



FOCAL

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

Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba

March 2007

Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Cuban dissidents denounce an increase of repression and harassment against the opposition. The president of Cuba's National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, says that Fidel Castro will be in "perfect shape" to run for re-election to parliament next spring. Government supporters break up a public protest by wives of prisoners who marched through the streets of Havana to commemorate the 4th anniversary of the 2003 crackdown on dissidents.

Economy: Cuba and Venezuela sign agreements for installation of 11 ethanol plants. The number of tourists visiting Cuba dropped 3.6 per cent in 2006. Cuba's Chamber of Commerce reports a decline in the number of foreign associates. Cuba should begin its controversial drilling for oil in its territorial waters in the Gulf of Mexico by 2008.

Exile Community: In Madrid, Spain, the Executive Director of the Cuba Project presents data about the number of deaths throughout the revolutionary process in Cuba. A crowd of Cuban exiles gathers to express frustration with the Bush administration's restrictions on traveling to Cuba.

Foreign Affairs: The Rio Group summit featured debate on whether to admit Cuba among its members. Raul Castro meets with the Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis. Venezuela, Cuba and Iran are studying how to add Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua to their three-way alliance. Cuba and Venezuela created a US \$1 billion fund to help Haiti. A diplomatic crisis develops between Sweden and Cuba.

Security: A top-level delegation of China's Popular Liberation Army visits Cuba. Cuban Defence Minister Raul Castro warns against an invasion of his country during a speech to troops participating in military exercises.

Terrorism: The Colombian government and the ELN meet in Havana.

US-Cuba Relations: Bills on travel restrictions and the embargo are presented in the US Congress. US lawmakers want to stop Cuba from drilling for oil in waters close to Florida. Cuba indicates openness to American companies that want to join the communist country's new oil-drilling ventures. US officials say that the image of an increasingly revitalized Castro is impeding the island's day-to-day leadership from making major changes. Fidel Castro publishes an article in Granma criticizing US production of ethanol.



Domestic Affairs

March 1: Cuba will convert to summer time on March 11, the island's Basic Industry Ministry reported. For that reason, Cubans must put the clocks forward an hour, to end the current time in force since October 2006. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/07)

March 1: Actress Daisy Granados, director Fernando Perez and editor Nelson Rodriguez shared the 2007 National Cinema Awards. The jury presided by director Manuel Perez awarded Granados for her performances in numerous classics of Cuban cinema; Fernando Perez for emblematic titles like "Clandestinos", "Hello Hemingway", "La vida es silbar" and "Suite Habana"; and Rodriguez for his extensive and intense contribution to Cuban films over four decades. The awards ceremony will take place on March 24 on the 48th anniversary of the founding of the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC). (*Granma*, 1/3/07)

March 2: Cuba's Fidel Castro is recovering well from a stomach illness and could return to lead his country, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said. "He is recovering noticeably," Perez Roque told reporters during a visit to Panama. "We are optimistic he will return to work at the appropriate moment." When asked if that meant Castro would take up presidential duties again, Perez Roque replied, "Yes," but said he was unable to give a time frame for any return to office. (*Reuters*, 2/3/07)

March 2: Fewer drug traffickers are using Cuba as a corridor to the United States thanks to tough enforcement and cooperation with other countries, the ruling Communist Party newspaper Granma said. Cuba intercepted 1.7 tonnes of marijuana and cocaine in 2006, the lowest level of seizures in 11 years, it said. Smugglers fly shipments of narcotics up from Jamaica and Colombia and drop bales into the sea between thousands of uninhabited islands off Cuba's north coast for pick up in speedboats that ship the drugs to the US market. Severe prison sentences and the exchange of information with police forces of neighboring countries -- though not the United States -- have helped crack down on the illegal trade, Granma said. "The shipments decrease. The routes of international drug traffickers are moving away from our coasts," the paper said. (*Reuters*, 2/3/07)

March 3: Elsa Morejon, the wife of prominent pro-life activist and political prisoner Oscar Elias Biscet, issued an urgent appeal for medical treatment for her husband and for his transfer out of the harsh conditions of the prison cell where he has been held for refusing to collaborate with the Castro regime and renounce his principles. LiberPress published the open letter from Morejon, in which she describes the grave prison conditions Biscet must endure as part of a 25-year sentence for his non-violent struggle for civil rights and for his opposition to abortion and the death penalty, which are both legal in Cuba. Morejon revealed that her husband is allowed family visits once every three months and spousal visits once every four months. In addition he is being held in a cell with no bed, lights, ventilation or chair and he is "taken out for fresh air" once a month. She said he depends greatly on the antibiotics and medicines that his family members are able to bring to him during their periodic visits. Amnesty International has classified Biscet as a prisoner of conscience since 1999. He was released after three years in prison, but he was arrested again one month later while he was preparing to meet with human rights activist in the city of Matanzas. In 2003 Biscet was condemned to 25 years in prison for his efforts to achieve freedom, democracy and respect for civil rights. (*Indian Catholic*, 3/3/07)

March 5: A full-page article by Manuel Yepe, an academic and former Cuban official, published by the official newspaper Granma, compares the current situation on the island to that of other communist States - especially China. "We must learn from the lessons of others to avoid needless mistakes, but pre-established models should never be imposed like straitjackets," Yepe said. (*AP*, 5/3/07)

March 6: A project aimed at the integrated socio-economic and environmental management of the southern coast of the province of Havana is now in progress along a 142 kilometer coastal strip, the majority of which is susceptible to flooding. The project seeks to improve the quality of life in this area that is the most vulnerable to tropical hurricanes and flooding in Cuba. It also aims at fostering development in balance with the environment, said Farah Carrera, coordinator of the South Coast Project and head of the Department of Territorial Planning. Carrera told the press that 25,000 people, spread in 33 small towns, live in the project area. Several of these settlements, such as Rosario, Cajío and Mayabeque, are beach towns that were devastated by recent hurricanes. Project research began in 1998 and was developed by the Physical Planning Board of the Province of Havana (DPPF). The current initiative is funded by UNESCO. (*CAN*, 6/3/07)

March 6: Cuba's New Latin American Film Foundation is exhibiting a cycle of films based on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's works to pay homage to the outstanding Colombian writer on his 80th birthday. In 1986, Garcia Marquez, along with Fernando Birri and Julio Garcia Espinosa, founded Cuba's International Film School in San Antonio de los Baños. He has since then contributed to the artistic education of the students in the field of screenplay writing. (*CAN*, 6/3/07)

March 7: A total of 18 political and other prisoners decided to join a hunger strike at Kilo 8 prison, in Camaguey province. The group demands the unconditional release of all political prisoners confined in Cuban jails. They are also protesting the inhumane conditions they are subjected to; and are trying to get attention on political prisoners whose health is extremely deteriorated, as in the case of Normando Hernández, Nelson Aguiar, Alfredo Pulido and Juan Carlos Herrera. At the same time, the group requests the ending of repressive actions against the peaceful opposition. The group is comprised of political prisoners Juan Carlos Herrera Acosta, Lamberto Hernández Plana, Nelson Vázquez Lima, Leoncio Rodríguez Ponce and José Daniel Ferrer García, plus 12 common prisoners who joined their protest. (*Payo Libre*, 7/3/07)

March 8: A group of members of the illegal Democratic Party "November 30 Frank Pais" remain outside a police station in Havana demanding explanations for the arrest of some of their colleagues. Shortly after the search and arrest that took place on March 6 at the headquarters of the Democratic Party, the vice president of the organization left for the police station accompanied by another fellow party member to demand the release of Reinel Sanchez Calvo, member of the Party's Executive Board. "We showed up at police station #11 of San Miguel del Padron, Havana, to demand that Reinel be released", Anaika Paneca told the independent press. But instead, Anaika and her colleague were detained for several hours. Since then, Sanchez Calvo has remained in jail under the alleged crime of "possession of enemy propaganda", and the two women remain under parole until the day of the trial. Party activists have maintained a protest outside the police station. (*Puente Informativo*, 8/3/07)

March 8: Political prisoner Rafael Corrales Alonso was released from prison after 10 months in jail. Corrales was sentenced to 5 years in prison in 2002, for the crimes of "disrespecting the Commander in Chief, resisting arrest and public disorder." In 2005, he had been on parole before being sent back to prison in 2006. During his years in prison, he lost most of his hearing in both ears. (*Cubamet*, 9/3/07)

March 8: On March 2nd, independent journalist Guillermo Fariñas and dissidents Miriam Fernández Armas and Oscar Madruga González were beaten by members of the State Security and of the Association of Combatants of the Revolution (ACR), the independent press reported. After a brief exchange of political views, a mob led by a lieutenant of the political police, another officer and four civilian members of the ACR, slapped and kicked the director of the Cubanacán Press news agency. Fernández Armas and Madruga González were pushed to the ground. (*EER*, 8/3/07)

March 9: Cuba has seen no improvement in the four years since the March 2003 crackdown that resulted in the incarceration of 75 dissidents, said Miriam Leyva, co-founder of Ladies in White, a group comprising relatives of political prisoners. "Having arrived at the fourth anniversary of the extraordinary repression of the days March 18th,

19th, 20th of 2003, nothing has changed in Cuba with respect to human rights and progress toward democracy," said Leyva, wife of economist Oscar Espinosa, a member of the "Group of 75" who was released in November 2004 for health reasons. "The delegating of provisional power by Fidel Castro to his brother, Raul Castro, has not brought about any substantial modification in eight months, just the permanent low-intensity repression instead of noisy, repudiation rallies," she said in a letter released in Havana. "We have the feeling that preparations (are being made) for new waves of repression. Maybe they're not going to unleash them yet. That will depend on the interests of the regime," Leyva said. She added that "the opposition in Cuba is growing, but what is more important is that people (are being) subjected to ever-worsening hardships; they're exasperated and are constantly expressing (their displeasure)." "Instead of carrying out substantial modifications to spur the economy and the country in general, the government could decide to launch a new campaign to discredit the opposition and new imprisonments," she said. (*EFE*, 9/3/07)

March 10: An anthology of former Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez was presented during the Eighth International Documentary Festival, organized by the Cuban Film Institute. The Vice President of the Film Institute, Luis A. Gonzalez Nieto, presented the first of three DVDs that will be part of a compiling sample dedicated to preserve Alvarez' film memory. Documentaries like *Now*, *Hanoi*, *Martes 13* (Tuesday 13), *Mi Hermano Fidel* (My brother Fidel), are included in this first record. The other two volumes will include films dedicated to Latin America and to Southeast Asia, deeply tackled in his work. (*Prensa Latina*, 10/3/07)

March 10: Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez presented Cuban singer Pablo Milanés with a medal from the Casa de las Americas for his contributions to Latin American culture. The Nobel laureate in literature, who turned 80, joked that it was the first time he had bestowed a medal on a younger person, the official National Information Agency known as AIN reported. Based in Cuba, Casa de las Americas represents music, literature and other fine arts throughout Latin America. Writers, musicians and artists from countries across the region often are called upon to present colleagues with the Haydee Santamaria Medal from Casa de las Americas. Milanés, an internationally acclaimed folk singer, said he was especially moved to have a medal named after his late mentor Santamaria, a rebel fighter also known for her contributions to Cuban culture after the 1959 revolution. (*AP*, 10/3/07)

March 11: The 16th International Book Fair, one of Cuba's most important cultural events, concluded in Santiago de Cuba with a cultural gala marking the 485 years of the city's foundation. The fair, opened at San Carlos de La Cabana Fortress in Havana, was attended by over one hundred international personalities, and had Argentina as guest country. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/3/07)

March 11: Cuban dissident Oswaldo J. Payá Sardiñas, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), denounced the "intensification of persecution" of members of his illegal group that promotes the Varela Project. He also condemned "the threats to annihilate the group and its leaders," and warned that "a new repressive wave is taking shape." [[Comunicado desde La Habana](#)] (*ABC*, 11/3/07)

March 12: Fidel Castro's health "is visibly improving," Cuba's foreign minister said in Paris, adding that government officials increasingly consult him on the country's most important issues. Castro has gained weight and is doing physical exercise, Felipe Perez Roque told a press conference. The Cuban official said that "we are optimistic" about the president's recovery, who last July 31 delegated his political duties to his brother Raul after undergoing an operation for an intestinal hemorrhage. To illustrate Castro's progress, Perez Roque said that "more and more" he and other government officials keep him up to date on events in the country and consult him by telephone on leading issues. (*EFE*, 12/3/07)

March 12: Cuban First Vice President Raul Castro visited the Pinar del Rio Ophthalmology Center, the newest facility in the province to treat eye ailments. Raul Castro praised the people of Pinar del Rio for their hard work in making the program a success in the province. In the visitor's book Raul wrote his congratulations "in the name of Fidel, who has been the chief promoter of the Miracle Mission." The Pinar del Rio center is located within the Abel Santamaria

Cuadrado Hospital and began functioning on January 17. Some 200 patients are served daily. The center provides general services as well as specialized care for glaucoma, cataracts, retina and cornea problems, refractory surgery, oculoplastic surgery and neuro-ophthalmology. Dr. Osmany Correa Rojas, director of the center and coordinator of the Miracle Mission in the province, said that the new facility is equipped with the latest diagnosis and surgical equipment. Thanks to new investments, Pinar del Rio has also extended its eye care network. There are operating rooms in the Leon Cuervo Rubio Hospital, also in the provincial capital, as well as the Hospital in San Cristobal and the polyclinics in the municipalities of La Palma and Sandino. (*Granma*, 13/3/07)

March 12: Cuban economist and dissident Oscar Espinosa Chepe does not discard the possibility of a new crackdown against dissidents similar to that of 2003. According to Espinosa, one of "the 75" who were sentenced to up to 28 years in prison, "a new Black Spring cannot be ruled out" and "it would not be a surprise if the government deals another blow to the dissidents in order to scare the population." (*EFE*, 12/3/07)

March 12: A woman who makes her home in the drained swimming pool of a derelict hotel and one of the provincial families driven by poverty to settle in Havana without official authorization are among the protagonists in documentaries by young Cuban filmmakers who refuse to shut their eyes to the island's problems. Alina Rodriguez, 22, grew up seeing the difficulties of internal migrants at a settlement in the San Miguel del Padron neighborhood and decided to tell the story in a documentary called "Buscandote Havana." "I wanted to show their problems and help avoid the pejorative view that people have of easterners," Rodriguez said. The "easterners" (orientales) are people from the island's eastern provinces who, in many cases, have not been able to secure authorization to live in the capital, putting them in the paradoxical situation of being "undocumented" migrants in their own country. The subjects of "Camas Solas," a documentary about the evacuation of residents from a rickety building near the Capitol due to the approach of Hurricane Ivan in 2004, also shows complaints by the population about the scarcity of housing. For "Model Town," filmmaker Laimir Fano selected a group of retirees in Hershey, located some 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) from Havana and a town born in the shadow of the US chocolate company's old plant. Images of the bustling Hershey of half a century ago contrast with current scenes of the abandoned plant and deteriorated community. The young filmmakers' work is being screened at the 6th National New Directors Show organized by the National Cinematographic Arts and Industry Institute. For Marilyn Solaya, head of the center's audiovisual department, the screening of these documentaries shows that progress has been made, even though "they are not going to be shown on Cuban media. Less sensitive things also are not shown." (*EFE*, 12/3/07)

March 13: Cuban dissidents said that the government is tightening its repression of their group for its insistence on peaceful, gradual change toward democracy in the country. "Officials are tightening their repression of the Progressive Arch's work for a gradual, peaceful and calm transition to democracy and respect for human rights, beginning from the promotion of dialogue," said a statement signed by Manuel Cuesta, the leader of the dissident group. Progressive Arch said that on March 19, activist Ana Gamoneda was detained by police as she returned to her house after meeting other dissidents. "They warned her about her activities," the statement said. Eight days earlier, Jesus Diaz was detained for several hours and documents from an opposition network were seized. "The Progressive Arch once again calls on the authorities to come into line with current trends, which value dialogue and respect between adversaries for the resolution of conflicts," the statement said. (*AFP*, 13/3/07)

March 13: Cuban communist leaders called for the revolutionary ideals of ailing leader Fidel Castro to live on as they marked the 50th anniversary of a failed attempt to assassinate dictator Fulgencio Batista. "This revolution will continue for all time," parliament speaker Ricardo Alarcon told hundreds of students and top government leaders, including acting president Raul Castro, who watched the event from a front row seat but did not address the crowd. Alarcon praised the courage of Jose Antonio Echeverria, the University Student Federation president who was killed by police after the attack a half-century ago, and said that Cubans like him would ensure the socialist revolution would endure. (*AP*, 14/3/07)

March 14: Fidel Castro, recovering from intestinal surgery, told his Venezuelan counterpart and close ally Hugo Chavez that he feels "very well," the official newspaper Granma said. I (feel) very well. I'm doing nearly everything," Castro was quoted as saying by phone to Chavez, as well as Haitian President Rene Preval, when the two leaders were meeting in the Haitian capital to sign cooperation accords that include Cuba. Castro said he had been visited by Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez earlier in the day. "This morning I had a visit from 'Gabo,' said the Cuban leader, 80, who underwent intestinal surgery almost eight months ago. The government said Fidel Castro was now recovering at a faster pace and taking part in daily government affairs, fueling talk he may return to the helm of Cuba's communist government soon. "The pace of his recovery process has picked up. We are all expecting it to be completed shortly," Vice President Jose Ramon Fernandez told reporters. Still, Fernandez said, "it is clear that after a lengthy illness one has to rest and take precautions and factor in the absolutely overwhelming dedication he always gives his work, hours and hours, and days without rest; and we have to protect him from that." (*AFP*, 14/3/07)

March 15: The illegal Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) denounced the increased repression against dissidents over the last few months and the "arbitrary detention" of one of its leaders and a journalist. A note from the CCDHRN "firmly protests the arbitrary detention of Carlos Jesús Menéndez," a member of its executive, and denounces the arrest of independent journalist Odelín Alfonso, as reported by family sources. (*EFE*, 15/3/07)

March 15: Fidel Castro will be in "perfect shape" to run for re-election to parliament next spring, the first step toward securing yet another term as Cuba's president, National Assembly head Ricardo Alarcon said. "I would nominate him," said Alarcon, the highest-ranking member of parliament. "I'm sure he will be in perfect shape to continue handling his responsibilities." Mobbed by foreign reporters following a parliamentary session to discuss Cuba's upcoming elections, Alarcon said Castro "is doing fine and is continuing to focus on recovery and rehabilitation." A lengthy process of nominating candidates for municipal elections will begin this summer, leading to several rounds of voting. Then, by March 2008, Cuba should be ready to hold parliamentary elections that are expected to include Castro, Alarcon said. (*AP, Prensa Latina*, 15/3/07)

March 17: Forty Cuban women took turns standing behind fake prison bars to symbolize their loved ones' arrest during a government crackdown on dissidents four years ago. Gathering at dawn for a 12-hour protest, the women erected metal bars under a staircase and stood in the fake prison cell one at a time in half-hour shifts. On the opposite wall, they hung a Cuban flag scrawled with the names of their jailed loved ones. "We don't have weapons, we are peaceful," protest host Laura Pollan said. Pollan's husband, Hector Maseda, and 74 other government critics were rounded up in a 72-hour crackdown that began March 18, 2003. Communist Party officials and others have visited leading activists in recent days, attempting to dissuade them from holding public acts to mark the anniversary of the crackdown. (*AP*, 18/3/07)

