8: About 3,500,000 people visited the most recent Cuban Book Fair in the 34 venues all over the country. Cuban Book Institute Deputy President Edel Morales announced the number during the closing ceremony of the event, which sold 3,200,000 books. Beginning in Havana, and continuing throughout Cuba, the Fair went beyond all expectations, the official stated. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/04)

March 8: Relatives and human rights activists are urgently appealing to the Red Cross Organization and the international community to save the life of 52-year old Julio Antonio Valdés Guevara, an imprisoned Cuban dissident hospitalized with a serious kidney condition. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 9/3/04)

March 9: Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, promoter of the Varela Project, denounced the serious situation of four political prisoners presently on a hunger strike protesting the abuses being perpetrated against Iván Hernández Carrillo, public relations secretary of the "Pedro Luis Boitel" Democracy Party, director of the Varela Project, and now a political prisoner. Alberto Domínguez --member of the Christian Liberation Movement, confined in the same prison as Hernández Carrillo--, and three other political prisoners have been on a hunger strike for more than 10 days, demanding to stop abuses against Hernández Carrillo. "Therefore I call all those who sympathize with democracy and respect for human rights to pray and express their solidarity with these Cuban prisoners, to demand that our brothers be treated with dignity and their immediate release," stated Payá Sardiñas. (*Puente Informativo*, 13/3/04)

March 9: Two groups of Cuban dissidents announced that they were starting a campaign to gather petitions for a moratorium on the death penalty on the communist-ruled island. Leonardo Calvo, coordinator of the Dialogue for Rights Coalition, told a news conference that the campaign will include a "national debate" and an anonymous survey in which citizens can explain their reasons for opposing capital punishment in Cuba. Beside the Coalition, the other organization pressing the issue is the Reflection Table of the Moderate Opposition. The campaign aims to start a national debate on human rights on the island to coincide with the upcoming meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. The signed petitions will be presented to the legislature, said the coalition coordinator, who did not disclose the number of petitions the dissident group hoped to collect nor when the campaign will end. (*EFE*, 9/3/04)

March 10: New studies about the reproduction of orchids through biotechnological techniques are being discussed at the 7th International Workshop on Orchids, which runs in Havana. Nearly 50 experts from several continents are taking part in the workshop, which is held every two years at the Botanical Garden of Soroa, the largest of its kind in Cuba. Pedro Pablo Rivero, director of the Botanical Garden of Soroa, said that the main purpose of the event is to protect the bio-diversity of orchids, one of the species with the greatest danger of extinction in the world. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/3/04)

March 10: The mother of a dissident who has been jailed for two years without charges said her son was critically ill and called on Cuban authorities to put him on trial. "He is a skeleton of his former self and has lost a lot of weight. He

was vomiting blood from an ulcer when I saw him. If he dies the government will be responsible," said Alcira Avila, mother of Leonardo Bruzon. Bruzon, a 48-year-old former restaurant worker, went on hunger strike on January 27 to demand a trial, she said. (*Reuters*, 10/3/04)

March 13: Four of the six species of marine turtles that exist on our planet live in the Peninsula de Guanahacabibes Biosphere Reserve, located in the westernmost part of the island. Named "Fish with Shield" by ancient culture, the turtles find secure refuge in this region, which is considered one of the few homes to different species of turtles on the planet. Surrounded by a platform of coral reefs that protect wild life, this region has 14 almost virgin beaches serving as a home for the turtles. The Peninsula of Guanahacabibes is a protected area with highly trained personnel that carry out an environmental program in the area. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/3/04)

March 14: Coming up on the one-year mark since the beginning of a wave of arrests that put 75 Cuban dissidents behind bars, their relatives and the opposition are not holding their breath to see the prisoners released any time soon. The crackdown on internal dissidents that began at the middle of March 2004, led to the summary sentencing of some 75 opposition members to up to 28 years in prison on charges of conspiring against Cuban independence with the United States and undermining the Cuban Revolution's goals. The blow left the opposition more fragmented than it had been before, although some of its members claim the heavy-handed sanctions forced them to reorganize. This is the case for Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) leader Oswaldo Paya, who, in a recent interview with EFE said that the 50 members of his organization who were arrested have been replaced by new members and a "renewal" of the MCL's foundations has been effected. (*EFE*, 14/3/04)

March 14: Three-time Olympic medalist Juan Maren of Cuba defeated Moises Sanchez of Spain in a Greco-Roman wrestling Olympic qualifying tournament. (*Seattle Post*, 14/3/04)

March 15: After reaching rock bottom in 1993 at the height of the country's economic crisis, Cuban book publishing has been on a steady rise, increasing from two to ninety million volumes in 2003. By the end of the 1980's, approximately 50 million books were being published annually but the figure took a nosedive after the collapse of the Socialist Bloc and the subsequent difficulties faced by the island. Now, banking on education and culture and the nation's human resources as its greatest asset, Cuban publishing houses are busy trying to meet the large demand of a population that loves to read. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/3/04)

March 15: Dr. Omelio Borroto, Deputy Minister of Public Health, and Dr. Noel González, head of the Heart Transplant Team at the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital, revealed that Cuban scientists are currently working with mother cells to regenerate organs in animals. They said it was important to search for a better alternative to transplants, as the risk of rejection by the recipient's body is eliminated or greatly diminished. The doctors explained that the Cuban health system is against human cloning for ethical reasons -- primarily promoting preventive health care, transplants and organ regenerating procedures as ways of prolonging life. Among the pharmaceuticals developed to strengthen body response to the ageing process are Vimang -- made up of extracts from bark of mango trees -- and PV-2, a natural preparation based on morinda royoc and manufactured through homeopathic procedures. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 15/3/04)

March 17: Oswaldo Paya, Cuba's most internationally celebrated opposition figure, proclaimed "Cuban Spring" in a letter released to mark the anniversary of a government crackdown on dissidents. In homage to the 1968 Prague Spring, in which Czech dissidents and artists protested against communism before a brutal Soviet crackdown, Mr. Paya said the suffering of Cuban dissidents had focused the world's attention on Fidel Castro's regime. "They are in cages, without space, even though they fought for the freedom of all," he said of 75 dissidents who have been jailed since their arrest last year, most for their participation in a petition campaign demanding basic human rights. (*The Washington Times*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Wives of Cuban dissidents jailed a year ago for opposing Fidel Castro said their husbands were withering away under harsh prison conditions and demanded their release. "My husband is dying slowly," said Cruz Delia Aguilar, whose husband Julio Antonio Valdes, needs a kidney transplant. "I ask for his release into the hands of the International Red Cross." To honor the imprisoned dissidents, their wives and mothers will take part in a 12-hour fast accompanied by a prayer chain, Gisela Delgado, wife of the jailed Hector Palacios, told the press. The largest gathering will be held at Delgado's home in Havana, but she said similar events were planned in other cities throughout the country. Most of the dissidents "are languishing in subhuman conditions that are a violation of the U.N.'s regulations concerning the treatment of prisoners," according to Elizardo Sanchez, who heads the outlawed Cuban Human Rights Commission. "At least a dozen are in their 60s, and some were suffering from serious illnesses when they were arrested," he said. A year later, their health "has deteriorated as a consequence of all this time suffering in solitary confinement and isolated punishment areas in some 10 high-security facilities generally hundreds of kilometers from their homes." "Nobody has access to really potable water. The food they are given is practically inedible and sanitary conditions are awful. Medical care is very poor and they are subjected to veritable plagues of insects and rats," Sánchez added. According to Sanchez's group, at least 13 of the dissidents are hospitalized and another 10 are in no condition to be in prison. (*Reuters, EFE, 18/3/04*)

March 18: A year after Fidel Castro launched a massive roundup of dissidents in Cuba, his pro-democracy opponents are divided and in disarray, but not defeated. "In spite of continued repression, the government has not achieved its main objective of eliminating the opposition," said Social Democrat Vladimiro Roca. "We were very battered, but we are recovering from this blow," said Roca. Oswaldo Paya, who started the Varela Project, a grass-roots effort backed by 11,000 signatures urging a national referendum on basic rights, including the right to open a business, said his nationwide campaign continues. "The government is afraid that Cubans have begun to lose their fear," Paya said in an interview. "It bragged about penetrating the dissidents and presented its spies. But this was a moral defeat for the regime, which is using repression and propaganda to stop Cubans learning about a peaceful road to change that Cuba badly needs," he said. With 50 Varela Project activists locked away, Paya said he has slowly rebuilt civic groups across Cuba and in September presented 14,384 more signatures to the National Assembly. (*Reuters, 18/3/04*)

March 18: The first anniversary of Cuba's crackdown on a group of dissidents was marked by prayer and sadness along with defiant calls from family members for the release of the 75 people imprisoned. "We are in mourning because it's been one year since the wave of repression," said Laura Pollán, wife of imprisoned dissident Hector Maseda. "But we are united in demanding the freedom for the 75. They are imprisoned unjustly." The family members of more than a dozen of the prisoners gathered in Pollán's cramped home to pray, provide support and speak with reporters. They dressed in white, and many wore T-shirts emblazoned with faces of the jailed dissidents. (*The Chicago Tribune, 18/3/04*)

March 19: Cuban TV reporters are interviewing wives of incarcerated Cuban dissidents, purportedly for a documentary film in the making. The initiative has focused on the wives of a score of political prisoners, currently ill or hospitalized in penitentiaries across the country. (*El Nuevo Herald, 19/3/04*)

March 18: One year after Cuba rounded up 75 activists in a crackdown on dissent, wives and relatives of the prisoners fasted for 12 hours to demand their immediate release. "We make another call for the release of the 75 innocent prisoners, just as we have made various calls in the past," said Gisela Delgado, wife of jailed opposition party leader Hector Palacios. "The government has been increasingly intransigent, but we will keep on fighting," said Delgado, who wore a white T-shirt printed with a color photograph of her husband. Palacios, who recently underwent a gall bladder operation, is one of more than a dozen of the prisoners currently hospitalized in custody for serious ailments. Sitting under a red, white and blue Cuban flag tacked to the wall of her living room, Delgado spent the day in a protest fast with other prisoners' wives. At another gathering, Yolanda Vazquez, wife of imprisoned journalist Manuel Vazquez, called the wives' protest "a triumph." "I thank all the world for their solidarity with the 75 prisoners," said Blanca Reyes, wife of jailed journalist and poet Raúl Rivero. (*AP, 18/3/04*)

March 18: The wives of 15 Cuban political prisoners jailed in last year's crackdown on dissent held a rare public march in Havana's streets demanding amnesty for their husbands. The women - dressed all in white, with many pinning their husbands' photographs to their chests - started their march at the well-known Coppelia ice cream restaurant in the city center. "Freedom for the 75 political prisoners!" the women shouted as they marched up to Department of Prisons headquarters seven blocks away. There, they submitted a letter to the department's director, General Rafael Calderín Tamayo, demanding freedom for their husbands and improved prison conditions. Authorities did not interfere with the march, which lasted about 2 1/2 hours. Several men who appeared to be plainclothes police officers were seen along the way, watching the protest from a distance. A green Peugeot sedan slowly followed the group while someone inside videotaped the procession. The wives also took a bus to the Miramar neighborhood, where they marched more than 30 blocks down the main Quinta Avenida thoroughfare to National Assembly headquarters. The women delivered a letter addressed to parliament President Ricardo Alarcon seeking amnesty for the prisoners. (*EFE, AP, 19/3/04*)

March 20: Cuban rock bands joined the world protests against war and terrorist acts and organized a concert at Havana's John Lennon Park. Inaugurated by Fidel Castro in 2000, the park is becoming a usual venue for peace concerts. Titled Concert for Peace, the show presented the bands Agonizer, Combat Noise and Chlover, as part of the 27th Culture Week in the Plaza de la Revolución municipality. (*Prensa Latina, 20/3/04*)

March 23: Cuba is hoping to repeat its 2000 feat and place among the top 10 medal winners at the Olympic Games in Athens. Jose Ramon Fernandez, president of Cuba's Olympic Committee, made his comments at a regular meeting of the group in this capital city. "Our delegation's main objective is to equal or surpass our performance in Sydney and remain among the top 10," Fernandez said. No fewer than 119 Cuba athletes have already qualified for the Games this year, though the number could increase because some trials have not been held yet, he added. (*EFE, 23/3/04*)

March 23: Orlando Tamayo Zapata, one of the 75 prisoners of conscience arrested on the last wave of repression that began on March 2003, began a hunger strike in solidarity with a common prisoner who is not receiving the medical attention he needs. The common prisoner, named Luis Moreira Ávila, began a hunger strike fifteen days before and is presently in critical conditions. Prison authorities ignore his plea. Moreira Tamayo Zapata's strike is indefinite. (*Puente Informativo, 30/3/04*)

March 23: Fidel Castro has urged the US and European governments to mirror Cuba's example of health cooperation; Cuba has more than 16,000 medical personnel volunteering in Third World countries. In his speech at the commemoration of the founding of Cienfuegos Provincial Hospital 25 years ago, the Cuban leader noted how Cienfuegos alone has contributed almost 600 doctors, dentists and technicians to that assistance program. Try to find a similar number of US or European doctors to volunteer on similar missions and you won't find them, the president pointed out, because "those countries do not have our type of human capital." (*Prensa Latina, 24/3/04*)

March 24: The Cuban Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) reported that, with 7 cases per 100 thousand inhabitants, the island's tuberculosis rate is one of the lowest in the Americas. The announcement was made as the island received an award from the World Health Organization's Stop TB Initiative for the development of efficient means of control and treatment of the disease. (*Notimex, 24/3/04*)

March 24: Miguel Valdés Tamayo has sent his wife letters depicting the subhuman conditions at the Kilo 8 prison in Camagüey where he is serving out the 15-year jail sentence he was handed during last year's crackdown on political dissidence. According to Tamayo, "the food is still bad, stinky and the rations are meagre (...) rats, gnats, cockroaches, and insects of all kinds proliferate (...) and the quality of medical attention is abhorrent." (*Cubanet, 24/3/04*)

March 24: With respect to Cuba's prison system, Col. Rafael Guzmán, deputy head of the Ministry of the Interior's Prisons Directorate, stressed that efforts are being made to enforce human dignity in the inmates. The daily TV program Round Table (Mesa Redonda) depicted the increasing relevance of education, culture and sports as

instruments of prison rehabilitation programs. Col. Guzmán emphasis was placed on the inmates' guaranteed access to medical and dental care, sentence reductions of up to two months per year served, conjugal visitation, and the improvement of food and clothing quality, as well as of living and working conditions. (*Granma*, 24/3/04)

March 24: In letters written from the province of Camaguey's prison Kilo 7, prisoners of conscience Juan Carlos Herrera Acosta and Léster González Pentón informed that to commemorate the first anniversary of their unjust imprisonment, and to show solidarity with their fellow men in prison, a 5-day hunger strike was conducted. At the end of the strike, Herrera Acosta cut his legs repeatedly with a blade to protest against harassment by prison authorities. (*NetforCuba.Com*, 28/3/04)

March 25: The Cuban government refuted international charges that jailed dissidents had been ill-treated, presenting medical reports and videotaped statements by wives of prisoners. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque denied any of the 75 opponents of president Fidel Castro, arrested one year ago, were being held in solitary confinement, had been beaten or were being denied medical attention. "Cuba is complying with United Nations standards on the treatment of prisoners," he said at a news conference where he took no questions. "It is false that they have received degrading or inhumane treatment." International rights groups have criticized the conditions under which the dissidents are serving terms of up to 28 years. Cuba's record will be debated next month by the UN Human Rights Commission. (*Reuters, AP, IPS*, 26/3/04)

March 26: Adolfo Fernández Saíñz, 56, a translator, journalist and democracy advocate in Cuba, is in a cell in Holguín prison, nearly 500 miles from his family, which is permitted a two-hour visit every three months. Mr. Fernández Saíñz shares his cell with 47 common prisoners, one of whom beat him into unconsciousness in December. Mr. Fernández Saíñz, who is serving a 15-year sentence, is one of 75 journalists, economists, librarians, human rights workers and doctors arrested in Cuba last March and later convicted. (*The New York Times*, 26/3/04)

March 26: In telephone interviews from Havana, the wives of two of the dissidents jailed since March 2003, told the press that they felt manipulated by the Cuban television interviews. "The problem is that nobody had a chance to prepare," said Margarita Borges, whose husband, Edel José García, 58, was sentenced to 15 years. "I was so nervous that I couldn't think." The two women said the interviews lasted about 30 minutes and focused on the medical treatment that their husbands have received, they said. "I felt depressed and cried a lot after the interview when I figured out what they could do," said Dulce María Amador, whose husband Carmelo Díaz is serving a 16-year sentence. "I said the truth. I didn't lie, and if they manipulate it then that's a different story." Amador, 42, said she became suspicious when the reporter only wanted to know about her husband's health and their prison wedding, while ignoring her pleas for her husband's freedom. The Cuban TV interviewer "had specific questions and knew everything about our situation," Amador said. According to both women, the reporter also asked about their husbands' personal hygiene, eating schedule, reading materials, visitation rights, and any type of torture or mistreatment. (*The Miami Herald*, 26/3/04)