March 18: A small group of Italian activists joined the wives of Cuban political prisoners during their silent weekly march after Sunday Mass to call for their husbands' release. "We are with you for the liberty of the political prisoners," European Union deputy Marco Cappato said on behalf of his Transnational Radical Party. Cappato was among five Italians who joined about 40 wives and other female relatives of jailed Cuban dissidents marching quietly along Havana's Fifth Avenue. The other activists were Maurizio Turco, member of the Italian Chambre of Deputies, and Elisabetta Zamparutti, Matteo Mecashi and Maria Fida Moro, the daughter of late Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro (1916-1978), who was kidnapped and murdered by militants of the Red Brigades. The Italian activists displayed a banner that read "Liberty and Non Violence for Cuba", in front of Santa Rita church. They said they had not received government approval to join the women in their weekly low-key protest, but said they did not think they would have a problem because they are pacifists. (*AP*, 18/3/07)

March 18: Cuban poet Fina Garcia Marruz, said it was a surprise and an honour to receive the Pablo Neruda Ibero-American Poetry Award, which will be delivered by President Michelle Bachelet in Chile, "Juventud Rebelde"

newspaper reported. "With an award like this (...) we always think in several writers who also deserve it, and did not receive it. Marti, "the purest man of our race" as Gabriela Mistral called him, only had a little school medal on his chest at the age of nine," Fina stated. The Pablo Neruda Ibero-American Award, conferred to the author of "Visitaciones," was revealed on March 14 in Chile. (*Prensa Latina*, 18/3/07)

March 19: The home of human rights activist Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leiva has been surrounded by motorcycles and patrol cars of the Cuban State Security and National Police forces since March 16. Leiva, a blind lawyer living in Ciego de Avila, told the independent press that a paramilitary mob, known as Rapid Response Brigades, has prevented him from leaving his home to purchase groceries. "I was prevented from doing so as I was physically intimidated by members of these mobs," Leiva said. (*Netfor Cuba*, 20/3/07)

March 19: Eight months after Fidel Castro fell ill and four years after a broad crackdown on dissent, Cuba's organized opposition generally has been much quieter as it waits to see how the island's political situation develops. "Cuba is a country in waiting," said veteran rights activist Elizardo Sanchez. "What's going to happen with El Comandante? What's going to happen afterward? "If all of the population is waiting, the dissidents have no reason to be running back and forth," added Sanchez, whose Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation issues a list of political prisoners every six months. "The most optimistic thought they were going to see a series of Chinese-type reforms," Sanchez said. "But what has been seen is an almost feudal-style succession; everything remains the same." "Today, Cuba is living through an especially uncertain moment owing to Fidel Castro's illness," Miriam Leiva, one of the prisoner's wives, wrote recently. That uncertainty is accompanied by fear of another crackdown like the roundup of 75 dissidents launched four years ago this week. "We cannot rule out a new wave of repression," Leiva wrote, "instead of the urgent changes required for the critical political, economic and social situation the people face." Although the number of political prisoners has dropped, Sanchez said "low-profile repression" against opponents is up. "We don't feel hatred, but we are not going to be paralyzed by the threats and repression," Oswaldo Paya, the movement's most prominent leader, wrote a press release. "The uncertainty, the fear, the overwhelming propaganda and the precariousness of daily life can paralyze the will and submerge many in hopelessness." (*AP*, 19/3/07)

March 19: A group of women supporters of Fidel Castro tried to interrupt a peaceful demonstration of the Ladies in White, relatives of political prisoners who for four years have been demanding from the Cuban authorities the release of their beloved ones. Some 30 Ladies in White marched along main streets in downtown Havana until they arrived at Jose Marti Central Park, as part of the commemoration of the 4th anniversary of the crackdown of dissidents in 2003. Once there, close to the statue of Cuba's national hero, the Ladies in White released 59 white pigeons --one for each of the prisoners who still remain in Cuban jails— while shouting "Freedom", "Freedom". At same time, Castro supporters began to shout, "long live Fidel", and "long live the Revolution". The incident lasted a few minutes, and the dissidents continued their peaceful march under heavy surveillance by the authorities. (*EFE*, 19/3/07)

March 19: The International Trova Festival "Pepe Sanchez" bid farewell to its 45th celebration in Plaza de Marte, Santiago de Cuba, the birthplace of the Cuban "trova". This 45th celebration was dedicated to the centenary of Francisco Repilado -internationally known as "Compay Segundo", one of the musicians with the world wide famous Buenavista Social Club. Performances in the closing gala included the Madrigalista choir, the Septeto Santiaguero, trova singer Jose Aquiles and the Cohiba duet. Also sharing the stage were the Ballet of Santiago de Cuba and vocal soloists Marilis Gonzalez and Omar Corales. (*ACN*, 19/3/07)

March 20: Cuban singer and songwriter Pablo Milanés was awarded the 2006 Annual Prize by the Association of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), highlighting his artistic contribution of a lifetime to that fertile field of Cuban culture. After UNEAC president and poet Carlos Martí presented the award to the author of anthological songs, Harold Gramatges, who heads up the association, recalled that on this occasion the prize was shared with another eminent Bayamó resident, Salvador Alarcón, for his exceptional support to the concert bands in the country. Pablo expressed

thanks for a recognition that was dear to him for coming from his colleagues in creativity. (*Granma Internacional*, 20/3/07)

March 20: Government supporters broke up a public protest by prisoners' wives who intermittently shouted "Freedom! Freedom!" as they marched through a neighborhood in the capital to mark the crackdown that put their loved ones behind bars. More than 40 government supporters shouted down the smaller "Ladies in White" group with cries of "Long Live Fidel!" in a reference to ailing leader Fidel Castro. There were no physical confrontations between the two groups, and it was not immediately known if there were any arrests. "We are people who have to defend our revolution, our streets," said government supporter Esperanza Gomez, explaining the counter-demonstration, the second in a week. Since March 17, the Ladies in White have held activities every day to mark the fourth anniversary of the crackdown launched against dissidents on March 18, 2003. (*AP*, 20/3/07)

March 23: Almost half a century of communist rule has saved Havana's eclectic architecture from the urban developer's bulldozer, but a lack of repair has taken a ruinous toll on its neo-Baroque and Art Deco gems. Dozens of colonial buildings and beautiful squares in Old Havana have been restored since the UN cultural agency, UNESCO, designated it a world heritage site in 1982. But the rest of the city of 2.2 million people is falling into decay. "The situation has become critical. There are areas of the city where buildings collapse every few days. The overcrowding is tremendous," said leading Cuban architect Mario Coyula, who fears Havana's architectural beauty is damaged beyond repair. In teeming, pot-holed Central Havana, poverty coexists with some of the world's finest examples of neo-Baroque and Art Deco architecture built before Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. It is Cuba's most densely-populated district, with 160,000 people living in 1.3 square miles of crumbling buildings dating from the 1920s and 1930s, many now lacking basic sanitation. Experts say renovating Central Havana would be so costly that demolition is inevitable in many parts. Residents involved in urban planning believe their district can be saved. "We have an advanced state of deterioration, but renewal is possible," said one official who asked not to be named. She said 15 percent of the buildings were in very bad shape. "Nobody knows how they are still standing. It's a miracle they have not fallen down," she said. "It's late to try to save the rich diversity of this architecture," said Cuban writer Antonio Jose Ponte. "It's not far-fetched to think that Central Havana will disappear." (*Reuters*, 23/3/07)

March 23: Cuba is trying to wipe out tuberculosis (TB) by year 2015, in line with worldwide efforts in this regard. According to Dr. Edilberto Gonzalez Ochoa, from the Pedro Kouri Tropical Medicine Institute Tuberculosis Research Group, the island has the potential to achieve the goal even earlier, between 2010 and 2014. He explained that Cuba boasts 6.5 cases for every 100,000 inhabitants. By worldwide standards, TB is deemed eliminated as a social problem when the index is five or below. During a scientific workshop on TB held in Las Tunas, 416 miles east from Havana, expert Gonzalez said that in 1959, when the Revolution triumphed, there were 65 cases of tuberculosis for every 100,000 inhabitants. A Public Health Ministry program implemented since 1962 contributed to decrease the index gradually. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/3/07)

March 24: The State Council of Cuba announced the replacement of the ministers of Justice, Roberto Díaz Sotolongo, and of Hydraulic Resources, Jorge Luis Aspiolea. A brief report during a primetime television newscast announced that Díaz Sotolongo and Aspiolea had been replaced at the request of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The position of president of the Hydraulic Resources Institute will be filled by the First Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Construction, René Mesa. Meanwhile, Roberto Díaz Sotolongo, Minister of Justice since 1996, was replaced by Vice-Minister Maria Esther Reus. (*Reforma*, 24/3/07)

March 25: More than 150,000 young Cubans got up early to join volunteer labor activities in the cities and countryside in commemoration of the 45th anniversary of the Young Communist League (UJC) and the 46th of the Jose Marti Pioneer children's organization. The volunteer activities entailed work in construction, cleanup and beautification, and agriculture, including sugar cane harvesting. UJC president Julio Martinez called on Cuban youth "to take advantage of opportunities, be responsible and make an extra effort not only during special campaigns but on a daily basis."

Martinez said the volunteer work is a reply to President Fidel Castro's query of what can be done to make the Revolution endure. (*Granma*, 26/3/07)

March 27: Faustino Oramas, a popular Cuban musician who was among the last original members of the Buena Vista Social Club, died of cancer. He was 95. Cuba state television reported that acting president Raul Castro had sent a floral wreath to Oramas' funeral service earlier in the day. Oramas, known as "El Guayabero" and popular for the double meanings and ribald humor of his songs, was the oldest surviving member of the original Buena Vista group of elderly musicians who became international stars when American guitarist Ry Cooder brought them together in the 1990s. Oramas, born on June 4, 1911, in eastern Cuba, was known for his renditions of traditional Cuban pieces such as "Marieta" and "El Rey del Tumbaito". He was awarded Cuba's National Humor Prize in 2002. (*The Miami Herald*, 28/3/07)

March 28: Acting Cuban president Raúl Castro launched a new offensive against "criminal activities and other antisocial behaviour," by creating a mechanism that consolidates the work of the government, the police, social organizations and neighbourhood activists. A decree-law dated March 13th and published in the "Official Gazette," created the Prevention and Social Protection System. According to the decree, the new system comprises a national office, and units of action at the provincial and municipal levels as well as in minor urban and rural areas, and will promote popular participation. (*La Jornada*, 29/3/07)

March 28: Fidel Castro, who has yet to reappear in public since undergoing stomach surgery eight months ago, is in good shape, his elder brother Ramon Castro said. "Very good. He's in one piece," Ramon Castro said, asked about the 80-year-old revolutionary's state of health. "The thing is, the Castros are strong," he told reporters during the inauguration of an agricultural show in Havana. Despite recent reports that Fidel Castro is progressing well and taking a more active role in the government after handing day-to-day control to his younger brother Raul Castro in July, the Cuban leader has still only been seen in photographs and video images. (*Reuters*, 28/3/07)

March 29: In the World Series of weird baseball names, Cuba is a real contender. Never mind nicknames like that of the Mets' Orlando Hernandez — "El Duque" or "The Duke." This competition is among the names given to players like Danger Guerrero and Vicyohandri Odelin by their own parents. Then there's Yulieski Gourriel, the 22-year-old star second baseman on the island's national team, whose big brother Yunieski plays center field. Their mother figured that name was such a hit, she changed just one letter when Yulieski came along. Cuban law once required that children be named after saints, but the communist government long ago abolished that rule. Today, only the names of stars, objects, jobs and animals are prohibited. One of Cuba's best-known journalists and broadcasters, the late Eddy Martin, once said he counted 400 Cuban baseball players whose names started with the alphabet's next-to-last letter. And while Y names are common in allied Russia, it remains a mystery why Cuban parents would be attached to them. (*AP*, 29/3/07)

March 29: A therapeutic anti-cancer vaccine being developed by Cuban scientists is expected to give new hopes for patients in the advanced stage of lung cancer in terms of a longer survival rate and better quality of life. Known as Epiderma Growth Factor (EGF), the vaccine, discovered by Dr Gisela Gonzalez Marinello of the Centre of Molecular Immunology in Cuba in 1992, will be clinically trial-tested in Malaysia for the first time. Dr Gonzalez, who is also its project manager, said 230 advanced stage lung cancer patients had been identified in 12 hospitals to participate in the clinical tests in what could be a landmark trial for the drug. She said based on previous clinical trials in Cuba, Canada and United Kingdom, the vaccine had demonstrated its ability to promote longer survival rates of up to six months, and up to two years in some cases, while helping to improve the quality of life among lung cancer patients who responded to the vaccine. (*Bernamea*, 29/3/07)

March 29: Cuba's Science Workers Union (SNTC) granted Fidel Castro a diploma acknowledging his role as main promoter of that labor organization. During a ceremony held in Havana, the General Secretary of the Cuban Workers Confederation (CTC) Salvador Valdes Mesa received the diploma, which he will hand over to the Cuban leader. SNTC

leader Martha Cabrisas stressed that the setting up of the union some 15 years ago was crucial to implement the national strategy aimed at the country's scientific development. (*ACN*, 29/3/07)

March 29: A newly organized dissident coalition in Cuba launched a campaign to free political prisoners, promising to take its fight to international courts. The National Constitutionalist Alliance groups 225 organizations with a total of some 3,000 members, according to its director Angel Polanco. Polanco said the campaign would seek to gather 250,000 signatures in the only one-party communist nation in the Americas, and pass them on to the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. He also said that if the Cuban government rejects the request, the group would call for a day of peaceful civil disobedience across Cuba, something that has never happened in almost half a century of communist rule. (*AFP*, 29/3/07)

March 30: A new University of Information Technology will open in the eastern region on April 4, aimed at increasing registration in this kind of career. This school's syllabus agrees with that of the Information Sciences University (UCI in Spanish), opened in Havana in 2002, and whose registration increased to 10,000 students throughout the island. About 300 students, graduates from high school informatics centers, are expected to study in that institute, as part of the country's will to continue socializing the access to new technologies. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/07)

March 31: Cuba's provisional president, Raul Castro, said that the best way to evaluate the health status of his older brother Fidel is to read the op-ed piece that he recently wrote for the official daily Granma. "I want to begin by saying that, with regard to the health status of the commander in chief, I would recommend that you read and ponder his article," Raul Castro, 75, said during a session of the armed forces' military council, Granma reported. (*EFE*, 31/3/07)

Economy

March 1: The cost of inter-provincial bus travel for Cubans will quadruple. The Cuban Ministry of Finance and Prices approved a new base rate to establish the price of inter-provincial bus tickets, which is 4.2 times higher than the current one. The price of domestic air tickets in Cuba has increased by almost 100 %. (*EER*, 1/3/07)

March 2: Sherritt International, a Canadian energy company, said it plans to export Cuban oil for the first time -- a move that could put the crude on a collision course with the US trade embargo against Cuba. Details are few, but questions about the move go to the heart of the embargo: Where will the oil be refined? And how could Sherritt International or subsequent handlers keep the Cuban crude out of fuel being exported to the United States? Michael Minnes, company spokesman, said plans for exporting the oil are still under discussion. "We respect US law," Minnes said from Sherritt's Toronto headquarters. "We have no intention of selling it into a situation that would affect the embargo." Minnes said demand in Cuba for the oil has dropped because the island is increasingly using diesel generators for electricity production instead of burning crude. Sherritt doesn't currently have offshore wells; instead, its onshore equipment drills horizontally into petroleum reservoirs located under the water. Sherritt International, in a joint venture with the Cuban government, has been drilling for oil in Cuba for more than a decade, gradually increasing production to the point that domestic production provides almost half Cuba's petroleum needs. Venezuelan refined products make up the rest. (*The Miami Herald*, 2/3/07)

March 2: Wealthy cigar aficionados toasted the health of ailing leader Fidel Castro and shelled out \$728,000 at an annual auction of elaborate humidors that for the first time did not bear the signature of the 80-year-old revolutionary. Proceeds from the auction of five wooden-and-bronze humidors stuffed with hundreds of the island's exclusive hand-rolled cigars will go to Cuba's health-care system. The amount raised was similar to past years. But this year's auction, during a dinner at the close of the annual Habanos cigar festival, was the first in the festival's nine years for which Castro had not signed the humidors. "The president has not been well. I am sure that you will join me in wishing him a full return to health," said auctioneer Simon Chase, leading a toast among the hundreds of cigar connoisseurs from around the world before he opened the bidding on the chests filled with famous Cuban cigar brands such as Cohiba and

Montecristo. About 800 people from more than 40 nations attended this year's elegant dinner wrapping up five days of seminars on the qualities of Cuba's finest smokes, as well as trips to tobacco fields, curing houses and cigar factories. Paying \$550 a head, they dined on a seafood appetizer with lobster, shrimp, salmon, vegetables and caviar and a salted beef filet with mushrooms in guava sauce. Each dish was accompanied by wine and a special cigar. Through Habanos S.A., a partnership of the Cuban government and the Spanish-French tobacco firm Altadis, the island produces more than a third of the world's cigars for export, with sales of \$370 million last year. (*AP*, 2/3/07)

March 2: One of the main worries of the average Cuban family is food, which costs about two-thirds of their income, according to several studies. Family ration books are given out annually, and rationing is used by the Cuban government to ensure that every citizen has access to a basket of basic goods at subsidised prices, covering "not less than half of people's nutritional requirements," according to official estimates. The system should guarantee equitable distribution of rice, beans, sugar, coffee, oil, eggs, salt, pasta, bread and biscuits, fish, chicken, other meats like sausages, and milk and yoghurt for children. Monthly expenditure per person on subsidised, rationed goods varies from 26 to 38 pesos, according to a study by the University of Havana Centre for Studies on the Cuban Economy (CEEC). Rationed goods supplied families' basic needs adequately until the 1980s, but now it only covers their needs for 10 or 12 days a month, according to both researchers and consumers. For the rest of their food, consumers have to go to the agromercados, where a variety of high quality food is available, but prices are set by supply and demand. "Workers living on a salary have a hard time of it, because their wages can buy a lot of price-controlled goods, but they can't afford other necessary items that are sold at market prices," Central Bank president Francisco Soberón admitted in late 2005. A survey of households carried out by the National Statistics Office in 2001 found that over 66.3 percent of the expenditure of residents in Havana went to food and drink, and only 33.7 percent to other consumption. (*IPS*, 2/3/07)

March 2: Cuba has floated a proposal to boost trade with Panama by reducing tariffs on a range of goods, Cuba's foreign minister said during a visit to the Central American nation. Speaking at a news conference, Felipe Perez Roque said Havana had presented a list of goods it would like to include in such an agreement to "create conditions to increase trade." Panamanian Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro did not comment specifically on the proposal, but said, "We have identified other areas of cooperation which we can explore in the future, like the topic of trade." Currently trade between the two countries amounts to only about US\$50 million (€8 million). Panama exports mostly raw materials and manufactured goods to the island nation, while Cuba ships Panama tobacco, rum, cement and pharmaceuticals. Perez Roque did not say when the two countries might begin talks on an agreement. (*AP*, 2/3/07)

March 4: The main goal of Cuba's foreign trade sector this year is to more fully insert the communist island into the world and regional economy, the official Prensa Latina news agency reported, citing a Foreign Trade Ministry, or MINCEX, document. Havana conducted 44 percent of its total trade in 2006 with Latin America, the Caribbean, Canada and the United States, and it increased its mutual exchange with other nations and geographic areas. Other goals for 2007 are to strengthen Cuba's participation and role in the World Trade Organization, or WTO, and in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The document also mentions Havana's interest in strengthening its bilateral trade links as well as fostering an increase in exports and in its efficiency and international competitiveness. MINCEX also has proposed achieving greater success in incorporating its various entities into the so-called Business Improvement program currently under way throughout the country. In like manner, the ministry will seek to consolidate the development of online commerce, accounting and financial activities by firms within the MINCEX system, as well as to fight any instances of corruption, illegality and lack of discipline. (*EFE*, 4/3/07)

March 5: Cuban authorities have devised a restructuring plan for Antillana de Acero, the country's main iron works company to make it profitable in 2007. The plan includes the elimination of 200 jobs, according to the weekly official newspaper "Trabajadores." (*EFE*, 5/3/07)

March 5: During the Seventh Cuba-Venezuela Joint Meeting, both countries entered into an agreement for installation of 11 ethanol plants and development of sugar cane crops in Venezuela. Bilateral authorities initialed the pact to install

the ethanol plants, organized a joint committee on the use of alternate energy sources and also okayed a number of new projects. Venezuela and Cuba estimated that cooperation in the area of new energy sources will help boost development and collective welfare. The closing ceremony of the meeting was presided over by Raúl Castro, Cuban acting President; Venezuelan Ambassador in Havana Alí Rodríguez Araque; Venezuelan Minister of Energy and Petroleum and state run oil firm Pdvsa CEO, Rafael Ramírez; and other senior Cuban and Venezuelan officials. (*El Universal*, 5/3/07)

March 6: The number of tourists visiting Cuba dropped 3.6 per cent last year because of high prices and not political uncertainty over Fidel Castro's illness, travel industry sources said. Canadian tourism, the source of 27 per cent of Cuba's arrivals, or about 600,000 people a year, dipped for the first time in years, according to Cuban government figures. "Cancun and the Dominican Republic offered better deals," a Canadian diplomat said. Tour operators said Cuba lost its competitive edge when it revalued its currency by 8 per cent in 2005. They said tourists get more quality for their money elsewhere. The Canadian Association of Tour Operators warned Cuba last year that it was losing out to other Caribbean destinations because of the lack of adequate service for tourists, theft of luggage at airports and hotels, and a failure to attend to complaints. The number of tourists visiting Cuba from Spain, Italy, Germany and France declined last year, while Britain became Cuba's second-largest market after Canada. The dengue outbreak, which led to the fumigation of Cuban cities to kill mosquitoes, led some tourists to stay away last autumn, particularly from Italy, a European tour operator said. (*Reuters*, 7/3/07)

March 7: Trade between Brazil and Cuba amounted to a record high of 374.85 million US dollars in 2006, the Brazilian Ministry of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade said. Last year, Brazil's exports to Cuba reached 343.25 million dollars, while imports from Cuba amounted to 31.59 million, generating a surplus of 311.66 million, the ministry said. Meanwhile, Cuban Vice Foreign Minister Alejandro Gonzalez Galiano said Brazil is Cuba's second biggest trading partner in the region after Venezuela. The Cuban vice minister was in Brazil to participate in an annual bilateral meeting designed to address issues of mutual interest, such as scientific cooperation and cultural exchanges. (*Xinhua*, 8/3/07)

March 8: Cuba increased its infrastructure for an optimum use of accompanying gas extracted from the country's oil fields, Cuban TV reported. Installments from Cuban Company ENER GAS in Havana province's northern strip have new technologies and methods, aimed at raising the delivery of that resource to generate electricity in the Caribbean nation. That entity works for a sustainable increase of production levels and the aim of this year's plan is to add about 70 megawatts to the installed power plant and successively extend those capacities. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/07)

March 10: Habanos S.A announced that it is considering appealing the decision of the Court of Appeal of London in relation to its litigation with Master Cigars Direct Ltd regarding the distribution of Habanos cigars in Great Britain, and insisted that it will take legal action against the resale of its cigars in the European Union. (*EFE*, 12/3/07)

March 11: Argentina and Cuba signed a memorandum of understanding on technology transfer from the South American country to the island for the production of soy and grains. The agreement indicates that Cuba will contribute land currently under Ministry of Sugar administration, and Argentine businessmen will supply the know-how, seeds, machinery and money in exchange for a share of crop products. (*AFP*, 11/3/07)

March 11: Administrative mismanagement is the main cause of significant economic losses, product tampering, misappropriation of resources and other aberrations in Cuba's businesses, acknowledged Vice-minister of Domestic Trade, Damar Maceo, in statements made to the official newspaper "Juventud Rebelde." The newspaper has criticized the problem of product tampering and fraud that affect customers of state-run businesses, and has pointed to products like rum, beer, cigarettes, coffee, soaps and perfumes as the most commonly affected. (*EFE*, 11/3/07)

March 11: Cuba received 10 Iranian-made wagons to transport cement. Based on an over 9.9-million euros contract, Pars Wagon Co. in Arak, central Iran, is committed to build 100 freight train wagons for the Latin American nation within a year. In addition to this contract, Iran has also helped develop major projects in Cuba, including the building of a sewage pumping station and water treatment facilities. (*Tehran Times*, 11/3/07)

March 13: According to an article published in the Cuban weekly newspaper "Opciones", at the end of 2006 there were 761 joint ventures registered with the Chamber of Commerce of Cuba, 68 less than the previous year, confirming a trend seen in recent years. The president of the Chamber, Raúl Becerra, attributes the decline to the "business reorganization" process that has taken place in Cuba. (*EFECOM*, 13/3/07)

March 14: Cuba wants to develop trade and economic relations with Ukraine, Cuban Ambassador to Ukraine Julio Garmendia Pena told the press. "We are not quite satisfied with the volume of bilateral trade exchange, we consider that a wider perspective is being opened now," he said. He also said that there are good prospects in biotechnology and medicine supplies. Garmendia said that Cuba was interested in purchasing tires for heavy machines in Ukraine and to increase cooperation in the railway sector. "And, of course, (Cuba is interested in) traditional supplies like, rum, cigars and coffee," the ambassador said. Garmendia said Cuba is also interested in supplies of sugar to Ukraine. (*Ukrainian News*, 14/3/07)

March 14: Trade between Cuba and China ballooned to \$1.8 billion last year, double that of 2005, Beijing's ambassador to the island said. China's exports of buses, locomotives and farm equipment and supplies to Cuba in 2006 helped account for the sharp increase over the previous year, Zhao Rongxian said in a story posted on the website of the Cuban government's business weekly, *Opciones*. He did not provide specific numbers for Chinese-Cuban trade in 2005. A 2006 official Cuban report said trade between the two countries was about \$775,000 during the 12-month period ending in October 2005. It was unclear whether the \$1.8 billion figure corresponded to the same 12 months in 2006. "We are both socialist countries, we have a lot in common and magnificent relations of cooperation in all areas," the ambassador said. Cuba sent nickel, sugar and medicine as well as biotechnological products to China. Chinese tourists also visited Cuba in record numbers and now average more than 10,000 a year, the ambassador said. (*AP*, 14/3/07)

March 14: Comparatively high prices, an unusually warm winter in Europe and the sale of a Spanish tour company to a US competitor are hurting Cuba's tourist trade this year after a 3.6 per cent decline in 2006, travel industry sources said. The communist country's economy relies heavily on tourism for foreign-currency earnings that totalled \$2.4 billion (US) in 2006. The number of tourists arriving in Cuba dropped 7 per cent in January and 13 per cent in February, compared with this period last year, according to preliminary official figures. January through April are the high season in Cuba, so it will be difficult to meet this year's goal of 8 per cent growth, hotel executives said. Visitors fell to 2.2 million last year from 2.3 million in 2005, the Cuban government said. It was the first drop since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States hurt the travel industry worldwide in 2002. The number of visitors from Canada, Cuba's largest source of tourists, dipped 2 per cent in the first two months of this year, figures showed. But it was European tourism that dropped the most, with declines of 10 per cent to 20 per cent in the number of visitors from Italy, France and Germany, and a 45 per cent decline from Spain. (*Reuters*, 15/3/07)

March 15: With sights set on a lucrative world ethanol market, Cuba has plans to build eight new ethanol distilleries and export roughly 200 million liters of the biofuel by 2011, said Marianela Cordoves, a senior researcher at the Cuban Institute of Investigations into Sugarcane Derivatives, or ICIDCA. "We're thinking of expanding our output of ethanol (...) fivefold to 450 million liters of ethanol in 2011," Cordoves said at the F.O. Licht sugar and ethanol conference in Sao Paulo. "Some of that ethanol will be mixed into our (gasoline). But the rest - perhaps 200 million liters of fuel ethanol - we plan to export." The country is already in talks with Asia, the European Union and even Canada to potentially supply their markets, she added. The plan could nevertheless hinge on how heavily the Cuban government supports the initiative - and how easily Cuba will find investors to build the new distilleries. Earlier this month, Cuba's ailing leader Fidel Castro criticized the idea of using food crops for fuels. (*Dow Jones*, 15/3/07)

March 17: Cuba's Foreign Trade Minister Raul de la Nuez highlighted the country is taking measures for higher efficiency in trade management, including rational replacement of imports. At the closing of a meeting to discuss the work of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce (CCC) in 2006, the minister referred to the concentration of purchases and assessment of foreign trade among the actions being implemented. Executives from nearly 800 entities related to the activity, together with Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas, and first Deputy Economy and Planning Minister Alfonso Casanova, were among the participants. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/3/07)

March 18: In the land of tobacco it has become very difficult to find cigarettes and cigars. According to an article in the weekly newspaper "Tribuna de La Habana," smokers in the capital's municipality of Playa complained about the shortage while the provincial retailer of cigarettes, cigars and matches admitted that the "main problem lies with the lack of transport vehicles." (*EFE*, 18/3/07)

March 20: Challenges of horizontal and far-reaching perforation are among issues of the First Congress on Oil and Gas "Petrogas 2007", that started in Havana. Parallel to the Congress is the Second Earth Sciences Convention "Geociencias 2007", with forums on geology, geophysics and the mining industry, attended by 20 nations, among them, Canada, Venezuela, Chile, Spain, China, Italy and Mexico. (*ACN*, 20/3/07)

March 20: Cuba should begin its controversial drilling for oil in its Gulf of Mexico waters early next year, the country's Basic Industry Minister said. Minister Yadira Garcia said the government and Spanish oil major Repsol-YPF were negotiating with third parties to contract a drilling platform to sink various exploratory wells. "We are working together with Repsol on the platform that in 2008 should arrive to begin drilling during the first half of the year," Garcia said at the opening of a geology conference in Havana. Repsol drilled an exploratory deep-water well in 2004, finding signs of good quality oil but not in commercial quantities. India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corp. and Norway's Norsk Hydro partnered with Repsol in 2006 to explore its six blocks. Cuba's 43,250-square-mile (112,000-square-km) exclusive economic zone in the Gulf of Mexico was parceled into 59 blocks for foreign exploration in 1999. A total of 20 blocks have been taken by foreign firms to date, which also include Canadian firm Sherritt International, Malaysia's state-run Petroliaam Nasional Berhad and Venezuela's state-run PDVSA. "For the next year we plan to sink test wells to prove the existence of oil. Then it will be two or three years to consolidate the find and build the needed structures to exploit the oil, depending on financing," Minister Garcia said. (*Reuters*, 20/3/07)

March 20: Businessmen from 17 countries have confirmed their attendance at the 7th International Fair on Construction, FECONS, to take place in Havana from March 27 to 31. According to the head of the Organizing Committee, Cuban Minister of Construction Rene Mesa Villafañá, Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela and several countries from Europe and Asia are among the participants in the event. (*ACN*, 20/3/07)

March 21: Cuba has slowly but steadily restored in Old Havana some of the oldest -- and most gorgeous -- buildings in the Americas. The innovative plan has also funded social programs and housing reconstruction, making it a model for historic districts around the world, experts say. "It's a self-financing, self-sustaining model," said Herman Van Hooff, a United Nations cultural official based in Havana. "It's an integrated vision of restoration and providing services to the population. It has matured into a model with valuable concepts for other places." The unique part of Cuba's plan has been its strategy of restoring old hotels, restaurants and buildings to attract tourists and then using tourism revenue to fund more restoration, along with social programs and housing renovation, one of Cuba's most pressing problems. (*AP*, 21/3/07)

March 21: President of Venezuelan oil firm PDVSA Intevep, Hercillo Jose Rivas Siervo, expressed his satisfaction over the results of joint research with Cuba in the field of hydrocarbons. Rivas Siervo and a group of PDVSA Intevep experts are attending the 1st Cuban Congress on Oil and Gas, at the Havana Convention Center. In remarks to the press, Rivas said they have a collaboration agreement with oil firm Cuba Petroleo (CUPET) and Cuba's Oil Research Center for joint studies in the field. We are happy with the results of this cooperation, which will benefit both countries,

he stressed. He added that both parties collaborate in technological development in the areas of exploration, production, refining and environmental protection. This year, we did specific research to improve recovery of heavy crude and applied biotechnology in improving oil quality, he said. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/07)

March 22: Cuba expects its economic growth to slip down a gear this year to around 10 percent but remain among the strongest in the region, a senior government official said. Cuba, which reported growth of 12.5 percent in 2006, is feeling a pinch in its vital tourist industry this year, due in part to a warm European winter and cheaper destinations elsewhere in the Caribbean. Cuban tour operators have played down any impact on tourism from Fidel Castro's health problems. "I think that this year the economy will have a growth rate of not less than 10 percent. But certainly, very strong growth," Osvaldo Martinez, the head of parliament's economic commission told the press. "To sustain growth of 12.5 percent is extremely difficult. Growth of 10 percent would very likely be once more the highest in Latin America, so there is nothing to worry about," he said, after a conference on the United Nations' World Water Day. Communist-run Cuba calculates its economic growth rate using a unique method that adds in free education, medical care and other social services provided by the state. Under that methodology, economic growth has revved up to three times its pace at the start of the decade when the country was pulling out of the slump triggered by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. (*Reuters* 22/3/07)

March 22: The four countries boosting the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) Latin American Integration project agreed to include geology and mining as areas of cooperation. "We have identified actions to be proposed to our governments that could lead to future accords on mining resources," states a document issued at the Havana meeting. The text was signed by Yadira Garcia, minister of Basic Industry (Cuba); Jose G. Delance, minister of Mining and Metallurgy (Bolivia); Emilio Rapaccioli, minister of Energy and Mines (Nicaragua); and Ivan N. Hernandez, vice-minister of Mining (Venezuela). It envisions the creation of a group of experts from the ALBA member nations to support in the drafting of mining legislation, the establishing of a joint geological-mining data base, evaluation of mineral potential and carrying out market studies. The plan also involves the transformation of small mining operations, the setting-up of laboratories and a training program for miners, technicians and professionals. (*ACN, Granma*, 23/3/07)

March 22: Aymée Aguirre, vice-president of the National Institute of Hydraulic Resources (INRH), said that "500,000 people do not have access to drinking water" on the island, while approximately 560,000 do not have access to sanitation services. (*EFE*, 22/3/07)

March 23: The Second Cuban Earth Sciences Convention, assembling several congresses on geophysics, oil and gas, mining industry and geology, concluded in Havana after analyzing over 700 papers in four days of sessions. More than 800 delegates from 20 countries, of them 228 foreigners, attended debates. Evelio Linares Cala, president of the Organizing Committee and the Cuban Society of Geology, termed the event very successful, not only for the amount of work presented, but also for its quality and the participation of Cuban and foreign experts. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/3/07)

March 25: The Cuban-Canadian Energas project is using the natural gas collected during the extraction of petroleum to generate 15 percent of the electricity consumed by Cuba, to provide energy for cooking to 1 million people and to reduce environmental pollution. Top project officials told reporters about the effort during a tour through Cuba's northwest exploration and oil production zone after the end of the Geosciences Congress, which was devoted in large measure to revealing the communist island's energy prospects. Energas is a joint venture created in 1998 and operated in equal 33.3 percent shares by Canadian firm Sherrit, which is in charge of the financing and technology, and Cuba's Union Electrica and Cuba Petroleo, the latter known as CUPET, which handle distribution to consumers and the actual gas production, respectively. The firm processes the gas extracted along with crude oil, removing the sulphur and the heavy fuels known as naphtha, and then it burns the now-clean and non-polluting gas in turbines to produce electricity. Energas has three gas production plants in Cuba's so-called Northern Heavy Crude Strip, which runs for some 150 kilometers (93 miles) along the coast between Havana and the neighboring province of Matanzas, Energas deputy

general manager Alberto Villalonga said. The project includes investment of some \$200 million and the three plants generate some 400 megawatts of electricity, with production forecast to reach 525 megawatts by the end of 2008 during its final development phase, the Cuban engineer said. (*EFE*, 25/3/07)

March 26: The 19th Intergovernmental Cuba-China Commission for economic and commercial relations opened in Havana presided by Ricardo Cabrisas, Cuban minister of Government and Wei Jianguo, Chinese vice-minister of Commerce. Cuban Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration Minister Marta Lomas was also on hand for the opening session. This year's agenda includes a review of trade and economic relations during 2006 and approval of strategies for the current year. While in Cuba, Vice Minister Wei Jianguo will also meet with government leaders and visit important projects that have collaboration from his country. (*Granma*, 27/3/07)

March 26: A week of rain in Cuba's eastern Holguin and Las Tunas provinces has all but paralyzed the sugar harvest there, local sources said. They said the weather also has slowed work in other areas, putting this year's production target further out of reach. "With the rain of the last five days there isn't a sugar cutting machine that can enter a plantation, and if you cut the cane by hand the yields will be in the dirt," retired farmer Carlos Pena said in a phone interview from Holguin. Cuban plantations lack adequate drainage and the harvest is 90 percent mechanized. Heavy rain prevents the usage of cutting machines and other equipment for days, and the mills close down. Unusually hot and wet weather from central Camaguey province eastward had led to below capacity milling and yields even before the latest rain, which continued, jeopardizing plans to boost production to 1.5 million to 1.6 million tonnes of raw sugar from 1.2 million tonnes last year. Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro said over the weekend it had rained 67 times since November in Las Tunas. "We have to do everything possible" to produce what the country needs, he said. (*Reuters*, 26/3/07)