March 26: Cuban dissidents have appealed to the regime to allow international inspectors into prisons holding democracy advocates and independent journalists amid continuing reports of degrading and insalubrious conditions. The conditions under which 75 dissidents imprisoned a year ago are being held have become an issue in Cuba as the UN Commission on Human Rights debates the issue in Geneva. According to Oswaldo Paya, leader of the Liberation Christian Movement, the government is trying to cover up a "very serious" situation with a view to the upcoming vote in Geneva. "Why don't they release the sick? Why don't they let the International Red Cross into the prisons? Why don't they hold new trials in Cuba?" Paya asked. Elizardo Sanchez, who heads the outlawed Human Rights Commission, said the only way to establish the truth about the situation of the "prisoners of conscience" is to allow the International Red Cross, UN inspectors and even the international press to enter the prisons. Vladimiro Roca of the "Todos Unidos" movement called the government's attitude "choreography, theater," designed to confront "a difficult situation in Geneva." According to Blanca Reyes, wife of author and journalist Raul Rivero - sentenced to 20 years in

prison - the dissidents' wives were "manipulated." Reyes was one of the relatives who refused to be interviewed by Cuban reporters. (*EFE*, 26/3/04)

March 28: In closing the final session of the 3rd Workshop on the "Integration of the University in the Battle of Ideas" at Havana's Convention Centre, Fidel Castro told the 400 plus delegates in attendance that, with regards to education and health care, Cuba is today a world capital and a true model of a humane society. Fidel Castro had a lengthy exchange with the workshop participants. (*Granma*, 29/3/04)

March 29: A house of prayer of the Russian Orthodox Church will appear in Havana. "We hope construction will start even within the year," says Archpriest Nicholas Balashov, Secretary for contacts between Orthodox Christian communities at the Moscow Patriarchate Department of External Church Relations. Father Nicholas has just come back to Moscow from a trip to Havana. There are many Russian nationals in Cuba, and it is high time to build a Russian Orthodox church for them. It has to be a big place as a congregation of up to three hundred gathers for festive liturgies in Havana. Meanwhile, the Russian trade representation has to host those liturgies in its hall. That has been so since 2001. (*Novosti*, 29/3/04)

March 29: Relatives of jailed dissident Oscar Espinosa Chepe who is serving a 20 year sentence, urged Cuban authorities to allow the International Red Cross to visit him to verify his health. Miriam Leiva, the 63-year-old economist's wife, refuted last week's statements to the contrary by Cuban foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque, calling for her husband's release on poor health grounds. The dissident's wife has maintained Espinosa Chepe suffers from cirrhosis of the liver, prostate adenoma, as well as hypertension, and is too sick to stay in jail. Leiva called for Amnesty International, which considers Espinosa Chepe a "prisoner of conscience", and Human Rights Watch as well as the Red Cross to personally verify her husband's state of health and his prison conditions. (*AFP*, 29/3/04)

March 30: The First Cuban Congress on Prison Medical Care began in Havana amidst national and international debate on prison conditions on the island. According to Lt. Col Terencio Batista, Cuba guarantees its prison population standards of free medical care equal to the rest of the population, as well as the possibility to upgrade their educational and cultural levels. The Cuban officer also informed a roundtable of 250 delegates that at present there is a doctor for every 200 prisoners, a dentist for every 900, and a nurse for every 100. The organizing committee member for the event also informed that all prisoners are routinely given a thorough medical and dental examination upon entry, and then receive immediate and appropriate treatment. Lt. Col. Doctor Rosa Campoalegre spoke on the success of the educational program functioning in all penal institutions on the island, providing prisoners the opportunity for culture and learning, which has not only proven itself in their increased self-esteem and better behavior, but has created a more secure climate and better functioning of the prisons themselves. This congress is part of the complete spiritual renovation of Cuban prisons, a qualitative transformation of the concept of penal regime, now in progress for prisoners in Cuba while they fulfill their debt to society. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Young Cubans showed their tattoos during the live tattoo and piercing exhibit held in Havana. Cubans gathered at an annual event organized by the "Hermanos Saíz" Association, an arts organization under the Cuban Ministry of Culture. Tattoos are the latest rage in Cuba. (*Reuters*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Political prisoner Nelson Aguiar Ramírez, confined in the prison Combinado de Guantánamo, is presently hospitalized at the Guantánamo provincial hospital due to high blood pressure and chest pains. State Security officials have him in isolation, incommunicado. He is not allowed to receive telephone calls or any foods whatsoever. "They say he is in the hospital for a checkup but no tests results have been provided to him or his family", said Ada Kaly Márquez Abascal, coordinator in functions of the Democratic Party November 30 "Frank País". (*Puente Informativo*, 30/3/04)

March 31: At the closing session of the first Cuban National Penitentiary Medicine Congress taking place in Havana, it was emphasized that without regard to ideology or social conduct, all prisoners have equal access to all health

services of the country. According to this principle, the island's emphasis on preventive health extends to its prisons, Assistant Health Minister Gonzalo Estevez averred. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Cuba opened the doors of two penitentiaries to international journalists, hoping to rebut criticism about prison conditions in the weeks before the UN human rights body votes on the island's rights record. The visit by international media, limited to the hospital wards of Havana's Combinado del Este for men and the Manto Negro Western Women's Prison, was the first such group media visit to Cuban prisons in more than 15 years, authorities said. Military doctors and nurses led reporters, photographers and cameramen through operating rooms, an intensive care ward, and recovery rooms linked by hallways reeking of disinfectant and fresh paint. Journalists were invited to join the tour, originally organized for a national congress on prison medicine. In recent days, relatives of imprisoned opposition activists said Roberto de Miranda and Orlando Fundora - two of the peaceful dissidents convicted last April in Havana's worst crackdown in years - had been admitted to that hospital, along with Leonardo Bruzon, who was jailed in December 2002 and has been on a hunger strike demanding a trial. However, the press did not see any of these men at the hospital. Hospital chief Avelino Gonzalez said De Miranda and Bruzon had been transferred, although he did not specify where or when, while Fundora, he said, left the hospital on a conjugal visit. Reporters did not have access to any jailed dissidents or to inmates outside the medical centers. (*Sun Sentinel*, *AP*, *BBC*, *Canadian Press*, *EFE*, 1/4/04)

March 31: María de los Angeles Falcón Cabello, niece of Martha Beatriz Roque, informed that when she arrived at Carlos J. Finlay Hospital for her weekly visit to her aunt, she was informed by the officer in charge that Martha Beatriz refuses to receive any visits or food. Falcón Cabello does not know what this prisoner of conscience's situation is, or what she is going through at the present time. (*Puente Informativo*, 31/3/04)

Economy

March 1: Cuba will offer cell phone service to local residents for the first time, the official media reported, as the Caribbean island scrambles to modernize its telecommunications. "Starting the second half of the year the population will benefit from the installation and distribution of cellular telephones, a service up to now available only in dollars," Villa Clara province's official weekly, *Vanguardia*, said. "In the future the basic development of telecommunications will be cellular and wireless," *Vanguardia* reported. The island's 11.3 million people have almost no access to mobile phones. Cell phones are available to tourists and other foreign visitors. (*Reuters*, 1/3/04)

March 2: Cuba closed the first month of 2004 with a 12.4 percent increase in tourist arrivals, as compared to the same period last year, tourism industry sources informed. A total of 214,242 visitors traveled to the island in January, surpassing the number of arrivals in the same month last year by 23,573, according to statistics by the Ministry of Tourism. In January 2000, 163,786 tourists had visited the Caribbean island, 188,652 did so in the same month of 2001, and 140,792 in 2002. Canada, Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Venezuela, Spain and Mexico are still the island's principal markets. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/3/04)

March 2: Kenya and Cuba have stated their interest to strengthen cooperation links at the second intergovernmental joint commission in session in Havana. Kenya's Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister Moses Wetangula and Cuba's Foreign Investment Minister Marta Lomas are focusing on expanding collaboration in the next two years. The parties will close their meetings Friday by signing an agreement. Wetangula thanked Cuba's hospitality and friendship towards his country, with which it is collaborating in culture and sports. Some 21 Kenyan youths are currently studying in Cuban universities. Kenya and Cuba signed several cooperation agreements in sports and culture in the first intergovernmental joint commission in Nairobi. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/3/04)

March 2: Eshagh Yahanguiari, Iran's Minister of Industries and Mines, arrived in Havana, invited by the Cuban Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration. The Iranian minister said his country can supply raw material to Cuban industries, while stressing that Iran is interested on cooperation with Cuba in medical and biotechnological fields. (*AIN*, 2/3/04)

March 3: Cuba's plans to produce 2.6 million tonnes of raw sugar during the 2003/2004 harvest appeared further out of reach at the close of February, sources close to the industry said, as mills sputtered along and broke down. No official milling and yield information was available as the state-run media fell silent on the harvest's progress, a sure sign of problems, local analysts said. Cuba's top sugar reporter, Juan Varela, announced that the amount of sugar produced was not that important. "What is important is economic efficiency," he said. Varela's daily radio spots, usually filled with harvest information, have focused on Sugar Ministry efforts to produce food, electricity and livestock ever since. "I think the Sugar Ministry decided not to provide information on the harvest because it is not going well," a local sugar expert said. (*Reuters*, 3/3/04)

March 5: The head of Sherritt International says the company needs to "make something happen" in the next six months to get expansion of its Cuban nickel project underway or it will miss a chance to take advantage of the recent strength in nickel prices. "We're sitting down with our counterparts in Cuba and it's really a matter of negotiations to define the terms that are satisfactory to both parties," Dennis Maschmeyer, Sherritt's chief executive, said during a conference call with analysts. Last year, Sherritt's Moa mining and processing facilities in Cuba produced 7,715 tonnes in the fourth quarter and 32,042 tonnes for the full year of nickel plus cobalt contained in mixed sulphides. That compared with 8,159 tonnes during the fourth quarter of 2002 and a record 33,382 tonnes during the prior year. The company attributed the lower production rates to lower-grade ore and additional maintenance activities in 2002. (*The Toronto Star*, 5/3/04)

March 9: Cuba's efforts to use biogas as a source of renewable energy have been acknowledged during a workshop on the subject in the central Cuban province of Camaguey. One of the participants at the workshop, Italian engineer Enrico Turin, who also serves as vice president of the Eurosolar Association, noted that Cuba has the advantage of great volumes of residuals from agriculture and fishing that can be used to develop biogas. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 9/3/04)

March 10: Pernod Ricard's fastest-growing product is the famous Cuban rum Havana Club, which sold 1.9 million 9-litre (2.4-gallon) cases last year. Pernod Ricard's joint venture with Cuba, Havana Club International, has been selling the rum worldwide for 10 years, and sales have soared an average 17 percent a year. But the largest rum market, with 42 percent of the world's total sales of 38 million cases a year, is closed to the Cuban rum brand by a 4-decade-old U.S. trade embargo against Cuba's communist-run government. "We have won a battle but not the war," Ricard said at a news conference in Havana. "If the embargo is lifted tomorrow morning, we are ready to start selling in the United States." (*Reuters*, 10/3/04)

March 11: Cuba has taken more steps to restrict the circulation of the US dollar in the country as the Communist government continues efforts to roll back the market reforms of a decade ago. A circular from the Economy and Planning Ministry orders state companies to stop using the US dollar as of April for any services and products not considered their core business. A government official said state companies would now have to charge in pesos for nonessential services or close them down. Cuban businessmen said the latest restrictions range from a ban on some companies engaging in foreign trade to caps on the prices charged in an economy that is 90 percent controlled by the state. "We all think there will be more measures and each time they will move closer to controlling everything again," the manager of one company said. (*Reuters*, 11/3/04)

March 13: Coffee growers in central Villa Clara province have kicked off a recovery strategy in local coffee plantations, which is expected to be completed by 2007. The program includes replacement of plantations and soil improvement, based on organic techniques. The initiative also includes the use of worms as organic fertilizer and the

cultivation of alternate crops. Studies prior to the implementation of the strategy in that mountainous area of central Cuba indicated a sharp decrease in productivity due to inappropriate planting and soil management. Over 63% of all local coffee plantations in the central province are older than 16 years, which affects the plants' productivity, since the best productive stage of such plantations is around 10 years. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/3/04)

March 13: The Cuba-Canada joint venture in the energy sector, known as Energas, will make important investments in East Havana to increase power generation this year. Energas executives say that the project is expected to allow for the improved use of gas reserves on the northern coastal strip of Havana province and make a considerable contribution to environmental preservation. The company's station in central Matanzas province, with a 200-megawatt-hour potential, contributed 144 million kilowatt-hours in January, which satisfied all local consumption needs during hours of the highest electrical demand. Also in that central province, Energas produced tons of pure sulphur and liquefied gas, which is distributed throughout the island as kitchen fuel. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/3/04)

March 13: A group of 20 new local products have been added to the export list of eastern Santiago de Cuba province. The initiative, which is part of efforts aimed at increasing hard-currency revenues in that province, includes ecological bee honey, whose local production increased to 520 tons; fresh water fish; physiotherapy equipment, refined sugar, canned fruits, juices and concentrates, waste paper and crafts, among other products. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/3/04)

March 15: The Bangalore-based Biocon Ltd, in joint venture with Cuban pharmaceutical firm Cimab SA, will commission a facility in Bangalore, India, to manufacture the latter's biotech products based on the monoclonal antibodies (Mab). The facility, in which Biocon will invest Rs 125 crore, is expected to begin commercial production of Mab products in 2006. Initially the Rs 372 crore Biocon will market Mab products only in the domestic market. (*Business Standard*, 15/3/04)

March 16: China Petrochemical Corp., or Sinopec, has signed a memorandum of understanding with Cuba's national oil company, Cuba Petroleo, or Cupet, to explore four oil blocks in Cuba, a Sinopec official said. The MoU will allow Sinopec to conduct geological studies of the four Cuban blocks over six months, which could lead to the signing of a production sharing contract between the two companies, he said, without giving details of the blocks. "We will do a survey on these blocks first and then decide if we will enter into a PSC," he said, adding the blocks are likely to contain mostly crude oil, as opposed to natural gas. The MoU marks the first attempt by Sinopec, China's second largest oil and gas company, to enter oil and gas exploration and production in Cuba. (*Dow Jones*, 16/3/04)

March 17: Cuba aims to keep driving up rice production by encouraging cultivation in small paddies through a programme involving 190,000 farmers across the island. More than 130,000 hectares are already planted with rice as a result of the initiative, and is expected to increase with the incorporation of fallow farmland and the sugarcane fields that have been abandoned since the restructuring of the socialist-run country's sugar industry in 2002. Another 30,000 hectares of rice belong to public entities that benefit from strong infrastructure but are lacking in the organisation necessary to improve yields and reduce costs. Rice is a staple of the Cuban dinner table. This country of 11.2 million people consumes 670,000 tonnes of rice a year, but almost 60 percent has to be imported, mostly from Vietnam, China and the United States. (*IPS*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Mexico's foreign trade bank Banco de Comercio Exterior (Bancomext) will close its representative office in Cuba, the bank's official said, without disclosing the reasons for the decision. The bank was the main intermediary between the Cuban Government and Mexican businessmen, interested in operations in Cuba. Bancomext was running business in Cuba with the island's Central Bank to find a solution to a 380 million external debt with Mexico. (*La Jornada, Latin American News Digest*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Eight Canadian Companies representing the sectors of fresh, processed and natural foods and alcoholic beverages will be visiting with respective producers and suppliers in Havana, Cuba and at their places of work. The

purpose of this visit is to introduce Canadian buyers to Cuban suppliers in order to increase Cuban exports to Canada, assist in the development of Cuban production and export capacities, and to generally enhance the trade relationship between Cuba and Canada. (*Trade Facilitation Office Canada*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Under the Caracas Accord, Venezuela's state-owned national oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela*, currently ships to Cuba 13,000 barrels of Vitol Fuel, 10,000 of Shell, as well as 53,000 barrels of crude oil, on a daily basis. Now, the company has approved the shipment of an additional 25,000 barrels, for a grand total of about 100,000 barrels per day. (*El Nacional*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Thailand and Cuba have formally started to co-operate in trade and investment, with whisky, sports and sugar their priorities. During talks between Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai and Deputy Investment and International Economic Co-operation Minister Ramón Ignacio Ripoll Díaz of Cuba, Thailand expressed its interest in deepening technical and economic co-operation with Cuba. Charoen Siriwattanapakdi, a well-known Thai whisky producer, was reportedly interested in tapping Cuba's rum whisky market and would like Cubans to invest in Thailand's liquor industry as well. The two countries also agreed to study co-operation in sugar pricing and tourism, according to Mr Surakiart. (*Bangkok Post*, 17/3/04)