March 26: Cuba is cranking up a new campaign for worker productivity, hoping new rules in April will impose discipline in a work culture where tardiness and absences have long been tolerated and tiny salaries are not always enough to get people to go to work. The official Communist Party Granma devoted its back page to the new regulations, which many workers complain are too strict -- especially for the small salaries they earn. State TV in recent days has aired messages about the need to increase worker discipline. The communist newspaper acknowledged that many workers face additional problems that will make it hard to comply with the new regulations, such as unreliable and crowded public transport and limited hours for child care. Although minimum government salaries were increased significantly in recent years, the current average monthly pay is still just around US\$15. Now, Cuban workers "will have to change their life habits," party official Lina Pedraza told Granma newspaper. Cabinet Secretary Carlos Lage oversaw a meeting by senior Cuban officials last week examining the regulations taking effect on April 1, Granma newspaper said. Parliament speaker Ricardo Alarcon also attended, along with numerous government ministers. Contained in two resolutions, the package of new rules call for workers to arrive at the job on time, work their scheduled hours, and remain at work during their scheduled shifts. Workers are also prohibited from taking any personal payments from third parties for information or any other service. The regulations also call for government offices to stay open longer so Cubans can handle necessary government paperwork such as getting a driver's license or process housing documents without missing work. (*AP*, 26/3/07)

March 27: Cuba and China pledged to build on their rapidly growing trade, ending two days of meetings with a vow to do more in industries like oil, pharmaceuticals, nickel, medical services and tourism. Chinese Deputy Trade Minister Wei Jian Guo and Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas said in Havana that they had set up a commission to work on joint investments in various sectors. "Both parties express their satisfaction with Cuba's complete meeting of all financial obligations," a final declaration at the end of the talks said. According to the statement, the two countries renewed an agreement under which Cuba exports 400,000 tonnes of raw sugar annually to China and ratified Cuban plans to supply the Asian giant with nickel. China pledged to continue financing exports of energy, transportation, telecommunications and other equipment and to expand imports of Cuban goods and services. Cuba has two joint venture pharmaceutical companies in China and a third company providing low-cost eye surgery, with others planned. "Both parties agree to continue encouraging Chinese companies to participate in the petroleum sector of Cuba," the

statement said. Chinese oil and gas company Sinopec Corp. is in a joint venture to extract oil in Cuba 's western Pinar del Rio province, and other companies are considering offshore drilling in Cuba 's Gulf of Mexico waters. The statement said a joint venture hotel in Shanghai would be completed in time for the 2008 Olympics. (*Reuters*, 27/3/07)

March 27: The 7th International Construction Fair (FECONS) started in Havana with the participation of businessmen from seventeen countries around the world. Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela and other nations from Europe and Asia are among the participants to the fair which will run until March 31. However, the number of exhibitors attending the event, one of the most important in the region, could increase during the next few days, members of the organizing committee explained to the press. The fair will cover an area of over 3,250 square meters at Cuba's largest exhibition site, EXPOCUBA. FECONS includes construction technology, formwork systems, woodwork, tools, projects and designs, information technology, protection accessories, equipment and elevators. (*ACN*, 27/3/07)

March 28: Cuba 's Havana Club rum brand sold a record 2.6 million cases last year, fueled by a 30 percent sales surge in the island's domestic market, company officials said. Enrique Noste, Havana Club's director of marketing for Cuba, said the company's rums now rank 34th out of the world's 100 top-selling spirits. He did not provide overall sales figures for 2005, but said the company topped the 2 million-case mark for the first time in 2004, while selling barely 1 million in 1998 and just 460,000 in 1994. Havana Club sells more rum in Cuba than anywhere else. Its sales on the island reached 960,000 cases in 2006 and will top a million this year, said Noste, who said the country's top-selling spirit has long been cheap varieties of white rum. "It's a sector that is very popular with the population," he said. "Undoubtedly, it's a type of drink that has been a big hit with the Cuban people and it's the base of growth for us. We have had growth in other sectors, but it's the strongest." Havana Club brands account for 40 percent of total sales in Cuba 's alcohol market, and Noste credited last year's surge in its popularity on "continued loyalty," as well as dips in domestic sales of other spirits. He also said government efforts to aggressively market and distribute the brand on the island and abroad helped. (*AP*, 28/3/07)

March 29: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said that the island will produce "the sugar we can" during the current sugar harvest. In an interview broadcast by official TV, Lage said that due to "real and objectively adverse" conditions, in the 2006-2007 sugar harvest "we will grind the sugar-cane we can, and produce the sugar we can". Lage explained that this harvest is taking place under "very difficult" conditions due to excessive rain and high temperatures. (*EFECOM*, 29/3/07)

March 29: Ailing Fidel Castro published an article in state media criticizing US environmental policies, emerging from months of silence on political matters during his long recuperation from intestinal surgery in an apparent move to reassert his voice on international issues. The article, signed the day before, was written in the same kind of apocalyptic style Mr. Castro traditionally has used when discussing the impact of US international policies on developing countries. In his article, Mr. Castro quotes extensively from a Washington-dated story by The Associated Press reporting on the meeting between Mr. Bush and US auto makers and their comments about using corn to create ethanol as an alternative to fossil fuels. During that meeting, Mr Castro writes, "the sinister idea of converting food into combustibles was definitively established as the economic line of foreign policy of the United States". The US and Brazil recently signed an agreement to develop biofuels, and their presidents are expected to hold further talks on the matter. The Cuban leader noted that Cuba has also experimented with extracting ethanol from sugarcane. But if rich countries decide to import huge amounts of traditional food crops such as corn from developing countries to help meet their energy needs, it could have disastrous consequences for the world's poor, Mr. Castro wrote. [[Fidel Castro's Editorial in Granma](#)] (*Globe & Mail*, *AP*, 28/3/07)

March 29: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage confirmed Fidel Castro's position disregarding the possibility of using sugar cane lands for the production of ethanol, when local sugar production is experiencing the consequences of climate change. Local official TV interviewed Lage about sugar production. "It is irrational to believe that in this world

where millions starve, and food and water are scarce, ethanol, alcohol, would be produced as energy for transportation”, Lage said. (*AP*, 30/3/07)

March 30: Cuba is going to develop three mining projects with foreign companies as of the second half of 2008, the Cuban press reported. The deposits Matahambre and Mantua, located in Cuba's extreme western parts, are in the stage of building road, communication and energy infrastructure, which will be used for the deposits' development. The projects are related to silver and copper production and to studies of deposits of lead, sulphur and zinc. Cuba's programme includes staff training and was elaborated after a comprehensive environmental impact study. The Matahambre deposit was discovered in 1998, as a result of the association between Canadian company Holmer Gold Mines Limited and the Cuban Geominera SA. Cuba has stopped producing copper since July 2006, when the country closed La Mina Grande de El Cobre mine, located at some 20-km from Santiago de Cuba, which had produced copper since 1530. Previously Cuba closed the open-pit mines Matahambre and Jucaro, in the province Pinar del Rio. Cuba has the world largest nickel reserves and the second largest cobalt reserves. In 2006, Cuba mined 74,000 tonnes of nickel and is expected to mine 76,000 tonnes in 2007. (*AFP, Latin American News Digest*, 30/3/07)

March 30: Brazil has become a haven for developed and developing countries seeking technology for the use of ethanol as a fuel alternative to oil derivatives, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said. His remarks came in response to comments made by Fidel Castro in an article published by Cuban state daily Granma. Amorim stressed that he “respects” the Cuban leader and that he does not think his criticisms were aimed at Brazil, which produces ethanol from sugar cane, while the US uses less energy-efficient corn. “I think everyone is free to express their opinion. But I do not think that was meant against the Brazilian government or Brazil. Our opinion on ethanol is that ethanol’s success has been proved in practice,” he said. “President Fidel Castro is a person who is a respectable and historically important figure,” Amorim said. “He has some ideas that are outdated,” the minister added, saying that he had accompanied a Brazilian delegation to Havana 20 years ago “and at that time Castro was already saying alcohol would never work because sugar was a noble product.” Ethanol is a form of alcohol. “Brazil is open to establish programs with Cuba that could benefit an African country. It could be very good”. “I personally believe that even Cuba would very much benefit from the world ethanol market,” Amorim said. (*DPA, Qatar Times, AP, AFP*, 30/3/07)

March 31: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva blamed barriers to trade in foodstuffs and ethanol for closing off markets and threatening food supplies in the developing world. “The subsidies provided under America's corn-based ethanol program have spurred an increase in US cereal prices of about 80 percent,” Silva wrote in the *Washington Post*. “This hurts meat and soy processors worldwide and threatens global food security.” But he denied recent claims by Cuban leader Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez that ramping up sugarcane production to produce ethanol in Brazil and the rest of Latin America could hurt the poor. “The spread of sugar cane, soy and other oleaginous crops for biofuels will ensure that needy farming families have the financial means to feed themselves,” Silva wrote. (*The Washington Post*, 31/3/07)

Exile Community

March 1: US President George W. Bush mourned the recent death of Mario Chanes de Armas, who was at Fidel Castro's side in the Cuban revolution and later spent decades as a political prisoner in the leader's jails. “Cuban patriot Mario Chanes de Armas was a political prisoner of the Castro regime for 30 years, one of the longest sentences of any political prisoner in the world,” Bush said in a statement. “Like so many Cubans, he sought a democratic Cuban society only to see his quest betrayed by a Castro dictatorship.” “Mario Chanes was one of the original plantados, Cuban political prisoners who were unyielding in their fervent desire for a free Cuba,” Bush said. “His patriotism and

strong sense of purpose are examples to all freedom-loving people. Laura joins me in sending our thoughts and prayers to his family and friends." (*The Guardian*, 2/3/07)

March 6: The executive director of the "Cuba Archive" project, Maria Werlau, presented in Madrid the first entries of a database aimed at documenting the numerous casualties of Cuba's revolutionary process since 1959, which - she argues - tally up to 8,190 cases. During a press conference in Spain, Werlau, accompanied by Antonio Guedes, president of the Ibero-American Association for Liberty, announced the "Cuba Archive" project and urged the media "to break the silence in the name of the Cuban victims." (*EFE*, 7/3/07)

March 8: Agustín Tamargo, the gravelly voiced, fast-talking Spanish-language commentator known for his passionate and insightful analyses of local politics, Cuba and Fidel Castro, died. "Cuba died last night," Eduardo González Rubio, a radio colleague, said. Tamargo was 82. He never realized his dream to return to Cuba, "open a little schoolhouse and just teach," as one listener remarked on Radio Mambi 710-AM, where Tamargo had his own show for more than two decades. Tamargo fought throat cancer for several years. He recently fell ill for the sixth time with pneumonia and died of a heart attack at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach. Cuban American National Foundation President Francisco "Pepe" Hernández called Tamargo's death "an irreparable loss (...) at this historic crossroads that we find ourselves when we really needed a figure like him that represented honesty and integrity." A respected journalist in Cuba, Tamargo wrote for the weekly Bohemia magazine before he left in 1960 to escape what he called "the scourge of communism." When Castro began to strangle civil liberties, Tamargo balked. "You don't want journalists, what you need is record players," Tamargo wrote in a column before he left Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 9/3/07)

March 19: People chuckled when presidential candidate Mitt Romney, a Mormon raised in Michigan and elected in Massachusetts, bungled the names of Cuban-American politicians during a recent speech in Miami. But when he mistakenly associated Fidel Castro's trademark speech-ending slogan - "Patria o muerte, venceremos" -- with a free Cuba, listeners didn't laugh. They winced. Castro has closed his speeches with the phrase -- in English, "Fatherland or death, we shall overcome" -- for decades. "Clearly, that's something he was ill-advised on or didn't do his homework on," said Hialeah City Council President Esteban Bovo. "When you get cute with slogans, you get yourself into a trap." Romney's fumble demonstrates the potential snags for state and national politicians trying to navigate the Cuban-American community of South Florida. (*AP*, 19/3/07)

March 21: Republican presidential candidate John McCain warned against the spread of socialism in Latin America and pledged to give the region renewed US attention if elected. Appearing in Little Havana, McCain carefully avoided criticism of President Bush but said the Iraq war "has diverted attention from our hemisphere, and we have paid a penalty for that" in the form of a growing leftism embodied by leaders Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. In a speech to veterans of the ill-fated, CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, the Arizona senator said that "everyone should understand the connections" between Chavez, Morales and communist Cuban President Fidel Castro. "They inspire each other. They assist each other. They get ideas from each other," McCain said. "It's very disturbing." McCain had a clearly receptive audience among the Bay of Pigs veterans, who consider him a hero for the years he spent as a prisoner of war in what was then communist North Vietnam. The group's president, former CIA agent Felix Rodriguez, noted McCain's years in captivity in his introduction and said: "It's a distinct honor to have you." McCain was presented with a copy of the book "Against All Hope" by former Cuban political prisoner Armando Valladares, who was frequently tortured during his 22 years in a Cuban prison. McCain said that while he was in Hanoi, a Cuban agent came to show his Vietnamese captors "some new interrogation techniques," and he later discovered that the same agent had tortured Valladares. "Anything that I and my friends might have experienced is nothing -- nothing -- compared with what the men in this room went through," McCain said. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/07)

March 22: On an October night outside the Bolivian city of Vallegrande, Gustavo Villoldo says he secretly buried the body of iconic revolutionary leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara along with two fellow rebels. The year was 1967. That

night, he says he snipped a lock of Che's hair and scribbled down the exact geographical coordinates before dropping the bodies into a common grave. Now, Villoldo -- a Miami Cuban exile hired 40 years ago through the CIA to hunt down Che -- has come forward for the first time with his evidence to claim that Che's remains may still be in Bolivian soil and not in a Cuban mausoleum, his official grave site -- as Fidel Castro claims. He contends that hundreds of thousands who make pilgrimages yearly to Che's tomb in Santa Clara are being hoodwinked by the Cuban government. Villoldo said he's one of only four men who were present when Che's body was buried and is positive that he is the only one who knows the grave site's coordinates -- and can settle the matter once and for all. Villoldo says he's not coming forward for money but wants the truth known about Che's remains. Cuban officials have not commented, but Bolivian government officials and Argentine scientists who took part in the dig have been on the defensive. Villoldo knows his story may spark anger from Che lovers and haters alike. But he wants Che's family to know where their loved one is buried. "I will give them the coordinates, but only to them, not Castro," he said. "It's only right, I think." (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/07)

March 24: A small crowd of mostly Cuban exiles gathered on a sidewalk on Flagler Street to express frustration with the Bush administration's restrictions on traveling to the communist island to visit family. The protest is part of a stepped-up effort to ease the restrictions after federal lawmakers in Washington filed legislation that would allow Cuban-Americans to visit the island at will and lift a general Cuba travel ban for all American citizens. Demonstrators carried signs and chanted slogans against the rules that limit family visits to once every three years, with no humanitarian exceptions for family emergencies. The measures also do not include aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins on the list that qualifies as family. One of the groups involved in organizing the demonstration, the Association of Christian Women in Defense of the Family, said in a statement that "now, more than ever, is the time to act" because Congress is considering bills to ease travel restrictions. (*The Miami Herald*, 24/3/07)

March 31: The US travel ban to Cuba incites passions at both ends of South Florida's political spectrum. But having US Representative Jeff Flake, who hard-line exiles consider an adversary, sitting on a stage in the heart of Little Havana marked a first. Flake, a libertarian Republican from Arizona who has traveled to Cuba four times and has pushed Congress for years to end the travel ban, took part in a debate over the travel ban at the Tower Theater. He sought to make a case that banning travel to the communist island is counterproductive and against America's democratic ideals. Florida International University professor and Cuba scholar Lisandro Pérez echoed the argument, asking what had four decades of a trade embargo accomplished. Two prominent Cuban Americans -- radio host and University of Miami professor Paul Crespo and Hialeah City Council President Esteban Bovo -- countered that opening Cuba to American tourists and allowing Cuban Americans to visit family on the island more often than once every three years would only strengthen Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl's control. The debate, hosted by the American Civil Liberties Union, foreshadowed what could be a battle in the Democrat-controlled Congress over proposed legislation to ease restrictions. (*The Miami Herald*, 1/4/07)

Foreign Affairs

March 2: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque arrived in Panama for an official visit, heading a delegation to the first consultation meeting of the two countries' foreign ministries. The Cuban delegation is also scheduled to attend the third Cuba-Panama joint commission, where representatives from the two countries will discuss cooperation in three areas: education and culture, science and technology and health. During his stay in Panama, Perez Roque and his hosts are expected to sign several agreements including one on cooperation on penal matters and another on a mutual recognition of university degrees. Cuba's Foreign Minister will open in Panama an ophthalmologic centre, donated by Havana, to offer free eye surgery for low-income Panamanian patients. Located in the province of Veraguas, west of this capital, the opening ceremony will be attended by the Cuban minister and the country's President Martin Torrijos,

as well as members of his government. Over 5,000 Panamanians have received ophthalmologic surgery free of charge in Cuba, as part of the "Operation Miracle" that has benefited tens of thousands of Latin Americans and Caribbean. (ACN, *Prensa Latina*, 2/3/07)

March 2: The Comisión Médica Negociadora Nacional (National Medical Negotiating Commission), COMENENAL, Panama's foremost doctors' organization, took advantage of the visit of Cuba's foreign minister to express their opposition to the hiring of 20 Cuban ophthalmologists who would work in poor communities. The COMENENAL, which maintains not to oppose Cuba's "humanitarian assistance," declared that Cuban doctors' practice in Panama constitutes "an illegal exercise of the profession." (AFP, 2/3/07)

March 2: Denzil Douglas, prime minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, began an official visit to Cuba to broaden cooperation ties between both Caribbean nations. His agenda includes collaboration meetings with Cuban officials in areas of agriculture and human resources, the press secretary of the prime minister informed. During his two-day visit, Douglas will meet with nursing students and other fields of study at Havana education centers. The prime minister just concluded a visit to Venezuela where he met with President Hugo Chavez to analyze aid received from Caracas in the development of tourism and financial services. (*Prensa Latina, Granma*, 2/3/07)

March 3: Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, said he prefers "constructive relations" with all Latin American countries, "including Cuba and Venezuela" during a press conference at the closing of the 19th Summit of the Rio Group. (EFE, 3/3/07)

March 3: Cuban candidate Reynaldo Gonzalez lost his bid for the presidency of the International Baseball Federation, the worldwide governing body for the sport, when he was defeated by a two-to-one margin at a delegates meeting in Beijing. Gonzalez, the Communist-ruled island's former sports minister and the candidate of choice for not only the Cuban authorities but several Latin American baseball federations, lost by a vote of 58-29 to US former Air Force General Harvey Schiller. (EFE, 3/3/07)

March 3: The Rio Group summit, attended by only eight Latin American presidents, debated whether to admit Cuba to this club of 19 countries of the region, before ending the meeting. Dominican President Leonel Fernandez, whose country chairs the group for the next year, said the group must identify cooperation projects. "Strengthening the group will depend on its ability to work together," he said. Bachelet, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Mexican President Felipe Calderon met privately to address the group's future. They also discussed the possibility of admitting Cuba, said Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim. "There is no reason to isolate Cuba, so long as we keep in mind that we are defenders of democracy," a fundamental principle of the Group of Rio, he said. Cuba, as the only communist country in the hemisphere, is suspended from the Organization of American States. (AFP, 4/3/07)