March 18: Cuba's once-large cattle herd has been hit hard over the years, leaving many Cubans longing for beef. The situation also has forced Cuban officials to take tough measures to protect cattle, even as the government turns to the United States for help in restocking its herd. The beef industry never recovered, but dairy herds were built back up through huge investments and imported animal feed, experts said. Years later, when the Soviet Union collapsed and ended \$5 billion in annual subsidies, Cuba lacked the money for feed, and much of the dairy herd also was lost. The problems have been exacerbated by severe droughts and by what some experts describe as Cuba's ill-fated attempts to breed a superbovine that could thrive in a tropical climate. The government today imports huge quantities of milk from New Zealand, Canada and other countries and distributes it at subsidized prices for infants, children up to age 7, the elderly and the infirm. Most everyone else has to purchase powdered milk on the black market for \$1 a pound. Cubans earn an average of about \$10 a month. At the same time, per capita beef and veal consumption in Cuba has fallen from about 3.7 pounds per month in 1961 to just over 1.2 pounds per month in 2001, according to the United Nations. (*The Chicago Tribune*, 18/3/04)

March 18: The Conran empire is about to get bigger, with a new Cuban bar and restaurant concept coming to London this autumn. *Floridita* - serving food, cocktails, cigars and live music - is a joint venture with new company *Havana Holdings*. *Havana Holdings* was set up last year and is backed by the Cuban government. It is a joint operation between Cuban bar operator *Boisdale*, Cuban hotel group *Gran Caribe*, which owns the *Floridita* brand name, cigar producer *Habanos* and drinks producer *Pernod Ricard*. The first bar is scheduled to open in a central London landmark location in the first week of October, and the company hopes to roll out the brand across the UK and the continent. (*Caterer & Hotelkeeper*, 18/3/04)

March 22: The total number of buses making up Havana's mass transit fleet shrank from 543 in 2002 -- when there were already too few to meet demand -- to 524 last year. The fleet serves a total population of 2.2 million, and local authorities are trying to cover the shortage by reorganising routes and schedules to make better use of the available vehicles. In this Caribbean island nation of 11.2 million, a total of 900 mass transportation vehicles serve the cities, 183 serve suburban areas, and 1,036 cover the inter-urban routes, according to official figures. Although the statistics show that buses continue to form the backbone of the mass transit system, the number of passengers they carry fell 13.3 percent from 2002 to 2003, mainly due to fuel shortages. In 2002, buses picked up an average of 78.33 passengers along their routes, which dropped to 75.92 in 2003. (*IPS*, 22/3/04)

March 22: Central Camagüey became the first Cuban province to produce 200,000 tonnes of raw sugar in the 2003/2004 season, the local media reported, as the industry struggled to top last year's 2.2 million tonnes by early May.

"Camaguey has become the first in Cuba to produce 200,000 tonnes of sugar during the current harvest," the province's official weekly, Adelante, said. Analysts say less-than-expected yields, harvesting and milling problems mean this year's harvest will weigh in at around 2.3 million to 2.4 million tonnes, though efficiency has improved. On April 7 of last year western Villa Clara province became the first of 13 sugar-producing provinces to reach the 200,000-tonne mark, followed by eastern Las Tunas on April 15, while Camaguey did not reach the mark until May 27. (*Reuters*, 22/3/04)

March 23: The Cuban industry is planning to expand its cement output from the 1,357,200 tons produced in 2003, to 2 million tons in 2004, with a growth in national consumption of that product. According to Isaac Alayón, president of the Grupo Empresarial Cemento-Vidrio (Cement & Glass Manufacturers Consortium), in contrast with a previous slump in that sector, improved performance by the country's six cement and clinker manufacturing plants allowed for an increase in exports. (*Notimex*, 23/3/04)

March 23: Cuba continues to generate interest among foreign investors, with the total number of investment projects currently operating on the island totaling almost 350, a high-ranking Cuban source said in Havana. Cuba presently has 342 foreign investment deals, with a committed capital of over US\$ 6 billion, said the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation. Spain is the largest investor in Cuba. It is followed by Canada, Italy, France, Mexico and China. Spain has 98 joint venture companies and commercial offices operating in Cuba. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 23/3/04)

March 24: Virgin Atlantic Airways Ltd plans to order two more A340-600 aircraft, recruit 1,400 staff, add new routes to Cuba and the Bahamas, and expand capacity on existing routes, said the British airline. (*Reuters*, 24/3/04)

March 24: Effective in July, Air Canada will boost its non-stop flights between Toronto and Havana, Cuba to daily service operated with Airbus A319 aircraft. In the meantime, the carrier has introduced a larger Airbus A320 aircraft on the route in response to customer demand for the popular new service launched only last December. (*CNW*, 24/3/04)

March 24: Iran is to export cars to Cuba, said Iran's ambassador to Havana Ahmad Edrisian in a meeting with Cuban Minister of Foreign Trade Raul de la Nuez in Havana. Edrisian said Iran is also to enter a joint venture with Cuba for the production of shoes, basic materials for textiles and plastic bags. Nuez said his country is ready for any cooperation with Iran to upgrade trade with the Islamic state. (*IRNA*, 26/3/04)

March 25: Reporters Without Borders has asked to meet the chairman of Telecom Italia's board of governors about the implications of the company's ties with Cuban telecommunications operator ETECSA, that has been made responsible for Internet censorship. "We would like to meet you to discuss together the problems arising from your investment in Cuban telecommunications", the international press freedom organisation said in a 25 March 2004 letter to Marco Tronchetti Provera. "We believe that your company should broach the issue with ETECSA and the Cuban government to bring an end to relentless censorship of the Net in Cuba and so that 27 journalists jailed in March 2003, accused in particular of putting the Internet to "counter-revolutionary" use, can be released." (*RSF Press Release*, 26/3/04)

March 26: More than 20 years after the first sowing of camomile in Pinar del Rio, Cuba's most western province, a recent research study showed the high quality of its essential oil, including of export quality. The study, led by Dr. Maria de Lourdes Rodriguez, showed that the camomile oil can be produced in industrial amount by a distillation method that uses water vapor at the SUCHEL company facilities. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/04)

March 26: The devastating effects of the drought affecting East Cuba became more evident as the local water reservoir was unable to meet the demand, forcing water tank trucks to make more than 100 trips to distribute water. The local paper says the dams in the territory currently store less than 140 million cubic meters of water, and access to 100 million is limited by pumping capacity. Las Tunas is in the worst situation, as its population of 100,000 is barely

supplied one fourth of the 17 million cubic meters of water required to provide stable service. Underground water has decreased by more than one meter and dried out many wells. This is why the population is hoping for a miracle downpour to ease their desperate situation. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/04)

March 29: Alexandre Sirech, a 37-year-old Frenchman from Bordeaux is director-general of Havana Club International S.A. and presides over one of the most successful joint ventures ever launched between foreign investors and Cuba's communist government. In 2003, the company -- a partnership between French drinks giant Pernod Ricard and Cuba's Ministry of Food Industry -- shipped 1.92 million nine-liter cases of Havana Club rum. That's up from 1.73 million cases in 2002, when the brand ranked No. 53 on Impact magazine's list of the world's top 100 premium distilled spirits. "Demand has been exploding in Europe," he said, noting that Havana Club is now 50th on the Impact list. "If we keep up with this momentum, we should rank in the top 40 very soon." Havana Club has been able to score these gains even though the US embargo bars sale of Cuban rum in the United States where 42 percent of the world's rum is consumed. (*The Miami Herald*, 29/3/04)

March 30: The Cuba-based representative of Mexico's state-run foreign trade bank, Bancomext, said the institution would close its Havana office next month. "We have already let our staff go, the office shuts in mid-April and I leave in 20 days," said Cesar Lajud Desentis, in charge of Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior S.N.C.'s Cuba operations. Bancomext has functioned as an intermediary for more than 200 Mexican companies doing business with Cuba and worked unsuccessfully for over a decade to recover \$400 million in overdue debt. Bilateral trade was \$255 million in 2003, said Lajud. Some Mexican companies have urged Bancomext to reconsider shutting down the office established in 1975, the largest of 14 the bank says it is closing for budgetary reasons. (*Reuters*, 30/3/04)

March 31: In a recent poll conducted for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel and WTVJ Channel 6 by Florida International University, 54 percent of Cuban-Americans surveyed in Miami-Dade and Broward counties said they send money to Cuba. According to the survey, the average amount sent per household in 2003 was \$387 for an estimated total of about \$100 million annually from South Florida. (*Sun Sentinel*, 31/3/04)

Exile Community

March 2: A survey shows that more than one-third of South Florida Hispanic voters -- a group consisting primarily of GOP-leaning Cuban Americans -- disapproves of the job president George Bush has done "promoting democracy and regime change" in Fidel Castro's Cuba. Those results, compiled for Univision Channel 23 by Washington pollster Rob Schroth, are the latest indication that Bush could be hurt politically by complaints from some exile leaders that he has failed to deliver on campaign promises to crack down on Castro. (*The Miami Herald*, 2/3/04)

March 2: The Cuban government announced that it will ease entry visa requirements for Cuban exiles who want to visit the island, and once again condemned the travel restrictions imposed by the United States. As of June 1, most Cubans living abroad who want to visit Cuba will be able to do so with just a valid passport approved by the Cuban government, the Cuban Interests Section in Washington announced. The measure excludes the "small minority" of Cubans who have taken part in "terrorist and/or repugnant activities to destroy their country," Dagoberto Rodriguez, head of the mission, said at a press conference. (*EFE*, 2/3/04)

March 3: Belen Jesuit Preparatory School in West Dade, founded in Cuba in 1854 and billed as the South Florida school with the oldest history, celebrates its 150th anniversary this week. The mayor of Miami and a rising star of Broadway were educated there, as was the former CEO of Coca-Cola, not to mention Fidel Castro. By the time 80 communist soldiers occupied the school's campus for Castro in January 1961, it had 60 acres with 1,200 students. On September 17 of that year, 26 Jesuit priests -- expelled by Castro -- boarded the Covadonga ship and headed for

Miami. What used to be a school of Cuban Americans now comprises about 1,000 students from 27 different countries, most of them Latin American, European and Cuban American. (*The Miami Herald*, 3/3/04)

March 10: Two wealthy, conservative Cuban exiles have formed a new group and conducted a poll to help influence the US electoral debate. Miami car dealer Gus Machado and Leopoldo Fernandez Pujols, a Cuban exile who built a pizza empire in Spain, have enlisted the aid of Washington lawyer Mauricio Claver-Carone to represent their group, Cuba Democracy Advocates. Its first major action: hiring Miami-based Campaign Data Inc. to survey 600 Cuban-American registered voters in Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Their poll shows that Cuban Americans maintain hard-line attitudes toward Fidel Castro and want to continue the US embargo. It also found that there is little support for Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá's Varela Project, and that many younger Cuban Americans -- nearly 46 percent of the respondents between 18 and 39 years old -- say the United States should take military action against Castro. The margin of error was plus or minus three to five percentage points. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/3/04)

March 11: There are growing indications that Cuban exile voters will once again play a key role in November's presidential elections: Pollsters say Florida's estimated 500,000 Cuban voters could be a deciding factor in the state's election, which in turn may -- as it did in 2000 -- decide the national election. "The Cuban exile vote will be as important, if not more, than in the past," pollster Sergio Bendixen told me Wednesday, a day after the Democratic Party primary in Florida. "As long as they continue voting as a bloc, and as long as Florida remains one of the closest elections, the Cuban vote will play a key role." According to several pollsters, South Florida's Cuban exile voters will be courted heavier by both parties than in the 2000 elections, mostly because they tend to turn out in huge numbers, and because the Bush-Cheney campaign can no longer take them for granted. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/3/04)

March 11: The former Cuban fighter pilot who escaped from his country in a stolen MiG-23 in 1991 then returned the next year in a light plane to land on a rural highway and pick up his family has rejected five draft screenplays of his story. The 45-year-old Lorenzo, who now owns a construction company in Orlando, is a private man. The story made international news when the Cuban air force major defected in a MiG-23 and landed at a US military base in Key West, Florida. But he trumped his own feat when - in a spectacular and dangerous operation - he returned to Cuba in a rented puddle-jumper and picked up wife Vicky and sons Reyniel and Alejandro on a highway near a beach in the western province of Matanzas. Skimming the sea to avoid being detected by radar, he was able to land as night was falling on the rural highway, where he nearly crashed into a bus. With the motors running, his family, hiding in the bushes of the nearby beach, boarded the plane and Lorenzo managed to take off and escape Cuban air space before MiGs could be scrambled to shoot him down. (*EFE*, 11/3/04)

March 15: Organizations of Cuban exiles, "¡Ya! (Enough!)" and Unión Liberal Cubana (Cuban Liberal Union), announced their intentions to communicate their concern for the current human rights situation on the island to the newly elected Spanish president, PSOE leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. (*Europa Press*, 15/3/04)

March 18: Seventy five people -- teachers, priests, students, librarians, historians, entrepreneurs, artists and activists -- each representing one of the 75 Cuban dissidents and opposition leaders arrested beginning a year ago, will demonstrate in Miami. They will stand along Biscayne Boulevard, each with an 8-by-10 photograph of an independent teacher, writer, doctor, lawyer, librarian or human rights activist who was summarily tried and sentenced to long terms for "crimes against the state." The photographs will be attached to a 12-foot board, creating a mural that may later be put on display. Nearby, a makeshift cell will hold a typewriter and tape recorder, papers and pencils, books and blackboards -- things confiscated from raids on the dissidents' homes and used as "evidence" in their trials. "There will also be a Cuban flag inside the cell. The entire nation is in prison," said Marilú del Toro, a spokeswoman for the Cuban Democratic Directorate, a nonprofit organization that supports island dissidents and organized the noontime demonstration in Miami. (*The Miami Herald*, 18/3/04)

March 18: A large majority of Hispanic Republicans in Miami-Dade County support President Bush in his reelection bid, but almost as many feel that he needs to get tougher on Cuba or risk losing their support, according to a new poll. The findings suggest that while the president remains popular among Cuban Americans, there is room for the Democrats to take advantage of their frustrations and siphon off some of their votes, the pollster says. "The dissatisfaction with Bush shows that people are unhappy with his Cuba policy," said Florida International University Professor Dario Moreno, whose company, Campaign Data, conducted the poll for BellSouth. Senator John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, "has not announced a plan for the democratization of Cuba and has not released what his Cuba policy is. Until now, Cuban Americans don't have an alternative." The questions on Bush and Cuba were part of a larger poll that Campaign Data conducted on state legislative issues -- such as healthcare and education -- for BellSouth. In response to the question, "How likely are you to vote for the reelection of President George W. Bush?" about 88 percent of respondents said they were likely or very likely. Then another issue was raised: "In August 2003, Miami's 11 Hispanic legislators sent a letter to Bush urging him to take a tougher line toward the Castro regime. The letter warned the president that if he did not toughen his stance toward Cuba, he could not expect the strong support of the Cuban community in the presidential election." Seventy percent agreed or strongly agreed. (*The Miami Herald*, 18/3/04)

March 18: The Cuban exile community joined an international effort to mark the first anniversary of Havana's harshest opposition crackdown in years, during which 75 peaceful dissidents were sentenced to prison terms of up to 28 years. Writers, artists, journalists, students, clergymen and human rights activists were among those demanding the immediate release of the dissidents at a ceremony held in tandem with other similar gatherings in cities across the United States, Europe and Latin America. Each participant placed the photograph of one of the 75 prisoners on a mural located in front of the Friendship Torch in downtown Miami. Next to the mural, organizers built a replica of a jail cell 3 meters (9 feet) by 2 meters (6 feet) with some of the items that were confiscated from the dissidents by Cuban authorities: typewriters, computers, radios, paper, pencils and plastic chairs. (*EFE*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Cuban exiles' groups in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut are commemorating the first anniversary of the repression unleashed by Fidel Castro's regime in 2003, during which 75 dissidents, journalists and human rights activists landed in jail. (*Radio y TV Marti*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Miami-Dade detectives arrested the reputed "Godfather of the Cuban Mafia" in the fruit and vegetable section of his neighborhood Publix supermarket -- in the latest attempt to dismantle a violent crime family that has generated more than \$1 billion over the last four decades. José Miguel Battle Sr., the 74-year-old Bay of Pigs veteran and alleged king of the *bolita* numbers rackets, was charged along with 24 associates in a federal racketeering indictment detailing decades of illegal bookmaking, drug trafficking and money laundering -- all of it backed by murder, arson and witness intimidation. "These are the top 25 guys," said Miami-Dade Police Director Carlos Alvarez. "We've dismantled this entire organization. They called it ``The Corporation" because they ran it like a corporation -- a corporation that made a lot of money." Federal prosecutors are hoping to force the organization to forfeit more than \$1.5 billion in assets -- essentially everything they allegedly earned since 1964. (*The Miami Herald*, 18/3/04)

March 19: Six in 10 Cuban-American voters say they are likely to vote for President Bush in November, a substantial drop from the votes he received in 2000 and a possible reflection of long-simmering tensions between exiles and a White House that some in the community feel has fallen short of its tough anti-Fidel Castro rhetoric. Bush is estimated to have garnered about 80 percent of the Cuban-American vote in the 2000 election, thanks in large part to anger over the Clinton administration's return of Elian Gonzalez to Cuba. But in a recent poll of Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, only 58.4 percent of registered voters said they would definitely or probably vote for Bush in November. About one-quarter said they were undecided, with the rest saying they would probably not or definitely not vote to re-elect the president. Bush won Florida by just 537 votes after a disputed election in 2000, so any drop in support or turnout among Cuban-Americans is a cause for concern among Republicans. "There is no Elian to kick around anymore," said Guillermo Grenier, a sociologist at Florida International University and the author of the poll.