March 3: Ten Spanish university students are in hospital in Cuba, after their coach was involved in a pile-up near the island's main tourist resort of Varadero. Two of the five seriously injured had emergency surgery, and are now reported to be out of danger. The accident happened 150 kms from the Cuban capital of Havana, when a van crashed into the lorry which was travelling behind the students' vehicle. The group of 80 is studying at the Environmental Studies Faculty in the UAM, the Autonomous University of Madrid, and are all aged between 20 and 22. (*Typically Spanish*, 4/3/07)

March 4: Visiting representative of Havana University and chairman of the Iranian parliament's Training and Research Commission in a meeting in Tehran explored avenues for cooperation between the two countries' scientific and research centers. A statement released by the Information and Media Department of the Islamic Consultative Assembly said that during the meeting, the two sides stressed the need for cultural exchanges and increased educational and research cooperation between the two countries' scientific centers, given the cordial and developing ties between Iran and Cuba. (*FARS News*, 4/3/07)

March 4: Cuba's interim president, Raul Castro, met with the prime minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, Denzil Douglas, and the two leaders discussed mutual links and matters of international interest, Cuban media reported. The official discussions were held at the Palace of the Revolution, the seat of Cuba's government, after Fidel Castro's younger brother welcomed Douglas to the communist island. Also present at the meeting were Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and interim Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, among other Cuban officials. (*EFE*, 4/3/07)

March 5: Solomon's foreign minister is in Cuba to finalise hiring of Cuban doctors. The Sogavare-led government will sign a deal with Cuba to recruit Cuban doctors into the Solomon Islands. Solomon Islands is currently facing an acute doctor shortage. Foreign Affairs Minister Patterson Oti will meet his counterpart in Havana to sign a technical cooperation framework, which will form part of the doctor recruitment exercise. Under the deal, 40 Cuban doctors will be recruited to serve at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara and also in provincial hospitals. (*The Voice of New Zealand*, 6/3/07)

March 6: Spanish secretary of state for Ibero-America, Trinidad Jiménez, said that Spain does not want the European Union to introduce any change when the common position on Cuba is revised in June, and supported the validity of resuming a dialogue with Cuban authorities. (*Europa Press*, 6/3/07)

March 6: Health workers from France, Argentina, Brazil and Cuba have joined their Paraguayan counterparts in battling an outbreak of dengue that has claimed 10 lives this year, Health Minister Oscar Martínez said. Martínez said 16,200 people in Paraguay have been infected with the mosquito-borne disease since January 1, up from 15,000 cases a week earlier. "The specialists from these friendly nations are going to help us in the fight against this disease," Martínez told a news conference. He did not say how many outside health workers had arrived. (*AP*, 6/3/07)

March 6: A group of North American labor, community, and academic activists are sponsoring the first annual Global Solidarity School in Havana, Cuba, from May 6 to May 11, 2007. Participants will have the opportunity to share ideas, experiences, and strategies with leading Cuban activist educators and international cultural experts. The idea is to bring together people seeking to build a better world. Morning classes on subjects like the Spanish language, international relations, economics, the environment, and salsa dancing will be taught at Havana University. There will be guided afternoon tours to historic sites, artist's studios, museums, Afrocuban enclaves, and contemporary cultural centers. In the evening, Solidarity School participants will visit Cuba's best jazz clubs, an Afrocuban dance performance, and cabaret performances. (*XTVWorld.Com*, 6/3/07)

March 6: Cuba emphasized that the highest priority for the 186-member Non Aligned Movement is nuclear disarmament, historically defended by the organization. Cuban delegate Respel Pino recalled to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva that this position was reiterated during September's NAM meeting in Havana. He considered it contradictory for some states to pressure the international community for horizontal non-proliferation, while ignoring nuclear disarmament. "The only safe and effective way to avoid proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is by their complete withdrawal," he stressed. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/3/07)

March 6: Cuba and Saint Kitts and Nevis have fostered more ties of cooperation, Prime Minister Denzil Douglas said at the conclusion of a successful and useful official visit to Cuba. Douglas, who traveled to Havana five days ago at the government's invitation, told *Prensa Latina* in an exclusive that his country's authorities' wish to broaden bilateral cooperation in several fields. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/3/07)

March 7: Venezuela, Cuba and Iran are studying how to add Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua to their three-way alliance, visiting Venezuelan Minister of Mining and Basic Industries Jose Khan said in Teheran. At the fourth Venezuela-Iran joint meeting, Venezuela and Iran are set to sign another 20 new agreements, adding to the 152 conventions the two nations have already signed, Khan was quoted by Venezuela's official Bolivarian News Agency. The joint meeting, which began on March 6, drew over 100 delegates from the two countries to discuss the

environment, agriculture, energy, petrol, communication, infrastructure, housing, industry and the economy. The two countries now have 27 agreements on agriculture, 26 on energy and petroleum, 22 on economic collaboration, nine on investment, nine on transport. The remaining accords cover trade, construction, tourism, science and technology, education, mining and health. (*Xinhua*, 7/3/07)

March 7: In 2006, 30 Cuban doctors deserted a cooperation program in Bolivia, before the US administration announced that any Cuban medical professional sent abroad was eligible for political asylum, probably to pursue private practice in the region. Their departure from the mission after less than six months was an embarrassment for Havana and the allied government of leftist President Evo Morales. In 2004, 10 physicians working in South Africa refused to go back home. But the desertion rate among the estimated 26,000 Cubans in Venezuela may be the highest of any mission. In the Maracaibo area alone, at least 100 of the 500 doctors sent since the mission began in 2003 have fled, a Cuban doctor who crossed the Colombian border said. Now they're holed up in Colombia, unable to work, while US authorities mull whether to accept them as political refugees. (*The New York Times*, 8/3/07)

March 8: A delegation headed by Julio Martínez Ramírez, first secretary of the national bureau of the Young Communists League (UJC), began an official visit to Iran on March 5th. The delegation met with several high-ranking Iranians officials. The Cuban group included: Buenaventura Reyes, vice-president of ICAP; Ernesto Corvo, member of the national bureau of the UJC; Patricia Flechilla, president of FEEM; and Antonio Guerrero, son of one of the five prisoners in the USA. (*Juventud Rebelde*, 9/3/07)

March 9: The General Secretary of Vietnam's Communist Party Nong Duc Manh said that the government, party and people of his country are resolved to continuously increase cooperation and friendship with Cuba, the Vietnamese News Agency reported. Nong Duc Manh made his statement in Hanoi during talks with the Head of the International Affairs Department of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee Fernando Ramirez de Estenez, who is visiting that Asian nation. (*AIN*, 9/3/07)

March 11: Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque will visit several European countries, Bulgarian Diario Digital reported. Roque will visit France, Switzerland, Italy, the Vatican and Portugal. In Geneva he will take part in the UN Council on Human Rights. (*FOCUS News Agency*, 11/3/07)

March 11: Authorities in Grenada are investigating whether recent attacks on the Cuban ambassador and the Italian consul are related, police said. Ambassador Maria Delgado Valdes was sprayed with mace and received minor injuries when an unknown assailant or assailants broke into her home in St. George's on March 10. Her 62-year-old husband, Isaac Saavedra Valdes, was rushed to a hospital where he underwent surgery, police said. Police do not have a motive for the attack, which was the second on a diplomat in less than a week. The Italian consul, Vittoria Bertoletti, was injured after an unknown number of people broke into her home in the capital March 4 and stole items from the residence, said police spokesman Troy Garvey. (*AP*, 12/3/07)

March 12: Marylisa Boni, president of Kristal International Centre Inc., condemned the US hostility against Cuba at the beginning of her visit to the island. Canadian solidarity with Cuba grows every day, the visitor told Prensa Latina. "We have been working with Cuba for 23 years and there is a great desire to increase cooperation with the island," the executive said. Collaboration has included the donation of products for schools, hospitals and scientific centres. (*Granma*, 12/3/07)

March 12: Convalescing Fidel Castro is gradually getting back to work on matters of state and took part by telephone in a presidential meeting in Haiti this week, officials said. The 80-year-old revolutionary has not appeared in public since emergency surgery forced him to hand over power to his brother Raul in July, but his aides say he is growing stronger by the day and using the telephone a lot. Castro called four times to speak to Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Rene Preval of Haiti during their meeting in Port au Prince to discuss Venezuelan and Cuban aid to the

hemisphere's poorest country. "Fidel also took part in that meeting by telephone. He was very keen to make sure the trilateral cooperation succeeds," Preval said at a news conference. At the meeting, also attended by Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo, Chavez announced \$21 million in Venezuelan funding to extend medical programs carried out by Cuban doctors in remote rural areas in Haiti. (*Reuters*, 13/3/07)

March 12: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque assured that southern countries are victims of an absurd and cruel international order that impedes development, peace and progress. Perez Roque talked on behalf of the Non-Aligned Countries Movement (NAM), currently presided over by Cuba, at the UN Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) in Paris. He said that Europe, United States and Japan generate over 80 percent of all scientific publications and more than 90 percent of patents and 72 percent of international scientists live and work in industrialized countries. He also mentioned "brain drain," explaining how from Latin America and the Caribbean, there are 1.2 million professionals working in United States and other developed countries. (*Prensa Latina*, 12/3/07)

March 12: Cuba "is watching and waiting" to see if the new policy towards the island announced by the president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, "translates into action," said Cuban foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, in Paris. Pérez Roque emphasized that the new Mexican government has said that "it wants to change the path" taken by the previous president towards Cuba. "We are watching and waiting to see if that translates into action" said Pérez Roque. (*Milenio*, 13/3/07)

March 12: Ambassador of Cuba to Pakistan, Gustavo Machin Gomez said the contributions made by Cuba in terms of medical aid to the victims of the earthquake of 2005, in Pakistan's northern areas has made the bonds between the two countries stronger. He was speaking at an Interactive Session with him on the "Pakistan - Cuba relationship in the New Millennium" hosted by the Karachi Council on Foreign Relations, Economics Affairs and Law. Responding to a call by Pakistan for relief operations in quake-hit areas, Cuba had sent medical teams immediately, comprising some 2500 doctors and relief workers, who remained active in relief activities in the quake-hit areas for seven months. Cuban Ambassador said last year his country also offered a total 1000 free medical education scholarships to Pakistani students. (*APP*, 12/3/07)

March 13: Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodriguez and his record company "Multimusica" are being sued by two Chilean lawyers for having allegedly broken the Consumer Law. The Cuban musician pointed out that he decided to cancel a concert in the city of Talca, Chile, after hearing about the elevated price of the tickets -between 80 and 110 dollars. In a communiqué published by his production company, Rodriguez apologized to the people who had bought the 1,030 tickets to the concert for the inconveniences his decision might have caused. (*ACN*, 13/3/07)

March 14: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque met in Berne, the Swiss capital, with Micheline Calmy-Rey, president of the Swiss Confederation. The meeting is due to conclude the extensive working agenda fulfilled by the island's foreign minister, who attended in Geneva the top-level segment of the 4th UN Human Rights Council sessions. During his stay in this city, in addition to addressing the Council's plenary session, Perez Roque held several meetings with figures and chiefs of delegations attending the event. The Cuban official met with Nicaragua's Foreign Minister Samuel Santos, Malaysia's Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Iran's Manouchehr Mottaki, Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Raymond Johansen and Cyprus Alexandros Zenon, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour. (*Prensa Latina*, 14/3/07)

March 14: Cuban citizen Blanca González Arias said that she petitioned the government of Costa Rica for a humanitarian visa for her son, journalist Normando Hernández, who suffers from tuberculosis in Cuba and has been imprisoned since the 2003 crackdown against dissidents. González, a refugee in the United States, met with some members of the Costa Rican Legislative Assembly who support her plea. (*Cubamet*, 15/3/07)

March 14: Cuba and Venezuela created a USD 1 billion fund "to help Haiti," with resources devoted to purchase equipment, build dwellings and provide assistance to the Cuban doctors to be deployed in Haiti, said the Venezuelan People's Power Ministry of Communication and Information (Minci) on its website. In a joint news conference with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Haitian President Rene Preval announced that they initialed a number of cooperation agreements during a tripartite meeting with Cuban State Council Vice-President Esteban Lazo, including the instrument creating the USD 1 billion fund. "In short time, with Cuban help and cooperation, integral healthcare will be provided in all Haitian communities. Further, we have a group of Haitians taking medicine studies in Cuba. They are to replace Cuban doctors. Besides, Venezuela has provided USD 20 million in humanitarian aid to help shore up this cooperation initiative in the healthcare area," Preval explained. (*El Universal*, 14/3/07)

March 14: The Committee to Protect Journalists sent a letter to Cuban interim president Raul Castro demanding respect for free expression and the "immediately release all reporters, writers, and editors" imprisoned in Cuba. According to the CPJ letter, journalists who were ill before being jailed in 2003 during the crackdown on dissidents "have seen their health worsen in prison, while others who were in good health have developed illnesses. Some have additionally developed alarming mental health problems". The CPJ also expressed concern for the recent imprisonment of journalists Armando Betancourt Reina, a Camagüey-based reporter for Nueva Prensa Cubana, Guillermo Espinosa Rodríguez, who "was sentenced to two years of home confinement on charges of 'social dangerousness', and forbidden from practicing independent journalism". "He had been covering an outbreak of dengue fever", the letter added. [[CPJ urges acting president of Cuba to immediately release all jailed journalists](#)]. (*EER*, 15/3/07)

March 15: Nearly 56 low-income Nicaraguans with eye afflictions traveled to Havana to receive ophthalmologic surgery, as part of the Operation Miracle solidarity program boosted by Cuba and Venezuela. Reverend Sixto Ulloa, coordinator of the project the Democratic Mayors Association sponsors in Nicaragua, said that since the Central American nation started to receive the benefits of the program in June, about 1,665 Nicaraguans have received free eye surgery in the Caribbean island and 635 have been operated in Venezuela. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/3/07)

March 15: Italy's foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, asked Cuban foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba, according to a communiqué from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The meeting, requested by the Cuban minister, served "to resume, after four years, and in compliance with the European Union's common position on Cuba, the political dialogue with Havana." (*AP*, 15/3/07)

March 15: Cuban foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, met for half an hour with the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Tarciso Bertone, according to sources from the Holy See. (*EFE*, 15/3/07)

March 15: About 100 demonstrators demanded freedom outside the Cuban embassy in Prague for the dissidents who are imprisoned in Cuba. The rally, staged by the People in Need group, will continue at Prague's Wenceslas Square. A symbolical prison cell will be constructed there in which it will be possible to "serve" a part of the sentence of one of the Cuban political prisoners. The demonstration began with Cuban melodies and whistles. The crowd was addressed by former Czech dissident and interior minister Jan Ruml and dissident and sociologist Jirina Siklova. "There is the saying that hope is the last to die, but I hope that Fidel Castro will die sooner than the hope," Siklova said. There was no incident at the demonstration, to which the ambassadorial staff did not react in any way. (*CTK*, 15/3/07)

March 15: Four years after the March 2003 crackdown, Cuba still has 270 prisoners of conscience including 25 journalists, which makes the island the world's second biggest prisoner for the press after China, Reporters Without Borders said, after staging a protest at Cuba's stand in the international tourism fair in Paris. The international journalist watchdog said "the human rights situation has shown no improvement since Fidel Castro officially transferred power to his brother Raúl on 31 July of last year." [[Spring Just as Sombre for Independent Press](#)] (*Canadian Press, RWB Press Release*, 15/3/07)

March 16: Italian Deputy Premier and Minister for Foreign Affairs Massimo D'Alema received Cuban foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque yesterday at the foreign ministry in Rome. The meeting took place at the request of Perez Roque himself, falling within the scope of the Cuban minister's visit to Europe, which brought him first to Geneva to participate in the Council on Human Rights and which will later take him to Lisbon and Madrid. Their meeting offered an opportunity to reactivate Italy's political dialogue with Havana after four years, in full respect of the Common European Union Position on Cuba. It was also an occasion on which to review the status of and prospects for bilateral relations in economic and cultural spheres. More generally, Italy introduced the issue of human rights and basic freedoms, in the context of the hoped for improvement, given the appropriate conditions, of relations between the European Union and the government of Cuba. Minister Perez Roque met earlier on with Undersecretary Di Santo, with whom he had an exchange of views on specific bilateral topics and several international issues. (*Turkish Weekly*, 17/3/07)

March 16: Cuba's Council of State has appointed Luis Hernandez Ojeda as new extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador to the Republic of Nicaragua, *Granma* newspaper reported. Before his appointment, Hernandez was an official from the Department of International Relations at the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/3/07)

March 17: The Ladies in White asked King Juan Carlos, of Spain, and France's prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, to intercede in favour of the 59 dissidents who have been imprisoned since 2003. The Ladies in White highlighted the "historical role played" by King Juan Carlos in "Spain's peaceful transition towards democracy and observance of human rights." The letters sent to both Dominique de Villepin and the King of Spain were announced at the start of a series of activities in commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the arrest of 75 dissidents in 2003. (*AFP*, 17/3/07)

March 18: Fidel Castro will return to Cuba's presidency on April 28, eight months after stepping aside temporarily following an operation, Bolivia's leader Evo Morales has been quoted in media reports. According to Morales, Castro, 80, will resume official functions on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA, a regional cooperation mechanism joining Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia. The date also marks the first anniversary of Bolivia's signing on in Havana to the "Peoples' Trade Agreement" to implement the ALBA principles. The commemoration of the two events "will be the occasion to attend the return of our brother Fidel to Cuba's presidency. The presidents of six countries will participate," said Morales, according to the newspaper reports. Morales did not explain how he knew of Castro's planned return. Last October the Bolivian president declared that Castro, who ceded power to his brother Raul last July 31 after he underwent intestinal surgery, would be back in his job in "two or three weeks." (*Hindustan Times*, 19/3/07)

March 18: Haitian president René Préval travelled to Cuba after visiting the Dominican Republic. Préval will undergo medical treatment for prostate cancer. (*EFE*, 18/3/07)

March 19: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque described his recent European tour as fruitful and noted that he was able to corroborate the existence of a large movement of solidarity with the people of Cuba and their Socialist Revolution. Upon his arrival in Havana, Perez Roque told Radio Rebelde that his trip met its goals, which included the reactivation of the work of the Non-Aligned Movement, currently chaired by Cuba, at the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO. Perez Roque also referred to his talks with other foreign ministers and heads of delegations and described his exchange with Italian, Portuguese and Spanish authorities as useful, despite their different viewpoints. The Cuban foreign minister indicated that relations with the European Union "have remained cool and paralysed for the last few years, since they hit bottom in 2003." (*ACN, EFE*, 19/3/07)

March 19: There has been "significant deterioration" in terms of freedom of the press in the Americas since last October, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) reported. "Outstanding cases were those of Cuba and