The survey was conducted January 30 through March 16 by Florida International University in partnership with the South Florida Sun-Sentinel and Miami's WTVJ-Channel 6. The survey of 1,807 Cuban-Americans included registered voters and nonvoters and has a margin of error of 2.4 percentage points. (*The Miami Herald*, 20/3/04)

March 22: The Supreme Court of the United States rejected a case brought by the Miami supporters of Elian Gonzalez, who said their rights were violated by the government raid that took the boy from them. The high court rejection ended a case that once gripped the nation. It was only the latest case -- but possibly the last -- involving the boy, who was taken from Cuba by his mother, who died in the crossing to the United States. The group's case was filed by Judicial Watch, a conservative public interest legal group in Washington. In a petition to the Supreme Court, Judicial Watch argued that plaintiffs alleging civil rights violations against defendants claiming qualified immunity should not be held to a heightened standard of pleading, as the appeals court ruled. (*UPI*, 23/3/04)

March 22: Lincoln Díaz-Balart, a Republican legislator of Cuban descent, has called for the elimination of Fidel Castro and the insertion of US spies among foreign tourists visiting the Caribbean island. During an interview with Miami TV's Channel 41, Díaz-Balart told Oscar Haza that, "In Cuba, an assassination is imperative." When asked whether a US congressman should be promoting the assassination of a foreign head of state, the lawmaker said, "I do believe it should be done." (*La Jornada*, 24/3/04)

March 27: Leaders of the Venezuelan and the Cuban opposition in Miami called on the international community to take action in response to the severe political and institutional crisis taking place in the South American country. The call was issued at a march organized by Cuban and Venezuelan exile groups to protest against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro on Miami's famous Calle Ocho in the neighborhood known as Little Havana. According to police, some 2,000 protesters participated in the march. (*The Miami Herald*, 27/3/04)

March 27: Around a dozen members of the support committee of journalist and poet Raúl Rivero handed out postcards and books, some of which are banned in Cuba, to French tourists leaving for Havana from Charles de Gaulle airport at Roissy, north of Paris. Activists handed the books to the tourists so that they can give them to Cubans in the street or to the "independent libraries" the addresses of which were listed for them. The campaign, launched by the human rights organisation Pax Christi-Hollande, was due to be replicated simultaneously in several European countries. (*NetforCuba.Com*, 27/3/04)

March 27: About 50 Cuban residents in Spain took part in a demonstration outside the Cuban Embassy in that country, demanding freedom for the 75 dissidents incarcerated in the island, and for all the Cuban people. (*Europa Press*, 27/3/04)

March 30: José María Mijares, world renowned for his mastery of oil painting, his pioneer exploration of geometric abstraction in Cuban art of the 1950s and his neobaroque compositions of the exile period, died of lung and heart problems in Coral Gables. He was 82. Mijares left Cuba but Cuba never left Mijares. "In my subconscious there is an inner landscape that is Cuba," the painter said in an interview in 2001. "Since I was exiled at an older age, that landscape cannot be erased." Indeed, images of his native country blossomed frequently on his canvases. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/3/04)

Foreign Affairs

March 1: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said he was pleased with his visit to Argentina. He highlighted that it proved very fruitful and that there are possibilities for strengthening and increasing bilateral relations. "We have restored a respectful political dialogue without confrontation points and have reached a clear understanding on Cuba's

reasons to oppose the blockade and Argentina will not get involve in campaigns against Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission," Perez Roque asserted. The Cuban minister highlighted that Argentina's solidarity with Cuba is stronger than ever since Fidel Castro visited Buenos Aires to attend the inauguration of President Nestor Kirchner last May. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/04)

March 1: Visiting Cuban Minister of Labour and Social Welfare Mr Alfredo Cartaya paid tribute to President Robert Mugabe and Zimbabweans for supporting his country in fighting imperialism and economic sanctions imposed by the United States. Speaking through an interpreter, Mr Cartaya told journalists in Harare that Zimbabweans and Cubans would continue to work together in different fields and fight imperialist ideologies that were being imposed on the two countries by western powers, particularly the United States and Britain. (*AllAfrica.Com*, 1/3/04)

March 2: A source with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in Havana that Cuba is setting up a refugee camp to respond to a possible influx of Haitians attempting to flee their country. According to the source, only 30 Haitians have arrived in Cuba since the beginning of the current Haitian crisis, but more are expected. (*Reuters*, 2/3/04)

March 2: The Saharawi Foreign Minister Mohamed Salem Ould Salek arrived in Havana invited by his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque. "This visit will strengthen the historical cooperation and friendship links between Cuban and Saharawi people," Ould Salek said on his arrival at Havana International Airport. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/3/04)

March 2: Despite the serious political crisis and social instability in Haiti, Cuban doctors have continued to provide health service to the people, the Cuban TV reported. Cuba has been cooperating with Haiti for over a period of five years and doctors are distributed throughout the country assisting 75 percent of the population. They are working restlessly in coordination with the Pan American Health Organization and the International Red Cross. The Cuban embassy in Haiti said the team of 525 physicians will not abandon the Haitian people and will continue to work under any circumstance. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/04)

March 2: South Africa stands to benefit in terms of job creation and tourism growth from Cuban labour experts who will be visiting the country this year. Cuban Minister of Labour and Social Security Alfredo Morales Cartaya signed an agreement with his South African counterpart, Membathisi Mdladlana, allowing for improved co-operation in the fields of employment, social security and occupational health and safety. The ministers said priorities would include exchanging advice on medium and long-term employment projection, the creation of jobs for "vulnerable groups" of society, skills development for the youth and campaigns for apprenticeships and training. (*Independent Online*, 3/3/04)

March 2: The Spanish embassy has opened its library to all Cubans, who can obtain cards that allow them take out books. The decision by the embassy was considered by Cubans to be a response to an order by the Cuban government last September to turn over operation of the Spanish Cultural Center in Havana to Cuban officials. (*Cubamet*, 2/3/04)

March 2: The Cuban Ambassador in Haiti officially declared that Cuban doctors will not abandon the Haitian people and will continue to offer essential medical services regardless of developments in the current tense situation in the country. Cuban medical personnel have worked in Haiti for the last five years with 75 percent of the population receiving treatment from Cuban doctors. The only hospital to remain open is in Port-au-Prince and is staffed almost entirely by Cubans, now receiving support from the Pan American Health Organization and the International Red Cross. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 2/3/04)

March 2: The Cuban Ambassador to Spain, Isabel Allende, demanded that the two governments move once again toward closer ties. Following a meeting with the president of the Galician Nationalist Bloc, Xosé Manuel Beiras, Allende stressed how smooth relationships between non-governmental organizations, associations and universities from both countries are. (*Europa Press*, 2/3/04)

March 3: Communications within the war on terrorism will be one of the topics to be discussed in the seventh Ibero American Meeting on Marketing, Publicity and Advertisement starting in Cuba. The gathering that will session under the name "Dialogue 2004" at Havana's Conference Center will also look into the case of five Cubans jailed in the US. Delegates from Spain, France, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Dominican Republic and Colombia as well as 120 Cuban experts are attending the conference. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/04)

March 3: The Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce in Zimbabwe, Kenneth Manyonda declared that Zimbabwe and Cuba should increase mutual co-operation in the wake of sanctions imposed on the two nations by some Western countries. Manyonda's comments came during the official opening of the ninth session of the Zimbabwe-Cuba Joint Commission in Harare. The Zimbabwean Minister thanked Cuba for its "total commitment, support and solidarity" with the African nation. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 3/3/04)

March 3: Uruguay's lower house of Congress passed a resolution denouncing Cuba's intelligence services for listening in on telephone calls made from inside the congressional building. The resolution, which passed with 41 votes of 77 deputies present, expresses "the most severe condemnation" for all acts carried out on national territory or from another territory toward Uruguay aimed at violating the legislative body's rights. Nationalist lawmaker Jaime Trobo, who reported the case, said that a visiting member of the Cuban National Assembly, Lazaro Barredo, said on February 25 that Cuban intelligence had probed the origin and destination of phone calls and email messages sent by a Uruguayan deputy from Congress. [See *Chronicle on Cuba*, Foreign Affairs, February 2004] (*AFP*, 4/3/04)

March 4: Cuba and Ethiopia will sign a cultural agreement, as part of bilateral efforts to increase cooperation particularly to develop joint programs, exchange delegations, publications and general information. Cuban Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, and Ethiopian Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, Teshome Toga Chanaka, will preside over the ceremony. Toga Chanaka signed a cooperation protocol with the general secretary of Cuban Communist Youth Union (UJC), Otto Rivero. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/3/04)

March 4: The chairman of the Slovak Parliament's human-rights committee, Laszlo Nagy, visited Cuba where he met with opponents of the Fidel Castro regime, including well-known dissident Osvaldo Paya Sardinas, along with a Czech lawmaker, he said at a press conference. Nonetheless, Nagy added, he would prefer not to mention which Czech MP had accompanied him, or even which party he belonged to. "The name of the representative of the Czech Parliament is one I presently cannot state, since he is still in Cuba fulfilling his mission. He will return by the end of the week," Nagy said, adding that both politicians had travelled there to support the opposition's fight for freedom and democracy. The trip to visit Cuban dissidents, which also supplied them with money and other items, was prepared by the European People's Party and a Swedish NGO, and included three Swedish politicians in addition to Nagy and the unnamed Czech MP. British and Spanish politicians also planned to take part, but they cancelled at the last moment. (*CTK*, 4/3/04)

March 4: Western Sahara's Foreign Minister, Mohamed Salem Ould Salek, arrived in Havana on the invitation of his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Pérez Roque. Ould Salek met with the Cuban Education Minister Luis Ignacio Gómez to examine current bilateral accords and to discuss future Cuban participation in the African nation's education system. The Western Saharan Minister expressed confidence that his visit would "strengthen the historical links of cooperation and friendship between Cubans and Western Saharans". (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 4/3/04)

March 4: Cuban technicians are to work with their Mozambican counterparts in designing programmes for the National Social Security Institute (INSS) Professional Training Centre, in Chokwe district, in the southern province of Gaza, reports the Mozambican daily paper "Noticias". Mozambican Labour Minister Mario Sevene made this announcement, shortly after signing an agreement to that end with his Cuban counterpart Alfredo Morales Cartaya. (*AllAfrica.com*, 4/3/04)

March 6: The 35 th World Congress on Human Rights that ended its sessions in Quito recommended that Fidel Castro eliminate the death penalty. (*AFP*, 7/3/04)

March 6: Hemingway scholars from the United States are collaborating with the Cuban National Council of Patrimony in the preservation of Ernest Hemingway's papers, books and photographs. The beneficiary of the effort is the Hemingway museum at Finca Vigía, the US writer's estate on the outskirts of Havana, which houses a wealth of documents and objects. Pennsylvania State University Professor Sandra Spanier, one of the academics involved in the preservation project, told the US publication "The Digital Collegian" that a Rockefeller grant of \$75,000 had been awarded for the conservation effort. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 6/3/04)

March 7: Vietnam's Communist Party chief, Nong Duc Manh, has met with Fidel Castro, at the Palace of the Revolution in Havana. The two communist leaders posed for photographs before their talks, on the second day of a five-day visit to Cuba. Mr Nong Duc Manh will also receive Cuba's highest honour, the order of Jose Marti, and visit scientific research stations in Havana. (*Asia Pacific Breaking News*, 7/3/04)

March 7: In a letter to MP Yves Bur, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said that the French Ambassador to Cuba received instructions to intervene with Cuban authorities to obtain a "swift improvement of the incarceration conditions" of the jailed dissidents. (*AFP*, 7/3/04)

March 8: An introduction to Cuba's culture and lifestyle is being presented for the first time in Malaysia with an exhibition of seven well-known films from Cuba at Kuala Lumpur's Stonor Center. Entitled "Cubanismo," the exhibition is sponsored by the Cuban embassy and the Equator City Club both based in the Malaysian capital. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 9/3/04)

March 8: At least 30 Haitians fleeing violence in their homeland have sought refuge in Cuba, authorities said, adding that they don't expect a mass exodus from the nearby country. "I can confirm the presence of 30 Haitian immigrants in Maisi," a town on Cuba's east coast, the Foreign Ministry said in response to queries from the press. The Haitians came by sea, but the spokesman's office gave no other specifics. Maisi is about 45 miles from Haiti's shore. For decades, it has been a destination point for small groups of Haitians escaping political violence at home. (*AP*, 9/3/04)

March 8: Fidel Castro attended an event in solidarity with Vietnam -- just one day before the secretary general of Vietnam's Communist Party wrapped up his official visit to the island. Addressing the rally, Nong Duc Manh said that Cuba can always count on the support of Vietnam. He thanked the Cuban Communist Party and people for their hospitality during his four-day stay, which he described as productive and fruitful. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 9/3/04)

March 9: The Congolese press highlights existing cooperation between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Cuba in higher education and short term development projects. Under the headline "Cooperation without Traps", the L' Avenir daily reports on the recent signing of an agreement between the International University of Congo (IUC) and Universidad de Oriente (UO) in Santiago de Cuba, a Cuban eastern province, that envisions an exchange program. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/3/04)

March 9: The Chief of Military Intelligence Col. Noble Mayombo has said the Cuban spirit of resilience against US imperialism should inspire Uganda's own struggles against evil forces. Mayombo praised Cuba for her bilateral assistance to Uganda especially in human resource aid. Cuba helped government establish the Mbarara University of Science and Technology. "Cuba has on several occasions sent its doctors to help us overcome our health problems. But these doctors are also different. They serve with great responsibility and at times in difficult areas like Karamoja," Mayombo observed. (*AllAfrica.Com*, 9/3/04)

March 9: Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has said the Cuban government's support to Ethiopia was in tune with the development strategy the Ethiopian government pursues. The Cuban vice-president has described his visit to Ethiopia as fruitful. During talks with Cuban Vice-President Esteban Lazo, Prime Minister Meles said Cuba has been providing support to Ethiopia in the areas, among others, of agriculture, education, health and human resource development. (*BBC*, 10/3/04)

March 9: The leaders of Vietnam and Cuba, two of the world's last five communist-run societies, pledged to stick together in their march to build socialism. The secretary-general of Vietnam's Communist Party, Nong Duc Manh, ended a four-day visit to Cuba where he visited Havana's Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology and the Information Technology University supplied with Vietnamese computers. "We are two small countries, fighters with experience, and we march forward together as an example," Fidel Castro said as he bid Manh farewell at Havana airport. "We will continue together, Vietnamese and Cubans," Manh said. (*Reuters*, 9/3/04)

March 10: The organization "People in Need", with headquarters in the Czech Republic, is preparing different activities to commemorate the first anniversary of the crackdown on dissidents in Cuba. A replica of a cell will remain in one of the most important arteries in Prague, the Wenceslao Square, for 75 hours, one hour for each dissident sent to prison. The whole activity will conclude with a peaceful protest close to the Cuban embassy. (*Puente Informativo*, 10/3/04)

March 10: Botswana has praised Cuba's medical assistance to this southern Africa nation in its fight against AIDS and HIV infections. Mathias Chakalisa, Botswana's permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health, told the press that Cuban medical personnel have worked tirelessly to help confront this terrible disease. (*Prensa Latina*, 10/3/04)

March 10: As indicated by Mr. Dick Roche, T.D., Irish Minister of State for European Affairs, the Presidency of the European Union, currently held by Ireland, affirmed that diplomatic sanctions against Cuba, implemented since June 2003, are "symbolic in nature" and only affect the work of the EU member states and European officials. Mr. Roche stressed that these sanctions do not interfere "at all" with private sector activities nor individuals attending cultural events in Cuba. (*Europa Press*, 10/3/04)

March 10: Reporters Without Borders must pay 6,000 euros (\$7,348) in compensation to the daughter of Cuban photographer Alberto Korda for having used a picture of the late revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara without permission, the organization reported. The damages set by a Paris court are much less than the 1.14 million euros (\$1.4 million) sought by Diana Diaz-Lopez, a sum which would have meant the disappearance of the press-freedom watchdog known by the French initials RSF, according to its directors. RSF Secretary General Robert Menard called the court's ruling "reasonable." "The only objective of Diaz Lopez's lawsuits were to drown our organization and the court has not followed up on those," Menard said. (*EFE*, 10/3/04)

March 11: After nearly a year in custody, five Cuban refugees have been released and given permission to live in Curaçao while authorities consider their asylum requests, the government said. Authorities detained the five in April in St. Maarten, another territory in the Netherlands Antilles where they had been working illegally, the government said in a statement released. The five were to be deported back to Cuba, but they applied for political refugee status and were transferred in August to Curaçao, the seat of the Antillean government. (*AP*, 12/3/04)

March 11: Cuba and Brazil are negotiating a film exchange agreement that will allow for the annual exhibition of five motion pictures from each country. According to the Audiovisual Secretariat of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, the proposal would allow a Brazilian producer to have the exhibition rights of a Cuban film within the country. Orlando Senna from the Brazilian Ministry of Culture told reporters in Brasilia that the agreement provides for the sharing of profits from the film showings. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/04)

March 11: Cuba is the world's second leading jailer of journalists, after China, says an independent advocacy group called the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). The New York-based CPJ said in a new report that the regime of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro took advantage of the fact that international attention in 2003 was focused on the war in Iraq to launch a "massive attack" against Cuban independent media and political dissidents. The crackdown marked the "culmination of years of repression and intimidation" against journalists, the CPJ said, noting that 29 Cuban journalists were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 14 to 27 years. (*USInfo*, 11/3/04)

March 11: A group of parliamentary leaders from Finland have been touring the island in recent days. Arriving in Havana, the legislators are meeting with their Cuban counterparts and have visited a number of hospitals and schools in the capital. The Finland-Cuba Parliamentary Friendship Group is led by its chair, Esko-Juhani Tennila, and includes representatives Sinikka Hurskainen, Helena Comi and Marja Johanna Tiurna. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/04)

March 12: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said that the Cuban government is willing to resume its dialogue and ties with the European Union on condition that they stop inviting "mercenaries" --referring to local dissidents -- to their embassies in Havana. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 12/3/04)

March 12: The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) expressed its concern about the deterioration of the rule of law in some countries of the region, including Cuba. At the end of the Commission's 119 th regular session, José Zalaquett, president of the IACHR referred specifically to the situation in five countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti and Venezuela: "The grave human rights situation in Cuba has not changed, according to information received by the IACHR, due to the general violation of public liberties, particularly the right to freedom of expression, and due to the systematic repression of dissidents and independent journalists. The Commission will continue to study the general human rights situation in that country, not only in its general reports, but also as it considers individual cases and petitions, and issues precautionary measures", Zalaquett said. (*IACHR Press Release*, 12/3/04)

March 12: Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe thanked in Harare the solidarity of the Cuban people towards the African nation. Mugabe also characterized Fidel Castro as "a friend and brother." During an interview, the Zimbabwean president recalled that not only did Zimbabwe receive Cuban support during its liberation struggle, but now they are receiving Cuban doctors and other specialists to contribute to the country's health and development. (*Prensa Latina*, 12/3/04)

March 13: Fidel Castro has accused Spain's government of deceiving its citizens over the Madrid train bombings for electoral gain. In a television interview, Castro said the government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar had known an Islamic group was behind the explosions that killed 200 people but preferred to blame Basque separatists ahead of Sunday's general elections. "They are deceiving the Spanish people (...) it is a most important factor in the elections on Sunday" because a majority of Spaniards opposed the war in Iraq, he said. (*Gulf Daily News, Reuters*, 13/3/04)

March 13: Gladys Marín, president of the Chilean Communist Party, was awarded by Fidel Castro the Jose Martí Order, the country's highest decoration. Following presenting the award, the Cuban president talked with Marin and several comrade-in-arms, among them the Chilean Communist Party (PCCH)'s general secretary Jorge Teillier. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/3/04)

March 14: An enthusiastic Cuban government had the local TV channels interrupt their regular programming to announce the Spanish Popular Party's electoral defeat, "(brought about) by its war-mongering and servile pro-US imperialist policies." (*La Jornada*, 15/3/04)

March 14: The humiliation of independent journalists imprisoned or threatened by Fidel Castro's regime, was among the topics debated during a plenary meeting of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA), currently in progress.

Humberto Castelló submitted the report on the Cuban situation, on behalf of journalist Raúl Rivero, an IAPA regional vice-president, who is presently serving a 20-year jail sentence for contesting the state's media monopoly. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 15/3/04)

March 14: No Cuban officials attended the mass held in the Havana Cathedral in memory of the victims of the Madrid commuter train attacks. Cuban Foreign Affairs Vice Minister, Angel Dalmau, signed the book of condolence at the Spanish Embassy in Havana. (*EFE*, 14/3/04)

March 15: A Cuban response to escalating threats against Cuba from the administration of US President George W. Bush will be presented in a series of public meetings throughout New Zealand. Juan Pozo, the Asia-Pacific representative for non-governmental organisation ICAP (Cuban Institute for Friendship With the Peoples), is visiting this country as a guest of the New Zealand-Cuba Friendship Societies. (*Scoop*, 15/3/04)

March 15: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque is in Geneva to attend the 60th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Speaking with reporters upon his arrival in Geneva, Pérez Roque said that Cuba will fight to rescue the UN human rights agency, which is a virtual hostage of the powerful nations of the world. He said that a small minority of countries has converted the Human Rights Commission into a court to put poor, Third World countries on trial. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 15/3/04)

March 16: A new report by Amnesty International reveals the current state of 75 prisoners of conscience arrested during the March 2003 crackdown when scores of dissidents were detained in a series of targeted sweeps. Some were subsequently released, but many were subjected to hasty and manifestly unfair trials and sentenced to long prison terms. "After a detailed review of the legal cases against them, it is clear that they are prisoners of conscience -- detained for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. They should be released immediately and unconditionally," Amnesty International said. [[Cuba: One Year Too Many](#)] (*Amnesty International Press Release*, 16/3/04)

March 16: In a meeting with outgoing Cuban Ambassador to Mongolia, Pedro A. Moran Tapanes, Mongolian President Natsagiin Bagabandi highlighted the historic friendship and cooperation ties between Mongolia and Cuba. "Although Mongolia and Cuba are geographically distant from each other, they have been united with good relations for more than 40 years," Bagabandi told Moran Tapanes, who concludes his four years as Cuban diplomatic representative. Bagabandi noted the economic capacity of both countries that allows increased cooperation in different areas, such as health care, biotechnology and education. The Mongolian doctors and dentists who studied in Cuba are working well and have great popular acceptance, the Mongolian leader added. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/3/04)

March 15: The Deputy President of the Government of Cuba and of the Council of State, Esteban Lazo, arrived in Luanda, Angola, for a five-day working visit meant to reinforce the diplomatic ties between the two countries. During his stay in Luanda, Lazo will meet with the Angolan President, Jose Eduardo dos Santos. (*Angola Press Agency*, 15/3/04)

March 16: According to Uruguayan legislator Jaime Trobo, his parliament denounced Cuban covert eavesdropping actions against him before the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. Trobo said that the Human Rights Commission of the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) decided in Sao Paulo, Brazil, to move the venue for its next meeting to Santiago de Chile. (*Europa Press*, 16/3/04)

March 16: Fidel Castro has congratulated Spain's newly elected Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and expressed support for his decision to withdraw the Spanish troops from Iraq before June 30. Considering that decision, Fidel Castro has called on Rodriguez Zapatero not to forget that under pressure from Jose Maria Aznar as President of the Spanish Government thousands of young men from small and impoverished Latin American countries were sent as

cannon fodder to Iraq under the command of the Spanish Legion. [[Mensaje del Presidente del Consejo de Estado de Cuba](#)]

March 16: Czech senate chairman Petr Pithart said that even up to 15 years ago there were political prisoners in the Czech Republic and that is why he volunteered to spend one hour in a symbolic prison cell in protest against the imprisonment of 75 Cuban political prisoners today. "Only 15 years ago there were political prisoners in this country, and it is in human nature not to forget. Our duty is to remind people of it," Pithart said. The four-day "Stop Repression in Cuba" campaign started when a mock prison cell was erected in Prague's Wenceslas Square. Seventy-five Czech political and cultural personalities will gradually spend one hour in the mock prison during the action by day and night. (CTK, 16/3/04)

March 16: Over 600 writers linked to the US and Latin American media requested from Fidel Castro the release of Cuban journalists imprisoned in the island since last year. The letter was released by the Committee to Protect Journalists to the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, and is signed by well-known Latin American journalists and writers like Tomás Eloy Martínez (Argentina), Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis (Mexico), Sergio Ramírez (Nicaragua) and Fernando Vallejo (Colombia). Also US writers Carl Bernstein, Ed Bradley, Anthony Lewis, Clarence Page, David Remnick, Gwen Ifill and Michael Massing signed the letter. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 17/3/04)

March 16: Vladimiro Roca, president of the illegal Cuban Social-Democrat Party (PSC), congratulated soon-to-be Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Last February, the PSC submitted its official bid for membership during the latest Socialist International (SI) Council meeting. The SI is a bloc of social-democrat organizations that includes Mr. Rodríguez Zapatero's political party, the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). [[Carta a Rodríguez Zapatero](#)] (Notimex, 16/3/04)

March 16: Awaiting the repatriation of his body, relatives of Michael Mitchel Rodríguez, 26, the only Cuban victim in the Madrid train station terrorist attacks, blamed his death on José María Aznar's government's involvement in the occupation of Iraq. (ANSA, 16/3/04)

March 16: Fidel Castro says 1,000 Latin American troops are "cannon fodder" in Iraq and calls for them to withdraw along with the Spanish unit they are serving in. Castro, a fierce critic of the US-led occupation of Iraq, applauded Spanish Prime Minister-elect Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero for his decision to withdraw Spain's contingent of 1,300 troops by the June 30. In a message published by the ruling Communist Party daily Granma, Castro said "more than 1,000 young men from small and impoverished Latin American countries were sent to Iraq as cannon fodder under the command of the Spanish Legion." [[Mensaje de Fidel Castro a Rodríguez Zapatero](#)] (*Financial Times*, 16/3/04)

March 16: During day 2 of the UN Human Rights Commission's 60 th session in Geneva, Sweden's Foreign Minister, Laila Freivalds, expressed harsh criticism of the Cuban government. Freivalds reminded that, nearly a year ago, "in open violation of minimum UN standards for the application of the death penalty," Havana executed three men who hijacked a passenger boat in an attempt to flee the island. (*Encuentro en la Red*, 16/3/04)

March 17: Russian Army General Anatoli Gribkov, who supported Cuba's international mission in 1962 during the Missile Crisis, received an imitation of the Granma Yacht on the 85th anniversary of his birth. The recognition -in the name of Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro- was given to Gribkov in a solemn ceremony at the Cuban embassy to Russia with the participation of Cuban Ambassador Jorge Marti. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Cuba defied the United Nations' top human rights body by rejecting a report by Christine Chanet, special representative of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights. "She has ended up acting as an instrument at the service of the US government," Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told the annual meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Perez del Roque said Cuba "does not accept" a request that Chanet visit the country, even

though the demand is regarded by human rights groups as a soft option. Cuba also railed against any nation that disapproves of Havana's practices, saying if it does so it must be a pawn of Washington. Perez Roque wondered if this year Costa Rica would be "the new pawn at the service of the imperial master," presenting the customary resolution against Cuba at the commission's annual meeting. In the same vein, Perez Roque predicted that the US government will again seek "to fabricate condemnation against Cuba (...) to justify its criminal embargo and its plans for military aggression." [[Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister's speech at the UN HHRR Commission](#)] (*AP, EFE*, 17/3/04)

March 17: The Bush administration identified a Canadian travel company that it says is linked to Cuba and thus forbidden from doing business in the United States. The Treasury Department's action against Hola Sun Holidays Ltd. of Richmond Hill, Ontario, just north of Toronto, marks the latest development from President George W. Bush's call for more aggressive enforcement of provisions that prohibit most travel to Cuba. The department alleged that the travel agency is "controlled by Fidel Castro and his regime." (*Canada News*, 18/3/04)

March 17: A Venezuelan court ordered the Criminal Forensic Investigation Corps (CICPC) to take into custody the mayor of the Venezuelan municipality of Baruta, Henrique Capriles, for his alleged involvement in the attacks of April 12, 2002 against the Cuban embassy in Caracas, during the attempted coup against President Hugo Chávez. (*Europa Press*, 17/3/04)

March 18: The Cuban Ambassador to Holland, Elio Rodríguez Perdomo, refused to accept a letter signed by seven organizations demanding the release of the 75 dissidents incarcerated a year ago and of all prisoners of conscience in the island. The letter, addressed to the Cuban authorities, was signed by Amnesty International, CLAT, CNV, Cuba Futuro (Future Cuba), Glasnot en Cuba (Glasnost in Cuba), the Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), and Pax Christi Netherlands. (*El Mundo*, 19/3/04)

March 18: Mass and social organizations in Cuba announced their intention to mark the first anniversary of the US aggression against Iraq, with a Day for Peace and against War, an initiative that will be extended to also include the commemoration of Palestine's Day of Land. During a press conference in Havana, Cuban Peace Movement president Orlando Fundora read a declaration issued by organizations calling themselves "Against War and Against Occupation." This urges people in the world to express solidarity with the plight of the Iraqi and the Palestinian peoples. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 18/3/04)

March 18: The Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) demanded the "immediate release" of the independent journalists jailed in Cuba, following an act in commemoration of the first anniversary of the repressive crackdown in Cuba that culminated with harsh prison sentences for 75 political opponents and independent journalists. (*Europa Press*, 18/3/04)

March 18: During a conference in Argentina, former Czech President Vaclav Havel expressed his sympathy for the victims of the repression in Cuba. In a video released in Buenos Aires, Havel said that the Cuban situation is of great importance to him and that he wishes to do more to promote freedom in the island. (*Radio Martí*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Argentina said it will not vote against Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission. Argentinean Minister of Justice, Gustavo Beliz, told the press in Geneva that his country will abstain from voting on an upcoming resolution expected to try to condemn Cuba at the Commission. Foreign Minister Gustavo Beliz noted that the priorities of Néstor Kirchner's government were to unceasingly battle against measures to address "social genocide". (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Proclaiming "Europe says no to repression in Cuba," Reporters Without Borders held a news conference at the European Parliament in Brussels to mark the first anniversary of the start a wave of arrests in Cuba on 18 March 2003, which ended with a total of 75 dissidents, including 27 journalists, being sentenced to long prison terms. Leading

personalities and witnesses of the crackdown came to voice their views on the situation in Cuba. Spanish film-maker Fernando Arrabal was among those at the event, which was sponsored by Polish former dissident and former foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek and French writer and philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. The organisation's secretary-general, Robert Ménard, urged European parliamentarians to sign a "Brussels Declaration" in which they undertake to constantly petition the Cuban government for the release of the 75 dissidents and to call on the "European Commission and Council to pursue policies consistent with this goal." The declaration's first signatories included Daniel Cohn-Bendit of France (president of the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance); Emma Bonino of Italy (radical group of Non-Attached); Pervenche Berés of France (vice-president of the Group of the Party of European Socialists); Graham Watson of Scotland (president of the Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party - ELDR); José Ribeiro e Castro of Portugal (Union for Europe of the Nations Group); Gérard Deprez of Belgium (European People's Party) and Jules Maaten of Netherlands (ELDR). (*Press Release*, 18/3/04)

March 19: Hola Sun Holidays opened for business in the Toronto area, in 1992, and is a part of Havanatur, an operator based in Havana with more than 200 employees in Cuba and 90 tour operators in 50 countries. Martha Chapman, a spokesperson for Signature Vacations, said it is well known that Hola Sun is Cuban-owned, and it deals entirely with trips to that country. Pat Georgiades, owner of Rex Travel, said Hola Sun is one of her preferred wholesalers. She said she didn't know about Hola Sun's affiliation with Cuban leader Fidel Castro's regime, but she doesn't think Canadian travellers will care. "People want to go to Cuba because it's a nice destination and it's a cheap holiday," she said. About 452,000 Canadians travelled to Cuba last year, Toronto's Cuba Tourist Board says. Most go on all-inclusive packages like the ones offered by Hola Sun. (*The Toronto Star*, 19/3/04)

March 20: Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez said that the new integrating model of Cuba and Venezuela "worries the oligarchies of the region". Speaking in a ceremony to bid farewell to the country's ambassadors to Cuba, Iran and India, the Venezuelan leader spoke thoroughly of the current relations of cooperation and friendship that exist between the two Caribbean nations. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 20/3/04)