Venezuela," the IAPA found in relation to freedom of expression. The findings came in a paper drafted by the IAPA's Commission for Information and Press Freedom based on country reports. The document was approved following a thorough debate where corrections, changes and additions were made to the initial proposal. (*El Universal*, 20/3/07)

March 20: Cuba is leading a bid by a number of countries to strip the Human Rights Council of its power to investigate and condemn violations, a move some activists warn could jeopardize the whole UN's credibility. The 47 member states of the new UN watchdog, set up last year to replace its largely-discredited predecessor, are quietly negotiating a package of measures which will define its role. At stake is the fate of "special procedures" -- independent investigators appointed to report on countries where abuses are suspected. The former Secretary-General Kofi Annan described these rapporteurs as the "crown jewels" of the UN human rights machinery. "Our fear is that some governments are trying to sell the crown jewels, trying to undermine the independence of special procedures," Irene Khan, secretary-general of Amnesty International, told reporters in Geneva. Cuba -- which has never allowed a visit by the special rapporteur on Cuba, Christine Chanet -- is leading the charge to dismantle country investigators. Cuba and its allies argue that countries should submit their own reports on their domestic records and that there is no need for intrusive rapporteurs. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque warned against turning the Council "into an Inquisition tribunal." "The perpetuation of country-specific mandates, imposed by force and blackmail, would maintain the spiraling confrontation that did away with the authority and credibility of the defunct Commission on Human Rights," he said in a speech. (*Reuters*, 20/3/07)

March 21: Cuba's official daily Granma said that the city of Madrid has become the "European Miami", and accused the Spanish capital's government of financing and providing refuge to Castro's enemies. "The weakened and discredited counterrevolution of Cuban origin has found a breeding ground in the Spanish capital, where the autonomous government headed by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) is funding, subsidizing and fomenting aggressions of all kind against the island's Revolution", Granma said. According to Granma, "although the groups of Cubans based in Madrid are scarce, divided, and do not have the support of the Spanish people", they are supported by well-known "anti Cuban media". (*Reuters*, 22/3/07)

March 21: A diplomatic crisis developed between Sweden and Cuba after it was discovered that Cuban officials had opened a Swedish diplomatic post. The Cuban ambassador has been called to the foreign ministry. The Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, has also accused a Cuban delegate to the UN of "using unacceptable language". The row began when Foreign Minister Carl Bildt gave a speech to the UN Human Rights Council, in which he criticized Cuba's human rights record. Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios, Cuba's delegate to the Human Rights Council, is quoted as having said that "Cuba, unlike Sweden, does not persecute migrants or carry out ethnic cleansing that only allows those whose skin and hair color fit with the racial patterns of former Viking conquerors to remain in the country". "It is completely unacceptable language," Bildt said. The foreign ministry called in Cuba's ambassador in Stockholm to explain the comments and apologize on his country's behalf. Some time later the foreign ministry discovered that its diplomatic post had been opened by the Cubans. "The Cuban ambassador is going to be called in again," he said. "When we put forward the view that respect for human freedoms and rights were lacking in Cuba, it led to a furious outburst from the Cuban ambassador about Sweden's blood, colonialism, imperialism, Vikings and oppression and so on and so forth. We have said that this is an unacceptable use of language," said Bildt. The Swedish Minister conceded that the situation was now so serious that it could be designated a diplomatic crisis. "We have had one case where diplomatic sacks were opened. That is serious. There are international conventions about this sort of thing, so we are going to take that up too," said Bildt. Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios has accused Bildt of hypocrisy after the foreign minister failed to mention the Guantanamo base in Cuba or the American-led war in Iraq during his speech on human rights. (*The Local*, 21/3/07)

March 21: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that Nicaragua will unlimitedly support Cuba in all international forums, including the Human Rights Council, and against the US embargo at the UN General Assembly. "Now we are sure that Nicaragua will vote to raise the blockade to Cuba and respect the Cubans' human rights," said Ortega after

welcoming the island's new ambassador to Managua Luis Hernandez. Ortega said that during the last 16 years, Nicaragua became an ally of the US in the former Human Rights Commission in Geneva. The Sandinista leader ensured, however, that these links between Cuba and Nicaragua will be strengthened, as nations which are members of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/07)

March 22: Cuba will set up three eye clinics in Nicaragua to operate free-of-charge on cataract patients, announced Luis Hernandez, the new Cuban ambassador. The diplomat, who presented President Daniel Ortega his credentials, said that in the coming days the first four Cuban doctors would install the first clinic on the outskirts of Managua, the capital. Hernandez said the other two clinics —each with the capacity to operate on 80 patients a day— are slated for Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields, capitals of the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions. A strengthened relation between Cuba and Nicaragua also includes Cuban collaboration on eradicating illiteracy with the Yo Si Puedo (Yes I Can) method, added Hernandez. Cuba is also providing technical assistance to the Central American nation to install electric generating plants supplied by Venezuela under the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which promotes solidarity, social development and mutually beneficial trade. (*Granma*, 22/3/07)

March 22: Sweden's foreign minister is standing by his criticism of Cuba's human rights record, as a diplomatic row between the two countries shows no sign of abating. Cuba responded to Carl Bildt's comments at the UN by deriding what it called Sweden's imperial past. Mr Bildt has hit back describing Havana's response as "a desperate attack by a desperate regime". He also told the press that diplomatic mail at the Swedish embassy in Havana was being tampered with. "Whether it is linked to this [row] we don't know, but it happened at roughly the same time," he told the Europe Today programme. The row dates back to 12 March, when Mr Bildt gave a speech before the UN Human Rights Council in which he accused Cuba and other countries of violating human rights. Following the address, the Cuban representative, Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios, accused Sweden of hypocrisy. He said Mr Bildt's comments recalled "the not-so-glorious days of Swedish imperialism, which filled with blood and pain their neighbouring countries". Bildt rejected Cuban accusations saying that "the Viking days are gone", and that Sweden was "one of the most open countries in Europe in terms of immigration". A report from Cuban authorities was still pending concerning Swedish concerns that a Swedish diplomatic mail pouch had been opened in Cuba, which would be a breach of diplomatic conventions. (*BBC, Monsters and Critics, The Local*, 22/3/07)

March 22: More than fifty Cuban and Venezuelan writers started their 2nd meeting in Caracas, focusing debates on integration and Socialism as a cultural construction. During the gathering, the ministers of Culture, Abel Prieto from Cuba and Francisco Sesto from Venezuela, highlighted the importance of the recently-created ALBA Cultural Fund for the objectives of cultural emancipation. The president of Venezuela's National Book Center, Ramon Mederos, described the ALBA Fund as a means of great political, strategic importance to consolidate integration through culture. According to figures released during the meeting, the fund, which was created as a business entity by Presidents Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez on February 3, 2006, has published a dozen titles and more than 300,000 copies of books so far. The presence of writers from Bolivia and Ecuador in this two-day gathering opened in Caracas today has turned it into a large Latin American and Caribbean event. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/3/07)

March 22: Cuban Minister of Communications and Computer Sciences Ramiro Valdes Menendez arrived in the People's Republic of China. The Cuban minister, who is also a member of the State Council, has a full working agenda in China, a country with growing relations and exchange with Cuba. Valdes is scheduled to meet with the Chinese Minister of the Information Industry Wang Xudong, the minister of the State Radio, TV and Film Administration, Wang Taihua, and other high level officials. (*Granma*, 23/3/07)

March 23: Writers from Cuba and Venezuela agreed Friday to establish a network of Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) cultural houses in different Latin American countries. Cuba's Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, a novelist himself, said the idea of the cultural houses is for them to be centers to promote book publishing, music and filmmaking and be accessible to the majority of the population. The decision to establish cultural houses throughout the

region came at the 2nd Gathering of Cuban and Venezuelan Authors, which concluded in Caracas. Another initiative coming out of the meeting was the idea of a joint publication with contributions from several Latin American countries with distribution throughout the continent and also in Europe. (*Granma*, 26/3/07)

March 23: The Swedish ambassador to Cuba, Christer Elm, met with Cuban foreign affairs authorities who summoned him to discuss the strain on bilateral relations unleashed by an exchange of accusations between high ranking officials from both countries. "I can't discuss what they talked about, it is a political issue," the second secretary of the Swedish Embassy in Cuba, Peter Svensson, told the press. (*AFP*, 23/3/07)

March 25: A ring operating on the Caribbean coast of Honduras is smuggling Cubans and Chinese into the United States with the assistance of some local mayors, the press reported, citing Immigration Service chief German Espinal. Espinal told Honduran media that people traffickers were charging \$55,000 to Chinese and \$22,000 to Cuban nationals who wanted to get into the United States. The Bay Islands are the center of the people-trafficking business, the immigration chief said, without revealing the names of the mayors involved in the illicit industry. "A group of boat owners in the Bay Islands pick up Cuban rafters off the coast of Cuba, and for \$22,000 they are taken to a transit country, like Honduras, to get them closer to the United States," Espinal said. Groups of Cuban rafters, as the migrants who attempt to leave the island on small, usually homemade vessels are known, have been sailing to the Caribbean coast of Honduras, with more than 350 arriving in 2006, and the majority later travel to the United States, Honduran officials said. (*EFE*, 25/3/07)

March 25: Cuban Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, attended the sessions of the Arab League in Saudi Arabia. As representative of the Presidency of the Non Aligned Movement, Rodriguez Parrilla addressed the forum expressing Cuba's condemnation of expressions of "disrespect and intolerance towards Islam and towards Arab peoples". Parrilla also emphasized the Cuban government view about discussions on human rights in multilateral forums. "Attempts are made to compel our countries to adopt values which are alien to them and put aside our idiosyncrasies, our history, our culture and our religions. If we do not comply, we are selectively condemned as violators of human rights and as enemies of "democracy". Arab countries themselves have more than once been the victims of such practices, which persist today and which ignore their universal values and cultural legacies", the Cuban vice Minister said. [[Statement by Cuban Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Arab League](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 25/3/07)

March 26: The Government of Cuba will donate 23 hospitals to Bolivia. The hospitals will be set up in the departments of Santa Cruz, Oruro, La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí and Benin. Cuban ambassador to Bolivia, Rafael Daussá, indicated that 10 of the hospitals will be furnished with Cuban equipment and run by Cuban personnel. (*EuropaPress*, 26/3/07)

March 27: Two former Polish presidents have put aside their longtime rivalry to encourage Cuba's struggling democratic opposition. Lech Walesa, the renowned Solidarity leader, and Aleksander Kwasniewski, a former communist who became a popular democratic president, jointly published an open letter to the people of Cuba encouraging them to persist in seeking democratic change and promising them Polish support. "May these words, which we write together, along with the example of a free and progressing Poland, serve as testimony to the victory of agreement over conflict, dialogue over quarrel, good over evil," read the letter, published by the Polish media. The leaders recalled how they sat on opposite sides during the so-called Round Table Talks -- historic negotiations in 1989 that brought a bloodless collapse of communism. "You are faced with a great opportunity to restore democracy in Cuba, an opportunity that you must not waste," they wrote in the letter. (*AP*, 27/3/07)

March 27: Five Latin American countries agreed to join the ALBA Cultural Fund during a meeting held this weekend in the capital of Venezuela, Caracas. The Fund, which is part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) was first signed by the presidents of Venezuela and Cuba, Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro respectively in February, 2006. The initiative was penned during the 15th International Book Fair in Cuba. The cultural representatives of

Antigua and Barbuda, Ecuador, Bolivia, Dominica, and San Vicente and the Grenadines, who attended the Caracas meeting agreed to join efforts to defend the Latin American and Caribbean identities from the global hegemonic trends, reported the Bolivarian News Agency. Cuban Culture Minister, Abel Prieto, also present at the encounter stressed that the initiative is based on the principle of respect of cultural diversity as opposed to the hegemonic globalization taking over the world. "Our top priority is to defend our multiple identities, traditions and the need to fight racism and any other form of colonization and exclusion," Prieto asserted. Among the most interesting proposals made by the government representatives at the meeting, were the co-production of audiovisual materials, including movies, radio and television works. Participants also encouraged the promotion of Latin American culture and a better use of technology to maintain inter-cultural exchanges. (*ACN*, 27/3/07)

March 28: The Non Aligned Movement is gaining in strength and revitalization, as well as in real influence in key world topical subjects, under the presidency of Cuba, official Anayansi Rodriguez said. Rodriguez, who is in charge of the Cuban Foreign Ministry's team that deals with NAM issues, highlighted NAM achievements since the 14th Summit of Heads of State and Government held in Havana last September. In remarks to the press, she said that the movement has moved from rhetoric and declarations to concrete initiatives, in line with the Final Declaration and Action Plan approved in the last summit. She insisted that Cuba's performance is marked by transparency, taking into account heterogeneity and internal differences among NOAL members "so as to favor elements that unite us rather than those that separate us." (*Prensa Latina*, 28/3/07)

March 28: Bolivian Mining Minister Guillermo Dalence was replaced following a controversy over a recent unauthorized visit to Cuba. Dalence told the press that his weeklong visit to the Caribbean nation to meet with mining ministers from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela -- taken without President Evo Morales' permission -- was a mistake, and that he harbored no ill will over the president's decision to fire him. "We Bolivians have a custom that when someone has made a big mistake, a change has to happen," Dalence said in an interview Wednesday. "I don't think the president has any complaint against me, and I have no reason to protest either." Mining Vice Minister Luis Alberto Echazu was sworn in to replace Dalence. (*CNN*, 28/3/07)

March 29: Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos will visit Cuba in early April to speak with the government in Havana about the situation on the communist island and to analyze bilateral relations. The foreign ministry announced in a communique that Moratinos will be accompanied by the secretary of state for Ibero-America, Trinidad Jimenez, and by the head of the AECI foreign aid agency, Leire Pajin. Arrangements for the April 2-3 visit were firmed up after Moratinos' March 17 talks in Madrid with Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque. The Spanish authorities were negotiating with their Cuban counterparts a way to meet also with the dissidents. "Spain will do everything at hand to guarantee a dialogue with Cuban authorities and with the dissident movement", a diplomatic source told the press. "But to maintain a dialogue doesn't mean that the Minister will meet the dissidents", the source added. An option could be that "a high-ranking official meets with the dissidents after the Minister has left the island". This is the first visit of a Spanish foreign minister to Cuba since 1998 which, together with the special circumstances in Cuba surrounding Fidel Castro's illness, makes Moratino's visit a historical event in Spain-Cuba relations. (*EFE, Prensa Latina, El País*, 29/3/07)

March 29: A delegation of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) will be present at the 14th Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) to be held in Caracas on April 9-14. Secretary General of the FMC, Yolanda Ferrer, told the press that the representatives of the island hope for this meeting to result in new actions to promote precepts defended by the WIDF worldwide. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/3/07)

March 29: The Government of Cuba will donate 23 hospitals to Bolivia. The hospitals will be set up in the departments of Santa Cruz, Oruro, La Paz, Cochabamba, Potosí and Benin. Cuban ambassador to Bolivia, Rafael Daussá, indicated that 10 of the hospitals will be furnished with Cuban equipment and run by Cuban personnel. (*Reuters*, 29/3/07)

March 29: The Czech Republic granted asylum to three Cuban families persecuted by Fidel Castro's regime, answering a request of the US to its allies concerning the refugees, the public broadcaster Czech Television (CT) reported. Tomas Haisman, head of Interior Ministry's asylum and migration policy department, said this has been the first time that the Czech Republic answered this kind of US request. The three families were among Cubans who tried to get to the US, but the US coast guard detained them. According to US law, refugees who do not touch US ground must be returned to their homeland. But in the case of the three families US authorities recognised political reasons for their escape from Cuba and asked other countries to accept the refugees. The Czech Republic was the first to answer the request. The Czech government agreed to accept the refugees in late February and the families arrived in Prague on March 21. (CTK, 29/3/07)

March 30: On the eve of Spain's foreign minister's official visit to Cuba, Reporters Without Borders sent a letter to Angel Moratinos asking Spanish authorities to intercede on behalf of imprisoned journalists. "Dialogue with the Cuban government, which is deaf to the international community's appeals, in no way precludes firmness towards it. You are the representative of one of the only governments likely to remind the Cuban authorities of their duty to act with humanity and justice", the letter to Moratinos reads. "The imprisoned dissidents must be freed", RWB said. [[Letter from RWB to the Spanish government](#)] (AFP, 30/3/07)

March 30: The EU Presidency, currently held by Germany, presented a document for discussion among member states outlining the community's strategy towards Cuba. The document states that "the EU should hold a broad and open dialogue with Cuban authorities on every topic of mutual interest to improve relations between the EU and Cuba." It also calls for "high-level political cooperation" in the areas of the "economy, science, culture and human rights" as well as "tourism." (Europa Press, 30/3/07)

March 30: World famous Russian choreographer and ballet dancer Mijail Baryshnikov arrived in Havana to participate in an encounter of ballet academies. Other foreign participants will be Russian ballet dancer Azari Plisetski and Italian American choreographer Joseph Fontano. Baryshnikov praised the Cuban ballet academy and compared it with the Russian and the French. (AP, 30/3/07)

Security

March 7: A top level delegation of China's Popular Liberation Army began a visit to Cuba, aimed at increasing bilateral relations. The mission, led by Colonel General Zhu Wenquan, will develop a busy agenda including tours of military units and places of historic and cultural interest, according to a note by Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces Ministry published in the official daily Granma. The last visit of a Chinese military delegation to Cuba took place last December, headed by Colonel General Zhao Keming, Political Commissioner of China's National Defense University, and included meetings with Raúl Castro. (Prensa Latina, AFP, 7/3/07)

March 8: A high level delegation from the People's Liberation Army of China, led by Colonel General Zhu Wenquan, was received by the Deputy-Minister of the Armed Forces and Chief of the General Staff, Army Corps General, Álvaro López Miera. (Granma, 8/3/07)

March 12: Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro warned against an invasion of his country, saying the price paid by invaders would be high. "If anyone attacks us, we're ready to pay any price necessary, but the price paid by the invaders of our country would be much higher," said the 75 year-old during a speech to troops participating in military exercises in the western Pinar del Rio province. Raul, who has been the Caribbean country's defence minister since 1959, called the Cuban revolution "unbeatable." The exercises are to help the country improve the preparedness of its armed forces,

he said, adding that Cuba is training its military for the presence of an enemy politically committed to the destruction of the revolution. This year's war games are being billed as the largest mobilization of reservists and active members of the Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces since the 1961 Bay of Pigs and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Soldiers are engaged in artillery and missile launches, combat practice and naval and air drills. Civilians of all ages dressed in blue militia uniforms carried government-issued rifles and handguns for drills to defend their towns against surprise invaders, while civil defense units put out staged fires and evacuate residents from their homes. Cuba's state-owned TV picked up the patriotic beat, running old news reels of past military exercises and speeches to rally the nation. (*People's Daily, NBC News, 11/3/07*)

March 30: Interim Cuban leader Raúl Castro confirmed that a massive mobilization of security forces was ordered after his brother Fidel underwent surgery eight months ago. "This popular mobilization, in silence, without the least boasting, guaranteed the preservation of the revolution from any attempted military aggression," he was quoted as saying by the Communist Party's Granma newspaper. Addressing senior military leaders Friday, Raúl Castro said "Operación Caguairán" -- named after a hard Cuban tree also called "ax breaker" -- was ordered because he could not rule out that, in the face of his brother's ailment, someone in Washington could "turn crazy." Cuba did not publicly reveal the mobilization when it was ordered, just hours after it was announced on July 31 that Fidel Castro was "temporarily" surrendering power because of the surgery. He remains largely absent from public view eight months later, but is reported to be recovering. The mobilization covered 200,000 Cubans. Raúl Castro said the mobilizations were carried out successfully. Large numbers of uniformed but unarmed soldiers and extra police were visible in the streets of Havana immediately after the July 31 announcement. Granma earlier reported that mobilized soldiers had been practicing combat tactics, firing anti-aircraft rockets, using computer simulators and sniping, but gave no numbers. "Never before, except in the times of the Bay of Pigs [1961] and the Missile Crisis [1962] had Cuba undertaken in its national territory such a mobilization of its troops in such a scale," the newspaper said. (*EFE, Granma, The Miami Herald, 31/3/07*)

Terrorism

March 1: In Havana, the Government of Colombia and the National Liberation Army (ELN) concluded, in tight secrecy, the fifth round of an exploratory meeting. Sources that asked to remain anonymous indicated that the meeting concluded "without any type of commentary or statement," and did not specify exactly when the round ended. (*EFE, 1/3/07*)

March 29: On March 14th, in Havana, the provisional president of Cuba, Raúl Castro, and Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez met with delegates from the government of Colombia and the ELN guerrillas who are negotiating a peace deal. At the meeting, Raúl Castro reiterated on behalf of the Cuban government his "firm and respectful support to the peace negotiations that Colombians are conducting," reported the Office of [Colombia's] High Peace Commissioner (OACP). (*EFE, 29/3/07*)

US-Cuba Relations

March 1: US State Department released its 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, which acknowledged that Cuban law enforcement tipped US antidrug patrols off to more than 30 drug shipments last year. While

recognizing the island's efforts in preventive measures and tough penalties, the report portrayed the cooperation as inconsistent. "Certainly in the last 10 years, the Cubans saw drugs as a threat to their own kids and a corrupting influence on their government," former White House drug czar Barry McCaffrey said. "There is every indication that they cooperate in general, tipping us off to intelligence and taking our intelligence and acting on it." But McCaffrey cautioned against giving too much credence to Cuban government statistics, which experts say are often manipulated. During a news briefing, Anne Patterson, the State Department's top anti-drug trafficking official, congratulated Cuba for deporting trafficker Luis Hernando Gomez-Bustamante to Colombia after holding him in prison for several months. He is expected to be extradited soon from Colombia to the United States. "There is not a major trafficking issue through Cuba," she added. The Cuban government has long maintained that it is carrying on a strong fight against illicit drugs, despite past US allegation that government officials there were involved in protecting foreign traffickers.

[\[International Narcotics Control Report: Caribbean, Cuba\]](#) (*The Miami Herald*, 2,3/3/07)

March 2: The US Coast Guard intercepted 33 Cuban migrants in the Florida Straits on a boat headed for South Florida. Officials are holding the group aboard a cutter, including a doctor with a US visa, while the Bush administration decides what to do. After the boat was stopped on February 27, the Coast Guard brought one of the migrants to Key West because she needed emergency medical treatment related to a kidney illness. The other 32, including the doctor, remained aboard the cutter. The case was the latest involving Cuban migrants interdicted at sea under the controversial wet-foot/dry-foot policy. (*The Miami Herald*, 2/3/07)

March 2: Senator Mike Enzi (R-Wyoming), is co-sponsoring a bill that would remove all restrictions for Americans traveling to Cuba. Nine other senators are co-sponsoring the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act. "If we want to give the Cuban people a taste of the real America, we need to allow Americans to go there and share it," Enzi said in a release. "Unilateral sanctions stop not just the flow of goods, but the flow of ideas - ideas of freedom and democracy are the keys to positive change in any nation." The bill's other sponsors are Senators. Byron Dorgan (Democrat-North Dakota); Max Baucus (Democrat-Montana); Larry Craig (Republican-Idaho); Patrick Leahy (Democrat-Vermont); Tom Harkin (Democrat-Iowa); Chuck Hagel (Republican-Nebraska); Russell Feingold (Democrat-Wisconsin); Dianne Feinstein (Democrat-California); and Jeff Bingaman (Democrat-New Mexico). (*Billings Gazette*, 2/3/07)

March 5: Soaked, shivering and disoriented, five migrants walked up to the Key Biscayne toll booth, where they received kindness from strangers. The group included men, women and children. Workers at the toll booth separating Key Biscayne from the mainland kept them warm and gave them coffee until the US Border Patrol arrived. Thirty minutes later, six other migrants showed up -- also wet, also shivering. Four of the six in the latter group identified themselves as Lidia Lugo, 34; son Jose Carlos Rodriguez Lugo, 9; daughter Amanda Rodriguez Lugo, 15; and 13-year-old Mario Nunez, who is not related. An employee of Miami-Dade County let them huddle in his truck for warmth until the Border Patrol arrived. Lidia Lugo said they left the day before from Cuba's Pinar del Rio. She declined to say how they made the voyage. (*The Miami Herald*, 5/3/07)

March 5: In Geneva, Cuba denounced the obstacles to trade relations imposed by the United States, which also affect third countries. Jorge Ferrer, minister counsellor of the permanent mission of Cuba, made the comments during an informal meeting of the Negotiating Group of Non-agricultural Market Access (NGMA). (*AP*, 5/3/07)

March 6: The US State Department released its annual assessment of human rights around the world. On Cuba, the report says the government, temporarily headed by Raul Castro due to Fidel Castro's illness, "continued to violate virtually all the rights of its citizens, including the fundamental right to change their government peacefully or criticize the revolution or its leaders". [\[2006 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cuba\]](#) (*Reuters*, 6/3/07)

March 5: Cuban Olympic boxing champions Odlanier Solis, Yan Barthelemy and Yuriorkis Gamboa finally landed in Miami on March 1 after a long journey from Venezuela, where they defected last year. Since they arrived, they have eaten at La Carreta, reunited with long-lost relatives and friends and partied in South Beach. They addressed the media

formally for the first time since their defection. "When I walked out of the airport in Miami last week, I felt like I was on my own soil, like I had found my second home," said Barthelemy, a flyweight, who celebrated his 27th birthday. "Finally, I can breathe easier. I can relax. It's been a very long two months. I cried a lot of tears on New Year's Eve, missing my family, wondering if this day would ever come." None of the three boxers still has his Olympic gold medal. Solis' and Barthelemy's are on display at a sports museum in Cuba. Gamboa, the super bantamweight amateur champion, sold his last year to give his 1-year-old daughter a birthday party. (*The Miami Herald*, 6/3/07)

March 5: US-born University of Miami students are helping pay homage to their roots by promoting "A Week of Cuban Culture" on campus, an annual event sponsored by the Federation of Cuban Students. "I think it's important to have events like this to keep the culture alive for us -- a generation of Cuban Americans who have not had the privileges of experiencing it first-hand," said Stephanie Fojo, 21, president of the club. The group launched the celebration of food, music, history and dance in front of the Whitten University Center Rock Plaza by handing out guava pastries, *bocaditos*, *croquetas* and *churros*. They even brewed Cuban coffee for students and faculty. As part of the festivities -- this year, they expanded from three days to seven -- the group also presented the club's award, the YUCA -- which stands for Young, Urban, Cuban Americans -- to several prominent, local Cuban Americans who have made an impact. (*The Miami Herald*, 6/3/07)

March 6: US President George W. Bush said that when Fidel Castro dies, his Communist government should as well. "How long he stays on Earth, that's a decision that will be made by the Almighty," Mr. Bush told foreign journalists ahead of a weeklong trip to Latin America. "I don't know how long he's going to live. But nevertheless, I do believe that the system of government that he's imposed upon the people ought not live if that's what the people decide." Mr. Bush said Cuba's future should not be based on the fact that "somebody is somebody's brother. What I hope happens is that we together insist that transition doesn't mean transition from one figure to another, but transition means from one type of government to a different type of government," Mr. Bush said. He was referring to the role that Latin American countries can play in leading Cuba to democracy. "We believe the Cuban people ought to make the decision for the future," Mr. Bush said. (*AP*, 6/3/07)

March 6: US presidential contender Mitt Romney has tapped a prominent Cuban-American Republican in Florida for his first radio ad targeting Spanish-speaking voters. Al Cardenas, former chairman of the Florida Republican Party and a close ally of former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, described Romney as a friend of the Hispanic community and an ally in its drive for a democratic Cuba. "It is a difficult time in the world, in the Americas, and in our Cuba in transition," Cardenas said in his native Spanish during the spot, which promotes Romney's speech at a Lincoln Day Dinner in Miami-Dade County. "Mitt Romney understands the dynamic of Cuba." During an appearance in Florida last month, Romney declared he supported the current US embargo on Cuba to avoid enriching Fidel Castro, a Communist dictator he accused of disrupting peace and stability in the region. (*AP*, 6/3/07)

March 7: The US government forbade Don Foster, president of the International Softball Federation, to visit Cuba to award the first Cuban coach in the Hall of Fame, *Granma* newspaper reported. "I regret much not having gone to Havana for the ceremony of introduction of Cuban coach Armando Aguiar Gil in the Hall of Fame, because the US government denied me a visa and has not given any information about it," Porter told the daily. From his office in Plant City, Florida, Porter said that he had the Cuban government's visa, but he is still waiting for a written explanation from the US Department of Treasury on his prohibition. According to the Cuban Federation on that discipline, Porter should have visited Havana in February to deliver Aguiar the ring that accredits him as the first Cuban expert in the Softball's Hall of Fame. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/3/07)

March 7: Cuba is not ready for the throngs of American tourists who would be expected to visit the island if a US ban is ever lifted, but it has the time to build new hotels, a senior Cuban official said. "We have time to build the hotel capacity for the day that happens," Cuba's deputy minister of Tourism Oscar Gonzalez said in an interview. "It will take the United States some time to dismantle that infernal apparatus that has barred its citizens from traveling to

Cuba," he said, referring to proposals in the US Congress to relax sanctions against Cuba. By some estimates, there could be 3 million American tourists visiting Cuba within five years of an opening up of US travel. Cuba would have to more than double its current capacity of 42,000 hotel rooms, Gonzalez said. The island has the potential for more than 250,000 rooms, he said. (*Reuters*, 7/3/07)

March 7: US authorities presented independent Cuban activists and independent journalists with the State Department's annual human rights report, saying the situation has not changed since Fidel Castro stepped aside seven months ago. Jonathan D. Farrar, the State Department's principal deputy assistant secretary for democracy, human rights and labor, spoke via video-conference from Washington, answering questions from a small group of activists. "They changed one for the other," Farrar said of the 80-year-old Castro's decision in late July to temporarily cede power to his 75-year-old brother Raul while he recovered from intestinal surgery. "But we really have not seen a change in the human rights situation," Farrar added in Spanish to the group gathered inside the US Interests Section in Havana. Activists at the video conference were particularly interested in a section of the report that dealt with the island's Internet restrictions. The State Department said Cuba blocks access to Web sites it considers objectionable and usually only provides Internet access through government approved institutions. "We do not have the right to buy a computer, even with money in our pockets, unless it is through the black market," economist and independent journalist Oscar Espinosa Chepe said. "There are situations that are far more grave than the manipulation of access." (*AP*, 7/3/07)

March 7: The first-ever full-scale drill to ward off a mass migration to South Florida -- a dry run designed to prepare responders in case political instability erupts in a neighboring Caribbean nation and sets off a major exodus—began. Authorities from more than 85 government agencies were spurred to action, as officials launched a fleet of speedboats, readied cutters and alerted local health officials. The goal, Rear Admiral David Kunkel said, was to intercept 95 percent of those crossing the sea before they reached US shores and to deter others from trying the same. Unlike an indoor communications drill in December, the two-day event includes simulated emergencies at sea and on land. Scenarios included smugglers in speedboats heading down to Cuba to fetch relatives for paying clients in South Florida, beach landings and an onslaught of immigrants at local processing centers. "This is no small effort. We've been preparing for this for months," said Kunkel, head of the US Coast Guard in Miami and director of the task force running the exercise. The 400-member team began planning the exercise well before Fidel Castro fell ill and handed over political power to his brother in July. But he said the simulations would use Cuba as a source country. "It doesn't have to be from Cuba. It could be any Caribbean nation. However, we do recognize that Cuba is certainly an area where we must be prepared," Kunkel told reporters at the Emergency Operations Center in Doral, the drill's nerve center. (*Sun Sentinel*, 8/3/07)

March 7: Homeland Security officials in Washington, where immigration applications are processed, won't release figures on how many petitions it has received from Cuban medical personnel, nor the number it has granted. Julio Cesar Alfonso, a Cuban refugee and doctor who founded Miami-based Solidarity Without Borders to offer financial and legal help to Cubans trying to emigrate, estimates that about 170 applications for political asylum have been approved among the 200 or so people his group has helped. The program has proved a complicated one to administer, which is why it may be taking the Department of Homeland Security longer than expected to decide on asylum. Applications from Cuban medical professionals "require us to look closely to determine whether or not the person is fully eligible for the benefit," said department spokesman Chris Bentley. "The American public expects us to do that thoroughly and take as much time as needed to reach a sound decision." In addition to the lack of documentation from most of the Cubans who fled Venezuela, there is also the suspicion that some of the refugees may be spies sent by Castro to see who is applying. (*The New York Times*, 8/3/07)

March 8: Cuba responded to President George W. Bush's call for the island's transition to lead to a change in government, saying the US leader "does not understand anything" and "appears hallucinatory." Granma, the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, said Bush "persists in showing once again that he does not understand anything." Cuba's transition after the eventual death of Fidel Castro should be "from one type of government to a different type of government, based upon the will of the people," Bush said in a roundtable with Latin American media

on the eve of his trip to the region. "He himself (Bush) gets caught up in the skein of a tortuous and even labyrinthine thought, because that, the revolution and socialism, is what the people have been deciding for nearly half a century. What does the butcher of Iraq want to happen? To return to the time of his friends the Diaz-Balarts?" Granma said. The paper was referring to Bush allies Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, Republican congressmen from Florida whose father and grandfather were both associated with the regime of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, one of them as deputy head of the strongman's secret police. (*EFE*, 8/3/07)

March 8: US businessmen who recently returned from a visit to Cuba dismissed the notion yesterday that that country's economy will collapse with the passing of President Fidel Castro, or that his death will spur an exodus from the island. Wayne S. Smith, a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy, which sponsored the businessmen's trip, disputed the idea that Mr. Castro's death or departure would bring down Cuba's system. "This idea that the Cuban economy is collapsing and the regime is on the ropes is absolute nonsense," he said, adding that Cubans are not likely to flee the island in the event of Mr. Castro's death. Jake Colvin, director of the pro-trade industry group USA Engage, said Cuban interest in outside investment is more limited than its interest in trade but that Havana has a particular interest in outside investment in the energy sector, including oil and gas production. (*The Washington Times*, 9/3/07)

March 8: While hundreds of US law enforcement agents intercepted imaginary Cuban migrants during a massive training exercise in south Florida, two boatloads of actual Cubans sneaked ashore on Miami Beach. Boaters dropped off 21 Cuban migrants at a popular nudist beach and left 19 others on another beach a few hours later, the Border Patrol said. Both vessels escaped. "It's our belief that they were the result of organized smuggling," Border Patrol spokesman Steve McDonald said. The Cubans arrived on day two of a training exercise to test "Operation Vigilant Sentry," the US Department of Homeland Security's plan to halt a possible mass migration from the Caribbean. About 325 agents from 85 federal, state and local law enforcement agencies took part in the exercise. "We're not embarrassed at all," McDonald said. "It's not uncommon for them (Cubans) to have landings." (*Reuters*, 8/3/07)

March 8: The top Republican on the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee said she wants to stop Cuba from drilling for oil in waters 45 miles (72 km) from Key West, Florida. US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida said Cuba's drilling plans could endanger her state's pristine beaches -- a prime driver of its tourist economy -- and endanger the only living coral reef in North America. "It is totally unacceptable that the Cuban regime be allowed to drill for oil just 45 miles from our shores," Ros-Lehtinen said. "The consequences of a spill are disastrous." Ros-Lehtinen said she will introduce legislation aimed at stopping the drilling plan. She did not give any details about how her legislation would accomplish the task, or if the plan would comply with international trade rules. (*Reuters*, 8/3/07)

March 11: Hundreds of Cuban doctors and other medical personnel who defected in third countries -- and one magician -- have applied for fast-track US entry under a special program launched six months ago, US officials said. More than 100 already have arrived in the United States under the program, and hundreds more are hiding in places like Bolivia and Venezuela, awaiting US background checks to ensure they are medical professionals and not rights abusers or Cuban government agents. After a slow start, the program, designed for Cuban medical personnel who defect while working abroad, has received so many applicants that Cuban American activists are scrambling to assist the new arrivals. There are reports that Cuban authorities are visiting family members of doctors stationed abroad to warn of reprisals if their relatives flee. "It's a hugely successful program," said Emilio Gonzalez, the director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, part of the Department of Homeland Security. "The word is getting out and obviously we get an increased number every week." Cuba has an estimated 40,000 doctors, dentists, nurses and other medical personnel working in 69 countries, including about 15,000 in Venezuela. Miami Republican Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart in February said that 366 medical professionals who defected abroad had applied under the US program, 160 have been approved and 55 had arrived. Twenty five were rejected. Among those rejected were a magician and a chess player, US immigration officials said. Gonzalez said the latest number are much higher but declined to provide a number. Ana Carbonell, Diaz-Balart's chief of staff, said more than 100 already have entered the United States. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/3/07)

March 12: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who was in Paris to preside over a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Paris headquarters of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, said he knew that Fidel Castro's improvement "isn't good news" for US President George W. Bush. He said that the US government had a plan to intervene in Cuba when Fidel Castro died, but added that Cuba's enemies and their president will have to wait, and that "Bush will retire without achieving his objectives" for Cuba. (*EFE*, 12/3/07)

March 12: The wives of five Cubans convicted in the United States of acting as agents of a foreign government launched a campaign to obtain visas for two of the wives, who have not seen their jailed husbands for years. At a press conference, the women insisted that it was an injustice to keep the men in prison, after the High Court of Atlanta ruled in 2005 that the trial held in Miami in the late 90's lacked constitutional guarantees. (*AP*, 12/3/07)

March 14: Another bipartisan bill will be introduced in the US Congress aimed at easing the embargo on Cuba. This initiative, authored by Democrat Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota and Republican Senator Larry Craig of Idaho, would roll back the oil-drilling ban in the Gulf of Mexico, so that companies would now be allowed to drill in waters more than 45 miles off the US coast of Florida. This bill would allow US companies to gain access to deposits off Cuba's coast, which could have reserves of at least 4.6 billion of barrels. In late 2006, the US Congress had put an end to a 25-year ban on drilling in deep waters 125 miles south of the Florida Panhandle, although it set some restrictions until 2020. In 1999 Fidel Castro opened the northern coastline of the Caribbean country to international exploration, but US companies could not invest in any projects due to the embargo on the island. The piece of legislation being introduced is known as the "Security and Fuel Efficiency Energy Act of 2007". (*Global Insight*, 14/3/07)