March 21: Czech Senate Speaker Petr Pithart has pointed out that Fidel Castro's anger at the Czech support for human rights in Cuba might be so strong because of the support provided to his regime by Czechoslovakia in the communist era. (*CTK*, 22/3/04)

March 22: Cuba and the Islamic Conference Organization (ICO) issued a red alert on the increase of racism and xenophobia in the world. This issue was raised during the 60th session of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) of the United Nations in Geneva. During the Committee's annual session, non-governmental organizations have spoken at length on agenda item five of the plenary session which focuses on people's right to self-determination. Cuban delegate María del Carmen Herrera used her address to the session to challenge the United States representative whose presentation focused on the supposed liberty and democracy of that northern nation. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/3/04)

March 22: The former Spanish president, socialist Felipe González, told the Colombian press that the end of the United States blockade against Cuba will occur in 2005, regardless of who wins the elections this November. In an interview with the magazine *Cambio*, González said: "I am convinced that in 2005 the United States' blockade against Cuba will disappear." The former leader of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), stressed that he had received reports confirming his opinion on the ending of US blockade against the island. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/3/04)

March 23: The Cuban press is reporting that the Palestinian Embassy in Cuba will make a condolences book available for signing on the occasion of the murder by Israel of Ajmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of the Hamas movement. "The distinguished Palestinian politician", the Cuban news agency says, was killed in the city of Gaza, "a loss that has shocked the international community". (*Prensa Latina*, 23/3/04)

March 24: Cuba reiterated its total support to the cause of the Palestine people, condemned the assassination of leader jeque Ahmed Yassin and co-sponsored a condemnation resolution at the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). The document was approved with 31 votes in favor, 18 abstentions and two against (US and Australia). Juan Antonio Fernandez, chief of the Cuban delegation at the UNHRC, said that the world, almost used to the terrorism and horror against the Palestine people, was shaken and felt indignant with the assassination of leader jeque Ahmed Yassin. (*Prensa Latina*, 24/3/04)

March 24: The 22nd session of the Mixed Commission of Cuban- Guyanan Collaboration began in Georgetown with the objective of analyzing the mutual bonds in a dozen areas, these include health, education, technical cooperation, culture, agriculture and several others. (*Prensa Latina*, 24/3/04)

March 23: Stopping terrorism requires reducing global inequality by implementing policies that reduce military spending and increase aid for development, Cuban diplomat Jorge Ferrer Rodriguez told the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. "Terrorism cannot be defeated nor can armed conflicts be prevented if the abysmal inequalities that divide us are not overcome," Ferrer Rodriguez insisted. "What the world needs is to declare global war on underdevelopment, hunger, poverty, illiteracy and preventable diseases, like AIDS," said the representative from Cuba, one of the 53 countries that make up the UN commission. (*EFE*, 24/3/04)

March 24: The Guatemalan Congress has requested the government of President Oscar Berger to abstain from supporting a resolution promoted by US against Cuba at the 60th UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in Geneva. A proposal by the parliamentary group Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) was supported by 86 out of 120 deputies, which showed their solidarity with Cuba in face of the US hostility. Legislators recalled the fact that the Guatemalan Congress granted the Quetzal Order to the team of Cuban doctors who have been working in Guatemalan rural areas since 1998. The Guatemalan Congress recognizes that the Cuban doctors have made more than 10 million consultations over the five years of Cuba's support and 157,000 of them were significant in saving the lives of Guatemalan people. (*Prensa Latina*, 24/3/04)

March 24: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez sent a new group of medical students to Cuba on Wednesday, urging them and other compatriots to forge ahead with his "revolution." The president noted that 50 graduates from the first class of Venezuelan medical students sent to Cuba - in 1999 - would be coming home in September to join the "Barrio Adentro" (Inside the Neighborhood) mission. An air shuttle linking Caracas and Havana has allowed thousands of Venezuelans to receive specialized medical treatment in Cuba under an agreement signed in 2000 in Caracas. (*EFE*, 24/3/04)

March 24: Cuba is protesting UNESCO's decision to award jailed independent reporter Raul Rivero its World Press Freedom Prize, saying the action is an echo of US policies intended to isolate the island and promote dissidents. "It is deplorable and embarrassing that the Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Award has been used for ends separate from UNESCO's fundamental ideals, objectives and principles," read a communique posted on Cuba's Foreign Ministry web site. "Giving the award to this Cuban citizen who is serving a prison sentence for activities related to subversion of the constitutional and legal order of the Cuban system -- acting as a mercenary at the service of a foreign power -- threatens the legitimacy of the Press Freedom Award," the communique said. Last year, UNESCO granted Cuba an award for its work in literacy campaigns, also Michael Olomewa, president of the 32nd UNESCO General Conference visited the island. [[Official Statement by MINREX](#)] (*AP, La Jornada*, 24/3/04)

March 25: Canadian TV is broadcasting a documentary film on Fidel Castro filmed over three days in 2002. The film, *Commandante*, a new Oliver Stone movie, is a close-up portrait of a man who has defied a US embargo since 1960. Cuban leader Fidel Castro paces around his office like a condemned man, saying: "I can't help it, I am a prisoner here, this is my cell." The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) says the documentary had been due to air on United States network HBO last year. (*ABC Online*, 25/3/04)

March 25: Cuba protested what it called a "biased report" submitted by a representative of the UN Human Rights Commissioner to the HRC in Geneva. Ivan Mora, the Cuban ambassador to the Geneva-based UN organizations, responded to the report's accusations but was repeatedly interrupted by committee chair, Mike Smith of Australia. Cuba had previously objected to Chanet's report, calling it an instrument of the unrelenting US aggression against the island, filled with misinformation and fabrications from the White House and from Miami, where militant anti-Cuban groups were said to operate with the blessing of their host government. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 25/3/04)

March 25: The Committee for Non Governmental Organizations of Africa and the Caribbean described as "extremely helpful" the assistance that Cuba has been providing to Haiti over the past 5 years. Wilfred Grey, speaking on behalf of that group, stressed that the work carried out by Cuban volunteers, mostly doctors, has been- especially beneficial during this latest crisis. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 25/3/04)

March 25: Chile's governing Socialist Party urged the administration to abstain from voting on a UN resolution concerning human rights in Cuba, while the conservative opposition Independent Democratic Union (UDI) asked it to condemn abuses on the island. Socialist Party leader Gonzalo Martner was quoted by local newspapers as saying the decision by Argentina and Brazil to abstain could influence Chile to join them when the resolution is voted on at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Martner suggested the Chilean government, at the time of abstention, call on its Cuban counterpart to carry out domestic reforms on the island. (*EFE*, 25/3/04)

March 27: Belize Minister of Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Emergency Management Organization, Godfrey P. Smith, began an official visit to Cuba. The Belizean minister is participating in the 3rd Meeting between the Cuban and Belizean Foreign Ministries and holding important meetings with Cuban officials. Cuba and Belize established diplomatic relations on July 14, 1995. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/04)

March 28: Referring to the changes implemented in Venezuela, Fidel Castro said that they are "highly transcendent" and, as in Cuba, they "aim for social justice." "The Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is fighting a stale oligarchy that is using every old political trick in its bag to defeat him," said the Cuban ruler. (*DPA*, 28/3/04)

March 28: According to government spokespersons, the First Lady of Honduras, Spanish-born Aguas Ocana, traveled to Cuba seeking expert guidance for the creation of two treatment centres for abused women and children, respectively. (*AFP*, 28/3/04)

March 29: Cuba is to support the newly-established Kampala International University (KIU) medical school location. The Cuban ambassador, Ricardo Antonio Danza Sigas, said this while meeting KIU vice-chancellor Prof. Muhammad Ndawula, and the deans and heads of various departments at the university. "The Cuban Government wants everyone to attain university education. We want to help the people and countries of the Third World. Our doctors work for a small fee. Those at Mbarara University are not paid a salary but only get pocket money of about \$500," he said. (*AllAfrica.Com*, 29/3/04)

March 29: Defenders of human rights in Cuba exhibited for the first time the documentary "The spring of Cuba" in the Palace of Nations where the UN Human Rights Commission is presently in session. Presenting the exhibition was the producer of the documentary Carlos González, member of the Czech ONG People in Need, as well as Jannet Rivero De Toro and John Suárez, activists of the Cuban Democratic Directorate and representatives before the Commission for the International Liberal and the Christian Democrat International, respectively. (*Puente Informativo*, 29/3/04)

March 29: The Provincial Governor of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, Anatoly Zasuja, arrived in Cuba on the invitation of Havana provincial leaders for top-level talks on economic co-operation and solidarity. In a press conference given just moments after his arrival on the island, Zasuja told reporters he had come to see development in Cuba first hand and to sign an agreement on a twin-town project between Kiev and Havana. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 29/3/04)

March 30: Pope John Paul II named Italian Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi papal nuncio to Cuba, the Vatican said. The 56-year-old Italian prelate had been the papal nuncio in Haiti until now. (*EFE*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Carlos Ahumada, an Argentine-born businessman with companies in Mexico, was arrested in Cuba at Mexico's request, as authorities seek his extradition on fraud charges, the Mexican Attorney General's Office said. Ahumada, who owns a newspaper, soccer team, construction company and other businesses in Mexico, had fled to Cuba after a Mexico City judge issued a warrant for his arrest on March 10 on charges he defrauded the Mexico City government, the attorney general said in a statement. (*Bloomberg*, 31/3/04)

March 30: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque and his Belize counterpart Godfrey Smith, signed an agreement in Havana concerning the repatriation of illegal Cuban immigrants in the Central American nation. Pérez Roque said the accord establishes the foundations for legal and organised migration between the two countries, adding that the number of cases of illegal Cuban immigrants in Belize is relatively low. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 31/3/04)

March 30: Ukrainian officials visiting Havana reiterated their gratefulness to the Cuban people for their assistance throughout the years following the Chernobyl crisis in 1986. Letters of interests were also signed between the Ukrainian province of Kiev and Havana for developing closer relations in the areas of commercial, economic and cultural cooperation. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Cuba sees prospects to repair with the incoming Socialist Spanish government bilateral relations that deteriorated markedly under the outgoing conservatives. It also insists that improvement depends on acknowledging that EU sanctions against Havana are "mistaken." Cuban Ambassador to Spain, Isabel Allende, in a talk with journalists, cited what she called "objective conditions" for betterment of relations following the Socialists' upset victory in March 14 general elections. Allende noted that after winning Spain's March 14 elections, Socialist leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who will become prime minister in mid-April, expressed a desire to give a boost to Spain's relations with Latin America. "If he does, it will result in improved relations with Cuba," Allende said. (*EFE*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Mr. Fidele Idiarra, Malian Ambassador to Cuba, stated that relations between the two nations are excellent. The diplomat spoke at an event carried out with 101 young people from Mali, that are studying at the Caribbean Faculty of Medicine in Santiago de Cuba. (*AIN*, 30/3/04)

March 30: The United States has been unsuccessful so far in its search for a sponsor of its proposal to condemn Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque has informed. The United States has tried out the idea of presenting the State Department proposal on Costa Rica and Honduras, but thus far has had no bites. The Honduran ambassador has refused the honor. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Cuban TV reported that Adán Chávez, Venezuelan president's brother, presented his credentials to Cuban authorities as Venezuelan ambassador to Havana. Cuban vice-president, Juan Almeida headed the ceremony at the Palace of the Revolution in Havana. (*EFE*, 30/3/04)

March 30: In a letter sent to Fidel Castro, over 107 civil society organizations from around the world requested the liberation of political prisoners in Cuba. Gathered at the CIVICUS World Assembly in Gaborone, Botswana, the signing organizations include 67 NGOs from Africa, and the rest from Latin America and Europe. (*AFP*, 30/3/04)

March 30: Prominent Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya is urging the UN Human Rights Commission to condemn the Cuban government, arguing that not to do so "would be condemning the Cuban people," according to a letter released to media. To keep silent or justify on this commission the lack of and the violation of many rights in my country (...) indeed would be condemning the Cuban people," Paya said in a letter read before the full commission by Cuban

dissident Francisco de Armas. "The 75 prisoners of the Spring of Cuba, all peaceful citizens, were condemned to prison terms ranging between 6 and 28 years, in summary trials and later locked in cells of 1,80 by 3 meters, with a dietary regime as that of a concentration camp. One of them, José Daniel Ferrer, is presently locked in a punishment cell the size of a "cage". You know what cruel and degrading treatment is like, and that is the treatment that political and common prisoners are subjected to in Cuba", the letter says. (*AFP*, 30/3/04)

March 30: The Mexican Chamber of Deputies approved by ample majority vote a motion to request President Fox's government to abstain from voting on "any condemnatory resolution against Cuba" during the 60 th session of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. (*Europa Press*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Foreign Minister of Angola Joao Bernardo de Miranda is arriving in Havana, for a five-day official visit to Cuba. Bernardo de Miranda is scheduled to meet with his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque, the President of Parliament Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada, and Jose Ramon Balaguer Cabrera, head of the Central Committee's International Relations Department. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/04)

March 31: The IV Session of the Joint Cooperation Commission between Cuba and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is closing a working session in Havana with the signing of a collaboration protocol. Leading the delegation from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is Assistant Prime Minister, also Foreign Relations and Trade Minister Louis Straker, who will attend a conference on the Cuban health system. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Specialists from over 20 countries met in Cuba for discussions on what some experts have called the critical situation of the world's children, 11 million of whom die annually from preventable diseases. Almost 500 psychiatrists, psychologists, paediatricians, general practitioners, teachers and social workers are gathered in Havana's International Convention Centre this week for the II Pan-American Congress on Child and Adolescent Mental Health. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 1/4/04)

March 31: Cuba accused Honduras of agreeing to sponsor a US- roposed resolution targeting the island's human rights abuses during an upcoming UN Human Rights Commission vote. "The United States has found the government willing to be used for the shameful role of presenting the resolution against our country," Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told a news conference. The United Nations body is expected to consider the resolution for a vote in mid-April during its annual meeting in Geneva. Honduran authorities earlier this week declined to comment on reports that they would present the resolution at the request of US officials. [[Press Conference by the Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister](#)] (*AP*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque addressed the media during a news conference in Havana, on the Carlos Ahumada case. Perez Roque said Cuba will consider an extradition request from Mexico for Argentine-born business man Carlos Ahumada, who is wanted in Mexico in connection with an alleged US\$ 3 million in missing public funds. Ahumada was arrested by Interpol in Cuba. [[Press Conference by the Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister](#)] (*Reuters*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Mexico's ambassador to Cuba requested that the island nation extradite a fugitive Mexican businessman implicated in several corruption scandals involving government officials. Envoy Roberta Lajous went in person to Cuba's Foreign Ministry to deliver the request for the extradition of Argentine businessman Carlos Ahumada, a Mexican diplomatic official said. In accordance with the countries' bilateral extradition treaty, Mexico now has 40 days to hand over any documentation it considers relevant to the case, the official said. (*EFE*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Cuban journalist Raúl Rivero and Moroccan Alí Lmrabet were granted the 13 th "Agustín Merello" Award for the defense of freedom of expression in their countries. In a statement released to the press, the Press Association of

Cádiz, Spain, explains that the jury based its decision on Rivero and Lmrabet efforts to exercise free journalism with “dignity and great sacrifice”. (*EFE*, 1/4/04)

March 31: The IV Session of the Joint Cooperation Commission between Cuba and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is closing a working session in Havana with the signing of a collaboration protocol. Leading the delegation from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is Assistant Prime Minister, also Foreign Relations and Trade Minister, Louis Straker, who will lay a floral wreath at the monument to Jose Marti and attend a conference on the Cuban health system. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/04)

Terrorism

March 1: The suspected coordinator of the September 11 attacks on the United States, Ramzi Binalshibh, is being held at the United States military prison, Guantanamo Bay, in Cuba, and is talking with interrogators. Binalshibh acknowledged meeting the lead suicide pilot of the hijacked commercial jetliners that demolished the World Trade Centre twin towers, Mohamed Atta of Egypt, in July 2001. (*News24*, 1/3/04)

March 1: The United States has turned over seven Russian citizens who were being held at the US detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, the Russian Foreign Ministry said. Sergei Fridinsky, the deputy chief prosecutor, said that Russian authorities had charged the men with illegally crossing borders, mercenary activity and participating in a criminal group, according to the Interfax news agency. They were captured in Afghanistan and accused of fighting alongside the Taliban. The seven detainees were turned over under an agreement reached between Washington and Moscow. (*AP, Reuters*, 1/3/04)

March 9: Five British men detained by the US military in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for more than two years have left for home, the Pentagon said. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Barbara Burfeind, a Pentagon spokeswoman, told the press the five left Cuba under guard on a British aircraft. In a statement, the Pentagon said it had transferred the five men to the British government. (*CNN*, 9/3/04)

March 11: Cuban oppositionist Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas sent a letter to the president of the Spanish Government, José María Aznar, expressing his solidarity with the Spanish people and condemning the genocide committed by terrorists in Madrid. In the letter, Payá says to feel the same anguish and indignation that Spanish families feel, with whom he shares the same pain. The promoter of the Varela Project added that the crime is against life itself, against every Spanish citizen, is a crime against all those who love the Spanish people, a crime against humanity. (*Puente Informativo*, 11/3/04)

March 11: Fidel Castro has expressed consternation and sadness at the terrorist bombing attack in the railroad system of Madrid that has so far claimed the lives of some 190 people and has resulted in over 1,200 wounded. In a letter of condolence to Spanish King Don Juan Carlos I, Castro wrote, "I can assure you that Cuba, which for 45 years has been a victim of acts of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, understands and shares the pain brought by this revolting and unjustifiable aggression against the Spanish people." [[Mensaje de Condolencia](#)] (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/04)

March 11: Cuban vice president José Ramón Fernández personally called Manuel Fraga, president of the Galicia Xunta, to express his condolence for the victims of the terrorist attack in Madrid. Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, also communicated his condolence to Mr. Fraga. Apparently, no Cuban government official got in contact with Spanish president José María Aznar. (*Europa Press*, 11/3/04)

March 11: After the terrorist attack in the railroad system of Madrid, Cuban ambassador to Spain, Isabel Allende, personally expressed her condolence to the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister. (*Europa Press*, 11/3/04)

March 11: Relatives of the victims of several terrorist attacks accused seven Cuban dissidents arrested in Panama on charges of plotting to kill Fidel Castro of also murdering their loved ones, and they demanded "that justice be done." Cuban citizens Luis Posada Carriles, Pedro Remón, Gaspar Jiménez Escobedo, Guillermo Novo Sampoll, Pedro Remén Rodríguez and César Matamoros, and Panamanian national Jose Manuel Hurtado, were arrested in November 2000 in Panama and charged with planning to assassinate Fidel Castro during a Latin American summit. During a news conference, Felix Victor Negrin, Lisette Diaz, Domingo Garcia, Juan Carlos Cremata and Justino Di Celmo accused the seven anti-Castro activists of killing their relatives in separate terrorist attacks against the communist regime. "We have faith and trust in the Panamanian justice system," said Negrin, whose exiled brother Eulalio Jose Negrin was killed during a terrorist attack in Union City, New Jersey, in 1979. Cremata, for his part, recalled that his father, Carlos A. Cremata, was among the 73 people who died in the explosion of a Cuban plane over Barbados in 1976, which he said, was "an absolutely terrorist act." (*EFE*, 11/3/04)

March 12: Two of the British men freed from Guantanamo Bay have accused their American captors of inhuman treatment, which included being beaten and interrogated at gunpoint. Prisoners were shackled for up to 15 hours at a time in hand and leg cuffs with links that cut into the skin. They were kept in wire cages that were open to the elements, as well as rats, snakes and scorpions. Psychological torture included being denied water before prayers, meaning Muslims could not wash according to their religion, and depriving one inmate of food, while the others on a block ate. Force feeding was used to end a hunger strike by 70 per cent of the 600 inmates, which started after a guard kicked a copy of the Koran. When carrying out an amputation, US medical staff often removed more of a limb than was necessary. Prisoners were left malnourished by a diet of porridge and fruit. Some food was 10 years out of date. In addition to the beatings, the abuse at the camp included US soldiers bringing in prostitutes and parading them naked in front of devout Muslims. (*Independent.UK.Com*, 12/3/04)

March 13: Fidel Castro said that "no act of terrorism is justified, no matter who does it," referring to last week's terrorist attacks in Madrid that killed 200 people. "No act of terrorism is justified, no matter who does it, but for reasons of a strictly political nature, it is in the interests of some and not others because everyone knows that more than 90 percent of the Spanish people opposed that war in Iraq," he said. The only way to fight terrorism, according to Castro, is "to seek sincere cooperation" because war "is not going to put an end to it, it is going to make it worse and worse, it is going to sow ever more hatred, more dissatisfaction, more tragedy." (*EFE*, 14/3/04)

March 15: The Pentagon has released 23 Afghans and 3 Pakistani prisoners being held at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The prisoners will be flown back home, but the terms of their release were not immediately clear. (*CNN*, 15/3/04)

March 15: Five anti-communist Cuban exiles and a Panamanian expressed pleas of not guilty in a Panama City court at the beginning of their long-delayed trial on charges of plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro in late 2000. Luis Posada Carriles - the most prominent defendant - was the first to plead not guilty before Judge Jose Hoo Justiniani. The trial proceeded with the reading of the indictment, which cited "serious signs" that link Posada Carriles and the five others to the alleged attempt on the Cuban leader's life. (*EFE*, 15/3/04)

March 16: Cuba denounced the presence of a Cuban-American it considers a "terrorist" as an official member of the US delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva and demanded that his accreditation be withdrawn immediately. Luiz Zuñiga Rey, a Miami resident, is the "former president of the paramilitary arm of the Cuban American National Foundation." Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said the man's name appears on an official report from the Human Rights Commission dated December 21, 1999. (*EFE*, 16/3/04)

March 16: Prosecutors said four Cuban exiles accused of possessing explosives in an alleged plot to kill Fidel Castro planned to kill Cuba's leader in cold-blood. "There shouldn't be clemency for these people," said federal attorney Arquimedes Saez. After being delayed three times, the trial got under way with the reading of statements from the accused, all of whom declared their innocence. Luis Posada Carriles, Gaspar Jimenez Escobedo, Guillermo Novo, and Pedro Remon have been charged with conspiracy, possessing explosives and endangering the public's safety. An explosives conviction carries a maximum penalty of seven years in prison, while the lesser charges carry sentences of one to three and two to five years behind bars, respectively. Also charged in the case are two Panamanians, Cesar Matamoros and Posada Carriles' driver, Jose Hurtado. (*AP*, 16/3/04)

March 20: The special rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Commission, Enrique Bernales Ballesteros, said that the accusations of the Cuban delegation in the Human Rights Commission about the participation of Luis Zúñiga Rey as a member of the US delegation is based on a report Ballesteros had presented in 1999. In the report, Ballesteros denounced Zúñiga's criminal record. "There is urgent need for international laws to define these crimes", Ballesteros stressed. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/3/04)

March 27: Cuba denounced the presence of whom it considers a terrorist, Luis Zúñiga Rey, as member of the US delegation to the 60th Commission of Human Rights (CDH) in Geneva. Cuban UN ambassador, Orlando Requeijo Gual, addressed a letter to the Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in which he states "that it is a true insult and a total lack of respect under the guise of a diplomat and member of a delegation" of a person "of such a widespread and well known criminal record". The letter referred that the accusation was backed by the report of the Special Rapporteur on Mercenaries, Enrique Bernales Ballesteros, which was presented to the HRC in 1999. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/04)

March 30: Repeating and strengthening previous allegations about Cuba's alleged weapons of mass destruction program, a Bush administration official told Congress in written testimony that the island "remains a terrorist and [biological weapons] threat to the United States." "I believe the case for the existence of a developmental Cuba [biological weapons research and development] effort is strong," said John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security. Bolton made the allegations as part of a 25-page written statement on the development and spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Bolton also said Cuba has been successful at hiding details of its weapons program thanks to data passed to Havana by convicted spy Ana Belen Montes, the former senior Cuba analyst for the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency. Montes is serving 25 years in federal prison after pleading guilty in 2002 of spying for Cuba. (*Sun Sentinel*, 31/3/04)

March 31: Cuba rejected a renewed accusation by a senior US official that it is developing biological weapons and said the charges were an attempt to seek a pretext to invade the communist-run island. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque called a news conference to deny the latest charge by John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security in the Bush administration, who made a similar accusation in 2002. [[Press Conference by the Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister](#)] (*Reuters*, 31/3/04)

US-Cuba Relations

March 2: The US Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs released the 2003 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) which describes the efforts of key countries to attack all aspects of the international drug trade in calendar year 2003. The report states that in the case of Cuba the "regime security officials did take a much more aggressive posture with respect to all activities deemed "illegal," including narcotics trafficking,

beginning in the first quarter of 2003." [See [International Narcotics Control Strategy Report](#)] (*US Department Press Release*, 2/3/04)

March 2: While a number of positive developments are occurring in the Western Hemisphere, the region also faces many challenges in such countries as Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, and Cuba, says Roger Noriega, the State Department's assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. In a testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Noriega offered an analysis of the most important events affecting the nations of the hemisphere. For communist Cuba, Noriega said US policy is to encourage a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy characterized by strong support for human rights and an open-market economy. The United States will support Cuba's "embattled civil society and increase our efforts to break the information blockade" imposed on the island by the regime of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, said Noriega. In addition, he said the United States will provide a "voice to Cuba's independent journalists and human rights activists." (*AP*, 3/3/04)

March 3: Cuba signed an agreement with the Port of Houston to ship more of its American food purchases through Texas, in a deal that could give the communist-run country trade clout in a key political state. Cuba has been eager to spread its purchases through more than 35 states to increase domestic pressure against the embargo. The Port of Houston, the second largest in the United States and the world's sixth largest in tonnage handled, is the 18th American port to ship food to Cuba. The No. 1 departure point for American ocean travel to Cuba could be Texas when US travel restrictions against the communist island end, the port authority's chairman said. "I suspect that when everything opens up, a lot of cruise lines will want to come here," said James Edmonds, chairman of the Houston port commission. "It will be a great race." "We see that in this part of the world Mexico, Central America, Cuba is our future," Edmonds told a news conference. (*AP, Reuters*, 3/3/04)

March 3: A one-page advertisement supporting the five Cubans imprisoned in US jails, planned and paid for by solidarity groups, appeared in *The New York Times*, confirmed Gloria de la Riva from the US Committee to Free the Five. De la Riva explained previously that, in spite of all the obstacles, more than \$50,000 had been raised to pay for the advertisement in the daily. She also highlighted the generous contributions from Miami residents, whose committee made the most generous contribution of the campaign: \$10,000. (*Granma International*, 3/3/04)

March 4: The Cincinnati Ballet has signed two former soloists from the National Ballet of Cuba to dance for the company in the 2004-2005 season. Dancers Adiaris Almeida and Cervilio Amador both have defected to the United States. Almeida left the Cuban National Ballet while the company was on tour in New York in October. Amador left the company while it was performing in Daytona Beach, Florida. (*The Cincinnati Post*, 4/3/04)

March 5: Cuba's highest profile dissident, Osvaldo Payá, urged his compatriots "to take a step against fear" and begin the transition from totalitarianism, something he said must be impelled from within the island and not from Washington. "The regime is in its final stages. We're already poised for change; that's why we have a pressing need to prepare for the transition," Paya said. It is necessary for Cubans to "take a step against fear. It's the basis for peaceful change. It doesn't mean lashing out against the oppressor, but rather saying 'no' to submission," he added. This change must be made with the help of "all Cubans, those on the island and those abroad," the dissident said. According to Paya, the US government's announcement last October regarding the creation of a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, which is to promote a peaceful transition to a representative democracy and a free market economy, was an "error." "We have to 'de-Americanize' the vision of the solution to Cuba's problem. Changes in Cuba should be carried out by the Cubans themselves," Paya said. "The United States can offer solidarity and moral support, but to presume that the transition can be effected (from the outside) is both unrealistic and inappropriate. The transition must be carried out by Cubans themselves, who must decide what form it will take and see it through," he added. (*EFE*, 5/3/04)

March 5: The Cuban Foreign Ministry has denounced the Bush administration for taking new actions against five Cubans imprisoned in separate US jails as their March 10 hearing appeal approaches. In a statement, the Cuban

authorities rejects a US Department of State decision to only allow Cuban diplomats in Washington to visit their jailed fellow countrymen once every three months. [[Una nueva infamia](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 5/3/04)

March 5: Cuba's Ambassador to the United Nations, Orlando Requeijo, has strongly criticized Washington's double-standard on terrorism -- "condemning terrorism in some cases and tolerating or justifying it in others." Speaking at a public hearing of the UN Security Council Anti-Terrorism Committee, Orlando Requeijo pointed to the total impunity enjoyed by those in Miami who, with the complicity of US authorities, openly raise funds for terrorist acts, open bank accounts with that objective, recruit terrorists and provide them with refuge. In contrast, the island's UN ambassador cited the case of the Cuban Five, arrested in 1998 and sentenced to harsh prison terms by a biased Miami court in 2001 for the "crime" of uncovering terrorist plots against Cuba. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 5/3/04)

March 6: Controversial Cuban singer/songwriter Carlos Varela has been denied a US visa to enter the country to perform at the Guzman Center for the Performing Arts. The trip would have been Varela's second visit to Miami in the past six years. (*The Miami Herald*, 6/3/04)

March 7: Retired General Fabián Escalante, ex-chief of the Cuban security and intelligence services, said that the island "has a right to maintain the Miami Cuban-American Mafia under surveillance" through espionage operations. In that sense, Escalante justified the actions of the five Cubans arrested in the US in 1998 and convicted of espionage, who are currently serving prison terms ranging from 15 years to a double life sentence. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 7/3/04)

March 8: A federal judge has delayed sentencing six Cubans convicted of hijacking a passenger plane to Florida so that a key witness who apparently defected can be questioned about his testimony. US District James Lawrence King ordered prosecutors to ask Cuban flight attendant Abilio Hernández García whether he wished to change his testimony or meet with the defense. Hernández García traveled from Cuba to Key West with other crewmembers to testify against the six Cubans convicted on federal hijacking charges. Only Hernández García did not return to the island, slipping out of a hotel the day after the trial ended. "Defendants assert that Mr. Hernández García's testimony may have been influenced by the prospect of a return to Cuba," King noted in an order. He refused to order the government to reveal the flight attendant's whereabouts. (*AP*, 9/3/04)

March 10: Since January, over 3,900 Cuban immigrants have been intercepted or rescued at sea before touching US coasts, the US Homeland Security Department reported. (*Europa Press*, 10/3/04)

March 10: Cuban Parliament President Ricardo Alarcón has accused Washington of promoting illegal migration from the island in an attempt to justify a military invasion. Speaking with reporters, the Cuban leader said that Havana is concerned about the recent US decision to suspend regularly scheduled talks on migration issues. The talks are slated every six months -- alternately held in New York and Havana -- to discuss the 1994 and 1995 migration accords signed between the US and Cuba. In January, the United States announced it would not take part in the talks scheduled for Havana that month, subsequently inferring that negotiations slated for New York in July would also be scrapped. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/3/04)

March 10: The US government has prevented a group of 70 medical professors, doctors and other scientists from attending an international symposium on coma and death taking place in Cuba, according to some of the doctors involved. They affirmed that the ban, which they were informed of just a few days before the event, is the latest move by the Bush administration to limit their collaboration with persons in countries like Cuba that are considered hostile by the United States, *The New York Times* reported. (*Granma International*, 11/3/04)

March 10: Although the three judges of the Eleventh Circuit of the Atlanta Appeals Court can delay decision on the case of "the Cuban Five" for several months, the defense team expressed great optimism after the oral hearing. "They [the prosecution] had no answers to the Court's questions!" noted Paul McKenna, one of the defense attorneys,

recounting prosecutor Christine Heck-Miller's failure to produce any evidence implicating Gerardo Hernandez in the incidence of the Cessna planes shoot down when they repeatedly flew over Cuban territory. Lawyers for the five Cuban spies argued that they were unfairly convicted in a flawed 2001 trial that never should have been held in an anti-Castro hotbed like Miami. Federal prosecutors countered the trial was fair, the judge gave the defense plenty of chances to seek a new venue and the life sentences handed down to three of the spies were justified. The three-judge panel of the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals asked pointed questions about the government's evidence underlying the murder conspiracy conviction of spy ringleader Gerardo Hernández. (*Prensa Latina, The Miami Herald*, 11/3/04)

March 10: "Those who fight for liberty know that the American people and America's leaders are their allies," said Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Lorne Craner, in a testimony to the House of Representatives International Relations Committee. There is still much work to be done, however, in the area of human rights, according to Craner. "Backsliding" on key human rights issues in China, repression in Korea, and abuses in Cuba are just a few examples of ongoing human rights problems described in the country reports, he said. (*US State Department Press Release*, 10/3/04)

March 11: Italian shipping group Grimaldi said it would launch a ferry line between the United States and Cuba. The ferry line, which will connect Key West with Havana, will be served by cruise-ferry vessels, La Suprema and La Superba, of Grandi Navi Veloci (GNV), a subsidiary of Grimaldi. The two ships, which meet the security requirements of the US Coast Guard, can connect the two cities in four hours and thereby run four ferry routes a day, Grimaldi said. (*ANSA*, 12/3/04)

March 11: USAID administrator Andrew Natsios declared that his country would continue financing oppositionist groups within the island. In a conference at the University of Miami, the Agency for International Development official admitted that the agency has already paid \$28 million for projects in Cuba, with \$7 million earmarked for 2004 "to help unify humanitarian, civic and religious groups with a government-in-transition that respond to the interests of the United States." The government of the United States, he said, is ready to give whatever assistance is necessary. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/3/04)

March 12: High government officials said in Miami that the objectives of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, created by President George W. Bush, do not include developing projects for political transition in the island. According to Otto Reich, Special Presidential Envoy for the Western Hemisphere, the Commission was created to ensure that different branches of the US government are ready to provide assistance to the Cuban people, should they request it, once the dictatorship is gone. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 12/3/04)

March 13: John Kerry promised to make of Florida a battleground for his quest to oust President Bush. Asked about what he will do about Cuba, Kerry was ready with the bravado appropriate for a challenger who knows that every answer carries magnified importance in the state that put President Bush into office by just 537 votes. "I'm pretty tough on Castro, because I think he's running one of the last vestiges of a Stalinist secret police government in the world," Kerry told WPLG-ABC 10 reporter Michael Putney in an interview. Then, reaching back eight years to one of the more significant efforts to toughen sanctions on the communist island, Kerry volunteered: "And I voted for the Helms-Burton legislation to be tough on companies that deal with him." Only problem is that he voted against it. (*The Miami Herald*, 14/3/04)

March 13: Old church records show that the once-dominant Calusa tribe that vanished from Florida three centuries ago might not have been wiped out, a researcher says. Several dozen members of the tribe, nicknamed "The Fierce Ones," escaped to Cuba in the early 1700s after Spanish soldiers and other tribes overran their region, said John Worth, an anthropologist and director of the Randell Research Center, part of the Florida Museum of Natural History. Most died of typhus or smallpox within three months of reaching Cuba, but archives of a church in Guanabacoa, near Havana, show at least one Calusa woman survived and gave birth to two daughters in 1729 and 1731, said Worth. (*AP*, 14/3/04)

March 13: During their trip to Cuba, Hollywood couple Ed Harris and Amy Madigan visited the International Film School in San Antonio de los Baños. (AFP, 13/3/04)

March 16: A recent Journal-World series on the US crackdown on travel to Cuba is being brought to the attention of Congress. Representative Dennis Moore (Democrat-Kansas), is sending copies of the newspaper's "Trading With the Enemy?" series to all 434 of his colleagues in the US House of Representatives. A spokeswoman said the distribution was intended to stimulate renewed debate on the travel and trade embargo with Cuba. "Congressman Moore has long been a supporter of opening markets in Cuba, because he believes it will help our farmers and companies be more competitive globally," said spokeswoman Christie Appelhanz. (*The Lawrence Journal*, 16/3/04)

March 16: Two Florida Republicans representing President Bush's reelection campaign questioned whether John Kerry has had contact with Fidel Castro and Spain's "new Socialist government." The comments from US Representatives Mario Díaz-Balart of Miami and Mark Foley of West Palm Beach came during a conference call with reporters arranged by the Bush campaign to chastise the Massachusetts senator for his evolving positions on Cuba. "We would never make a comparison between a democratically elected government and a dictatorship," said Bush spokesman Reed Dickens, in an interview after the conference call, distancing the campaign from the remarks of its surrogates. "What we will point out is Senator Kerry makes serious accusations without the facts to back them up and has historically and consistently been wrong on Cuba." The Bush campaign conference call was part of a broader GOP strategy to paint Kerry as dishonest and waffling on key foreign policy issues, and to preemptively halt new efforts by Democratic strategists to court traditionally Republican Cuban-American voters in part by assailing Bush's own record on Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 17/3/04)

March 17: Washington has barred 300 Cubans involved in last year's crackdown against dissidents from the United States, State Department officials said, but the move was dismissed by critics as an empty election-year gesture. State Department officials told the press the policy targeted judges, prosecutors, witnesses and police who participated in a three-week roundup of scores of dissidents that began March 18, 2003. "None of these 300 people are ever coming to the United States, period," said a State Department official, who asked not to be named. "It shows those who participate in the abuse of human rights should know the United States will remember it for a long time." [[New US Policy to Deny Visas to Participants in March 2003 Show Trials](#)] (*Reuters*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Engineer Félix Bonne Carcassés, leader of the dissident group Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, has sent an open letter to the US Congressional Black Caucus, depicting the true situation of the black population under Fidel Castro. [[Carta abierta al caucus negro de Estados Unidos](#)] (*Cubanet*, 18/3/04)

March 18: A large majority of Hispanic Republicans in Miami-Dade County support President Bush in his reelection bid, but almost as many feel that he needs to get tougher on Cuba or risk losing their support, according to a new poll. The findings suggest that while the president remains popular among Cuban Americans, there is room for the Democrats to take advantage of their frustrations and siphon off some of their votes, the pollster says. (*The Miami Herald*, 18/3/04)

March 18: Cuba's national baseball team would play US major leaguers in a proposed "World Cup" tournament, a top Cuban baseball official says. But Cuba would demand the American pros be tested for performance-enhancing drugs. "If there is a tournament held, and the major leaguers would play, we would want to be there," said Rodolfo Fuentes, deputy director of INDER, the Cuban government entity that supervises the baseball program. "But it would have to be under Olympic rules and the rules of the International Baseball Federation (...) with respect to doping. (*USA Today*, 18/3/04)

March 18: US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, requested solidarity with “the courageous men and women in Cuba who champion democracy's cause”. In an official statement, Powell referred to last years’ imprisonment of 75 dissidents in Cuba. [[Condemn Castro’s regime abuses](#)] (*Radio TV Marti*, 18/3/04)

March 19: President Bush’s top political strategist assured Miami GOP activists that the administration is committed to economically strangling Fidel Castro’s government. In a speech that seemed designed specifically to soothe long-simmering tensions, senior White House strategist Karl Rove devoted more time to Cuba than any other issue -- drawing a standing ovation from the heavily Hispanic crowd at a Miami-Dade Republican Party fundraiser. "Have no doubt, we will remain committed," Rove told the crowd at the Radisson Mart Plaza Hotel and Convention Centre in west Miami-Dade County. Referring to the president, he added: “He knows, you know, we must not waver.” (*The Miami Herald*, 20/3/04)

March 19: The United States has denied asylum to Ariel Diego Marcell, one of the Cubans who tried last July to reach the coast of Florida in a truck modified for seaborne travel. Marcell, 29, was one of 12 Cubans who set sail in a converted 1951 Chevrolet truck only to be intercepted by the US Coast Guard and repatriated to the communist-ruled island. He told the press that he received a letter from the US Interests Office in Havana informing him that his request for asylum was denied based on officials' judgment that he was not facing the threat of persecution in Cuba. (*EFE*, 19/3/04)

March 20: More than 10,000 Cubans decried the war in Iraq in a protest organized by groups associated with the ruling Communist Party, officials said. The protest took place in the town of Cueto, 700 kilometers (435 miles) east of Havana, as the world marked the one-year anniversary of the US-led war. Concerts, art exhibits and conferences to protest the war were planned throughout the Caribbean country of 11 million. "The grave situation created by the criminal aggression in Iraq can only be resolved with the unconditional end to the illegal occupation, and with the Iraqi people enjoying its right to absolute independence in a united Iraq free of guardianship," party leaders told the protestors in a statement. (*AFP*, 20/3/04)

March 21: Mike Campbell, son of former Republican Governor Carroll Campbell, is turning up the heat on Andre Bauer, a fellow Republican. At issue is Bauer’s recent trade mission to Cuba. There, Bauer and others signed an agreement with Fidel Castro’s regime for the export of \$10 million of South Carolina agriculture products. Campbell, a potential challenger for Bauer’s job in 2006, opposed the deal, saying so in a newspaper column. Now, Campbell has taken his opposition to a new level. He has hired a highly respected Republican pollster to tap the sentiment of South Carolinians on the issue. What he found was that a plurality of voters -- 47 percent-- disapprove of the \$10 million agreement; only 29 percent support the deal. That opposition crossed over political, racial and gender boundaries. A plurality of Republicans, Democrats and independents; whites and blacks; men and women opposed the deal, according to the survey conducted by McLaughlin and Associates. The poll of 400 likely voters was taken in February. It had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points. Even farm households, who would benefit the most from the agreement, were split down the middle — 33 percent supporting the deal and 33 percent opposing. (*The State.Com*, 21/3/04)

March 21: Republican candidate to the Senate, Bill McCollum, has proposed a plan to infiltrate spies in US tourists groups visiting the island. According to McCollum this would be a way to bring democracy to Cuba, as an alternative to US failure to internationalize the economic and tourist travel embargo of the island. McCollum said that he strongly supports an internationalization of the economic embargo and the travel restrictions to Cuba, which he believes should be embraced worldwide, as in the case of South Africa years ago. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 22/3/04)

March 22: A trading company and economic development groups are leading an export mission to Cuba to try to increase California's share of the island's import market. Gregory Estevane, president of Global Strategies Trading, said the company hopes to take representatives of about 20 Central Valley companies to Havana April 13-16, when the

Cuban government has said it wants to negotiate and sign more than \$100 million of contracts. Global Strategies Trading is a company that trades in Latin America, Europe and Asia. Estevane said it is also the trading arm of the World Trade Center in Los Angeles, and is affiliated with the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation. The trip is co-sponsored with the Tulane and Los Angeles economic development corporations, said Paul Saldana, president and chief executive of the Tulane County Economic Development Corporation. (*Tribune Business News*, 23/3/04)

March 22: The White House's top adviser on Latin American affairs said that countries of the region need to acknowledge the "total absence of freedom" in Cuba, urging his hosts to vote to condemn the island nation in the UN Human Rights Commission. "Unfortunately, it's been 40 years now that (Cuba) hasn't had any press freedoms in the least. It's important that Latin American nations recognize the total absence of freedoms in that country," Otto Reich, a special envoy of President George W. Bush, said at a press conference. The Cuban-born Reich met with Paraguay's foreign minister, Leila Rachid, to discuss the human rights situation on the communist island. (*EFE*, 22/3/04)

March 23: Cuba blasted a US State Department report that alleges the island's government "chose" not to devote sufficient resources to its war on drugs as "vulgar and infamous." "If the previous annual reports by the Department of State (. . .) had been tendentious and manipulative in their references to Cuba, the one announced March 1 in Washington is vulgar and infamous," the official Granma newspaper reported. The latest report by the department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, issued to little notice, said Cuba is doing little to stop drug smuggling and that its cooperation with U.S. efforts is sporadic and limited. [[International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2003](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/04)

March 23: The US government denied visas to two officials of the Cuban Institute of Sports to participate in the 10th General Assembly of the Ibero- American Sports Council taking place in San Juan, Puerto Rico this month. A Cuban press release, issued in response to this most recent act of the US State Department, asserted that "In this manner, the Cuban Institute of Sports is once again being made the object of political and aggressive maneuvers against the island." (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 23/3/04)

March 24: Film students at Ramapo College, New Jersey, will get a chance to study in Cuba in a unique program. The three-credit course, "Cuban Cinema and Culture," will be offered at the International School of Film and Television in Cuba in June. Ramapo Professor Marta N. Bautis, herself a filmmaker, will teach the course and lead the trip to the island nation. "Given the travel restrictions, it is significant that Ramapo College is able to establish this program," said Dean Steven Perry of the School of Contemporary Arts. The Cuban school is located about 20 miles from Havana. Its philosophy is to have active filmmakers as teachers. The current director is Julio Garcia Espinoza, one of the founders of the New Latin American Cinema movement. Bautis, the Ramapo professor, is a documentary film producer. (*The Record*, 24/3/04)

March 25: With 99 Cuban and foreign enterprises participating, the 10th International Agricultural Fair opened in Havana. In this year's expo, both scientific and commercial activities will be featured. John Parker, participating as a representative of US farmers from the state of Florida, said that his visit was in part to monitor several agreements signed last year with the Cuban Agriculture Ministry. Speaking on behalf of North American farmers, Parker said, "We hope the 10th International Fair helps us to consolidate our bilateral relations." (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 25/3/04)

March 25: Three exhausted and dehydrated Cuban refugees were spotted bobbing on inner tubes in rough waters just off Lauderdale-by-the-Sea. As rescue and news helicopters hovered overhead, Good Samaritans and rescue workers ventured into the water to pull two of them onto the beach one block north of Commercial Boulevard. The third was plucked out of the water by Coast Guard rescuers about a mile farther north. The three were all that was left of a group of eight who set off from Jibacoa, Cuba seven days earlier on a makeshift raft of inner tubes roped together, with very little food and not nearly enough water. (*Sun Sentinel*, 25/3/04)

March 26: Cuba's Foreign Relations Minister Felipe Perez Roque has accused the United States as having reached new lows in its campaign to censure the island at the UN Human Rights Commission. Perez Roque charged that the United State's "most recent manipulation" was its attempt to recruit a third country to introduce a proposal denouncing Cuba before the 60th session of the UN body meeting in Geneva. Copies of that draft document were provided to journalists attending a Havana press conference. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 26/3/04)

March 26: The father of the two underage children of the dehydrated "balsera" (raft-woman) rescued off the coast of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, north of Miami, has officially initiated the family reunification sponsorship process to have the children join him in the US. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 26/3/04)

March 27: The body of a man washed ashore at Hutchinson Island, Florida, is believed to be one of the five who drowned in an attempt to escape Cuba last week. Three others on the journey on the inner tube raft made it to shore in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the Port St. Lucie Tribune reported. "A call to the Coast Guard revealed that a group of Cubans had been rescued south of here, and some were missing," a Martin County sheriff's report said. "This is likely to be one of the missing," it said. The body was dragged to shore after it was spotted. (*UPI*, 31/3/04)

March 28: With the support of several Hispanic lawmakers from Miami-Dade County, the Florida Legislature is considering tightening rules on travel to Cuba -- slapping extra fees on charter airlines that fly to the island and requiring state universities organizing educational Cuba trips to submit detailed itineraries well in advance. Representative David Rivera, a Miami Republican and chief sponsor of the measures, said the proposed fees on charter flights would help pay for improved security at Florida airports and seaports, while the school reporting requirements would crack down on tourist excursions masquerading as academic trips. Such tourist trips have been criticized by exile groups as helping prop up the regime of Fidel Castro. (*The Miami Herald*, 28/3/04)

March 29: In the US, government figures show there are about 200 businesses licensed to offer travel and shipping services to Cuba. Chris Robinson, desk officer for Cuban Affairs with the US State Department, said the businesses help fill an economic need in Cuba. Robinson said travel and shipping businesses that focus on getting packages and people to Cuba provide a valuable service, even though it's not lined with gold. Cubans in the United States annually send an estimated \$800 million in cash, clothes, food and medicine to relatives in Cuba, said Antonio Jorge, professor of economics and international relations at Florida International University in Miami. (*Tampa Tribune*, 29/3/04)

March 29: Relatives of five Cubans imprisoned in the United States as political prisoners have denounced at the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva, for a second time, violations against their loved ones. Rene Gonzalez's wife and daughter, Olga Salanueva and Ivette Gonzalez, Gerardo Hernandez's wife, Adriana Perez, and Fernando Gonzalez's mother, Magaly Llorca, traveled to Geneva to hold meetings with Human Rights Commission's officials. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/3/04)

March 30: After almost a decade of fighting, Bacardi is seeking to put an end to the long-running trademark dispute over the rights to the Havana Club brand. The rum giant, whose US headquarters are based in Miami, said it was filing a lawsuit in US district court in Washington, D.C. The suit asks the court to grant Bacardi exclusive US rights to the premium Cuban rum trademark and cancel the registration currently held by Cubaexport, a Cuban government entity. (*The Miami Herald*, 30/3/04)

March 30: In the latest Roundtable broadcast from Havana, Cuban political analysts recalled many Cubans have died trying to benefit from the Cuban Adjustment Act, enacted by the US in 1966, after the US government denies them formal and safe ways to leave for the United States. The panelists looked into the tragedy of nine Cuban rafters that left a toll of 5 dead, 1 unaccounted for and 3 survivors. They said the survivors had hidden the existence of a ninth person on board the raft called Lázaro Contreras. This was found out because Contreras' brother in Cuba reported Lázaro's disappearance. The US media did not mention Contreras neither among the survivors nor the dead. The Roundtable

informed that in the past three months and half the Cuban Coast Guard Service had thwarted 70 illegal exits, half of them carried out by human traffickers. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/04)

March 30: A federal judge in Manhattan said American trademark law protects Cuba's premium Cohiba brand of cigars and ordered a New York company to quit selling stogies under that name. Cohibas were originally created in Cuba as the personal cigars of Fidel Castro and were later given as gifts to visiting heads of state and other dignitaries. In 1982, Cuba began selling them internationally - but not in the United States, which has a trade embargo banning all goods from the communist island. A decade later, the magazine *Cigar Aficionado*, in its premier issue, anointed Cohibas as one of the world's great cigars - and that's when a New York company called General Cigar started marketing a high-end stogie under the Cohiba label. (*New York Post*, 30/3/04)