March 14: The United States and Cuba accused each other of hypocrisy in professing support for UN human rights experts. The US delegation told the 47-nation UN Human Rights Council that it had been surprised to hear Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque strongly backing the panel's experts who investigate specific abuses — like torture, freedom of expression or arbitrary detention — around the world. "This is great news," said US delegation member Velia De Pirro. "My government sincerely hopes this new support from the government of Cuba will soon lead to invitations from Cuba to these mandate holders to visit Cuba for the first time in their history." A Cuban delegate responded that the United States was also selective in its cooperation, refusing to allow experts to meet individually with terrorism suspects detained at Guantanamo Bay. Rodolfo Reyes said Washington should allow UN experts unhindered access to what he called the "international center of torture" in Guantanamo. Last year the United States declined to allow a team of experts — including one on torture — to have private access to the Guantanamo detainees, and the experts refused to go. Reyes also accused the US government of allowing terrorist activities by members of the Cuban-exile community in Miami. (*AP*, 14/3/07)

March 15: Cuban intelligence agents are working inside the US government and one mole uncovered in the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) caused the death of a US special operations soldier in Central America, a senior DIA counterintelligence official said in a new book. DIA analyst Ana Belen Montes, convicted of espionage in 2002, told Cuban intelligence officers about a secret US Army Special Forces camp in El Salvador that she visited in 1987. Weeks later, the camp was attacked by pro-Cuban guerrillas of the Marxist group Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, DIA counterspy Scott W. Carmichael said in his book, "True Believer." Mr. Carmichael, who led the DIA's investigation of Montes, said in an interview that other Cuban agents are operating inside the US government. "I believe that the Cuban Intelligence Service has penetrated the United States government to the same extent that the old East German intelligence service, the Stasi, once penetrated the West German government during the Cold War," he said. Havana's intelligence service shares its stolen secrets with US adversaries, including China, Russia, Iran and Venezuela, Mr. Carmichael said. (*The Washington Times*, 15/3/07)

March 15: State officials have filed applications with the US State Department for Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter to travel to the communist island nation of Cuba on a trade mission to promote Idaho agricultural products. Cuba has been under a US trade and travel embargo since 1962, which Otter would like to see lifted. "While in Congress, he made it

clear that the embargo with Cuba has been a failure," Mark Warbis, Otter's communications director, told the Idaho Statesman. "It's not the government, but the people it's punishing." Otter would be part of a trade mission that would include other state officials as well as business leaders. State officials hope to receive approval by the end of the month, and travel to Cuba next month. The US began allowing the sale of food and medicine to Cuba in 2000. (AP, 15/3/07)

March 19: Two top officers on the State Department's Cuba desk are moving to Iraq, adding to a government reshuffle involving a total of six key Cuba posts. Stephen McFarland, who heads the Cuba desk, and his number two, Timothy Zuniga-Brown, will join the Iraqi provincial reconstruction teams, which operate outside Baghdad's Green Zone. US officials say there is nothing unusual about those departures or the changes in other US agencies. The top tier of government that sets Cuba policy is unchanged, the officials emphasize. "It is just rotation stuff," says Eric Watnik, a spokesman for the Western Hemisphere department at the State Department, noting that McFarland and Zuniga-Brown had completed two years in their jobs and volunteered for the Iraqi positions. John Regan, the Cuba desk's No. 3, will head the desk until the replacements arrive this summer, Watnik said. Adolfo Franco, the US Agency for International Development assistant administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean, is also leaving to join Senator John McCain's presidential campaign. To replace him the White House has nominated Paul J. Bonicelli, the current deputy assistant administrator for the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance at USAID. David Mutchler, the USAID director for Cuba - a position also subject to regular rotation - is finishing his term in the job and will leave this summer, said Morgan D. Ortagus, a USAID press officer. Norman Bailey, the Cuba and Venezuela coordinator for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which coordinates intelligence-gathering among 16 U.S. agencies, was asked to leave when new ODNI director Mike McConnell took over earlier this year. A search for a replacement is under way. (*McClatchy Newspapers*, 19/3/07)

March 19: Cuba said that the unilateral, illegal US blockade against the island is a clear, serious, and violent instrument against Cuban children. Speaking before the plenary of the UN Council on Human Rights, currently in session in Geneva, Cuban delegate Yuri Gala recalled that children are victims of armed conflicts, aggressions and foreign occupations. Gala's speech was part of the Council's discussion of a report presented by independent expert, Brazilian Paulo Sergio Pinheiro. The Cuban delegate highlighted the recognition of issues including family, community, society and child labor in the document. However, he lamented that other central aspects of the concept of violence against children were missing. A comprehensive attention to the issue must include the negligent treatment of children, that manifests itself in the current unfair international order and the impact of politics and decisions of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Breton Woods institutions, he said. (*Prensa Latina*, 19/3/07)

March 20: Supporters of Republican presidential candidate John McCain said they expect to raise more than \$200,000 for the Arizona senator's campaign at a fundraiser that kicks off a flurry of Florida events for two weeks. No political visit to Miami would be complete without an event involving the powerful Cuban-American community, and the McCain campaign is no exception. McCain plans to speak to a group of Cuban-American veterans of the failed CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and make an appearance on the popular Spanish-language station Radio Mambi, according to McCain aides. One former Cuban political prisoner, Roberto Martin Perez, met McCain at the airport, and the senator made sure to note that he was meeting in Miami with "friends who are all freedom fighters" and to express support for continuing the US economic embargo of Cuba. That appearance comes after one of McCain's rivals for the GOP presidential nomination, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, raised eyebrows recently in Miami's politically powerful Cuban-American community by using a slogan of Fidel Castro's in a recent speech: "Fatherland or death, we shall overcome." (AP, 20/3/07)

March 20: Cuba is open to American companies that want to join the communist country's new oil-drilling ventures but any such deals are being blocked by Washington, the minister overseeing energy matters said. Basic Industry Minister Yadira Garcia said exploratory drilling in the Gulf of Mexico should start to yield profits by 2011. "A lot of American companies have been coming, they know about our studies (...) but we are not the ones limiting them," Garcia told reporters at an international gathering on earth sciences. Garcia said it was "a good moment" for

Washington to let American oil companies invest in the Cuban market. Currently, a long-standing US trade embargo prohibits most American trade and investment with the communist-run island. (*AP*, 20/3/07)

March 20: The United States called on Cuba to stop repression and to free political prisoners, four years after Havana rounded up and jailed 75 political dissidents. Cuba is the only one-party communist regime in the Americas. "In March 2003, the regime arrested members of Cuba's independent civil society, rounding up 75 independent thinkers, journalists, librarians, and academics," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack in a statement. "These individuals were sentenced to as many as 25 years in prison for carrying out activities that citizens living in democracies across the globe participate in every day. [[Fourth Anniversary of the Cuban Dissident Crackdown](#)] (*AFP*, 21/3/07)

March 20: Work to restore Ernest Hemingway's Cuban hideaway probably won't be finished until the end of 2009, held up in part by efforts to build a garage to house the author's long-lost Chevy convertible, museum officials said. Efforts began in 2005 to repair Finca Vigia and restore its grounds along with the papers, furniture and other objects inside. Museum director Ada Rosa Alfonso would not say how much restoration has cost to date, or how much was needed to finish it. "It's a process that requires dedication and time," she said. The budget for the restoration comes from the Cuban state and "it will continue providing it," she said. The museum is "open to accepting any kind of donation or support" but she said that Washington's embargo has blocked willing American donors. The restoration likely won't be completed for at least 2½ more years, she said. Six US experts have obtained permission to travel to Cuba and aid in restoration, and Alfonso said that the last American visit came in August. (*Globe and Mail*, 21/3/07)

March 21: Cuba denounced the United States to the World Trade Organization for the usurpation of Cuban labels of acknowledged international prestige. The protest referred to the systematic disregard by the US government over decisions made with the WTO and the serious consequences of non-compliance of agreements on intellectual property. Cuban representatives referred to the denial of the US Office of Patents and Labels to grant a license to renew the Havana Club label, arguing political reasons. Six other delegations, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Brazil, India, China and Argentina supported Cuban concerns and demands while the United States has continued twiddling its thumbs for five years claiming it is trying to solve the problem. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/07)

March 21: US officials say that the image of an increasingly revitalized Castro is impeding the island's day-to-day leadership from making major changes. Thomas Shannon, the top US diplomat for Latin America and the Caribbean, told the press that Cuba was in a period of "suspended animation" as Castro exerted a "controlling political presence" on the island. While Shannon did not directly contradict previous statements from US officials that suggested Castro was close to death, he suggested that the Bush administration is more cautious in its assessment of whether Castro will return, and in what capacity. Shannon said the transfer of power had occurred "in terms of managing day-to-day government" but that the new leadership was "unable to define itself independent of Fidel Castro." When asked about Castro's health, Shannon started by responding with the collective "we," but then corrected himself. "At least I've tried to be very careful about Fidel Castro's health, and be careful about making it clear that the Cuban state is so opaque and that his health is treated as a state secret, and guarded in such a way that it's hard to assess what it is." Shannon in December said that the Cuban government was unlikely to embark on major reform as long as Castro was alive, but his statements are stronger now. "I think we're kind of in this period of almost suspended animation, that there is expectation of change in Cuba but it's not happening; and it's not happening because Fidel Castro is not a day-to-day presence, but he's still a controlling presence," he said. Shannon said the United States would continue its policy of supporting the opposition in Cuba and "to attempt to work internationally to get people who communicate with the regime to convince the regime that now is the time for it to engage in a dialogue with the Cuban people." (*The Miami Herald, Reuters*, 22/3/07)

March 21: State trade visits to Cuba have helped Nebraska farmers and ranchers make nearly \$40 million in sales to the island nation, Governor Dave Heineman said. Announcing another trip to Cuba, Heineman said that Nebraska has

gained an edge over other states because its trade missions have been led by top state officials. The governor leaves on March 25 for the latest round of meetings with officials from Alimport, the Cuban import agency. "The goal of my administration is to continually seek opportunities for agricultural producers," he said. The upcoming mission will be Heineman's third trip to Cuba since 2005. Lt. Governor Rick Sheehy led a trade mission in 2006. (*Omaha World Herald*, 22/3/07)

March 21: Idaho has received a license to export agricultural goods, wood products and medical supplies to Cuba, according to Jon Hanian, spokesman for Governor C. L. "Butch" Otter. Otter plans to lead a trade mission to Cuba April 9-14 with 34 businesspeople and state officials. When asked which Cuban government officials the trade delegation would meet with since Cuba's government may be in transition, Hanian said, "That's a very sensitive issue with the Cubans right now. We're going to meet with current government officials. I'm assuming that is Fidel Castro and El Presidente." Idaho could gain trade partnerships for producers of seed, beef, pork, beans, dairy products, bandages and generic drugs, Hanian said. Much of the trip will be about establishing good will, he said. Idaho medical supply companies plan to donate some medical supplies as a humanitarian gesture. This is Otter's fourth trip to Cuba, Hanian said. The previous three times were as a member of Congress. (*Idaho Business Review*, 21,3/07)

March 23: The office of US Representative Dan Burton, the Indiana Republican who co-authored the 1996 Helms-Burton Act tightening the squeeze on Cuba, denies the lawmaker has decided to support a bill that seeks to lift restrictions on Cuban-American travel to the island. His denial came after the Center for Democracy in the Americas, an advocacy group, issued a press release saying Burton had twice told them he would support a bill that eases family travel. But Burton's office denied this. "It's just a rumor," said Clark Rehme, Burton's spokesman. Sergeant Carlos Lazo, a decorated Cuban-American US Army medic who is visiting Congress to lobby in favor of lifting travel restrictions to Cuba, said Burton twice assured him he supported the bill, which is sponsored by Representatives Bill Delahunt (Democrat-Massachusetts), and Ray LaHood (Republican-Illinois). Lazo became a symbol of the impact of Cuban-American travel curbs after he was denied permission to go see his two teenage sons when he finished his tour of duty in Iraq. Lazo earned a bronze medal for his service in Fallujah. 'He told me, 'I'm on board,' " Lazo told the press. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/07)

March 23: The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is urging Congress to pass legislation that would end travel restrictions to Cuba and encourage more contact between Cuban and American citizens. In a letter sent to Representative Charles B Rangel of New York, Bishop Thomas G Wenski of Orlando, Florida, chairman of the US Bishops' Committee on International Policy, commended Rangel, Representative Jeff Flake of Arizona and other lawmakers for sponsoring HR 654, a bill that would allow travel between the US and Cuba. "The USCCB has for many years consistently called for relaxing the sanctions against Cuba," Bishop Wenski said. "These policies have largely failed to achieve greater freedom, democracy and respect for human life. At the same time, our nation's counterproductive policies have unnecessarily alienated many in the hemisphere who should be our friends and allies, and brought needless hardship on the Cuban people. It continues to be our position that the goals of improving the lives of the Cuban people and encouraging democracy in Cuba will best be advanced through more rather than less contact between the Cuban and American people." Bishop Wenski described the travel restrictions on Cubans living in the US as particularly objectionable. (*Catholic Online*, 23/3/07)

March 24: A 4-year-old girl living in Coral Gables is at the center of an international custody dispute between the United States and Cuba over who will raise her: her father who lives in Cuba and wants her back, or a family acquaintance who Florida child welfare administrators say is more fit. Because of a secrecy order, the battle over the youngster has played out quietly in Miami-Dade County 's juvenile courthouse in Allapattah. But three sources with knowledge of the case say state child-welfare workers have asked Circuit Judge Jeri B. Cohen to grant long-term custody of the girl to an acquaintance of the girl's family. The girl, whose identity is being withheld by court and child-welfare administrators, was taken from her mother by the Florida Department of Children & Families about a year ago, sources said, after an investigation into charges that the mother's severe mental illness made her an unfit parent. DCF

also took custody of the girl's older, preteen brother. The children, who have different fathers living in Cuba, came to the United States legally two years ago. The boy's father agreed to surrender his parental rights, sources said, so there is no dispute about his staying in the United States. The girl's father, though, is pressing to gain custody. His lawyer is Ira Kurzban, a prominent immigration attorney who has represented the Cuban government in the past. Cohen, who presides over child-welfare, foster-care and adoption cases, has closed all proceedings in the case to the public and ordered all parties involved not to discuss it. It is not known when she will make a decision in the case. (*The Miami Herald*, 24/3/07)

March 25: Since 2003, one country has been the main supplier of food to Fidel Castro's Cuba: the United States. Many Americans think their government's 45-year-old embargo blocks all trade with the communist government, but the United States is the top supplier of food and agricultural products to Cuba. In fact, many Cubans depend on rations grown in Arkansas and North Dakota for their rice and beans. Cuba refused to import one grain of rice for more than a year because of a dispute over financing, but finally agreed to take advantage of a law passed by Congress in 2000 authorizing cash-only purchases of US food and agricultural products, after Hurricane Michelle in November 2001 cut into its food stocks. Since then, Cuba has paid more than \$1.5 billion for American food and agricultural products, said John Kavulich, senior policy adviser at the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council of New York. The \$340 million in exports in 2006 represented a drop of about 3 percent from 2005, which was down from nearly \$392 million in 2004. Kavulich said the decline was caused mostly by generous subsidies and credits from Venezuela and China. But the US remains on top. Its main exports to Cuba include chicken, wheat, corn, rice and soybeans -- much of it doled out to Cubans on the government ration. The United States also sends Cuba brand-name cola, mayonnaise, hot sauce and candy bars, as well as dairy cows. Kirby Jones, founder of the U.S.-Cuba Trade Association in Washington, said Cuba's food import company Alimport has an entire department dedicated to American purchases. (*AP*, 25/3/07)

March 26: The visiting governor of the US state of Nebraska, Dave Heineman, was in Havana to sign a deal to expand food exports to the communist Cuban government. "It's a good opportunity to expand our relationship. It's a very good relationship for both, Cuba and our state, and we want to continue to expand it in the future," said Heineman, who arrived with 30 US businessmen. He was to sign a deal with the Cuban state food import agency Alimport for US beans, corn, wheat, turkey, pork, beef and soy products. The governor did not immediately put a figure on the trade deal. It was the Republican's third visit to Havana. In 2005, he signed deals to export \$30 million worth of agricultural products to Cuba, and Nebraska officials agreed to a similar deal a year ago, with about a third of those contracts executed since, the governor said. Cuban officials scheduled a signing ceremony at the capital's Hotel Palco, but Heineman would not say how much those contracts would be worth. He said Nebraska officials are beginning to explore shipping medical supplies to Cuba. "We're down here for a long-term relationship," he said. "This is not about just this year or next year. We want to be down here for years to come. Ten years from now, even when I'm no longer the governor." (*AFP, AP*, 26/3/07)

March 26: Proponents of US offshore oil and gas drilling were infuriated by assertions made by Cuban officials regarding development plans in oil and gas basins adjacent to US waters in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. "This just shows that Cuba is moving forward, with or without US companies," said a spokesman for Senator Larry Craig (Republican-Idaho). "Florida is going to have China drilling off their coast in no time. Let's be honest, China doesn't exactly have the best environmental record. US companies, which do have the best environmental record and the best technology, should be doing this work." Craig co-sponsored earlier in March with Senator Byron Dorgan (Democrat-North Dakota), a bill that would allow US gas and oil producers to drill in Cuban waters within 45 miles of the Florida coast. It also would open up most of the US waters in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico to exploration and development. Jack Gerard, president and CEO of the American Chemistry Council said: "It is ironic indeed that Cuba and other nations have access to energy reserves only 45 miles from the US coastline while US energy policy prevents our country from competing for these same resources. We need policy change that will level the playing field for access to energy-- especially natural gas--to meet America's significant economic and security needs." A spokeswoman for the American

Gas Association said the 45-year-old trade embargo against Cuba and the 25-year-old moratorium on offshore drilling, "are forcing the United States to continue to be dependent on foreign fuel sources." (*Platts Commodity News*, 26/3/07)

March 26: The Chief of the Western Hemisphere in the US Department of State, Thomas Shannon, said that Fidel Castro is weak and ill but keeps on establishing the parameters under which the island is ruled. "It seems that a transfer of power took place, but Fidel Castro still establishes the context for the government. He establishes the parameters", Shannon said at a news conference in Madrid. "It is evident that he [Castro] is totally ill and weak, but still walks, and that is a simple reality", he added. (*Europa Press*, 26/3/07)

March 27: Cuba spent \$108 million so far this year on American food and agricultural products and associated logistical costs, but would have spent far more if not for Washington's 45-year-old embargo, a top official said. Pedro Alvarez, director of the island's food import company, Alimport, made the announcement as he signed agreements to purchase an additional \$15.75 million worth of wheat and pork from Nebraska producers. He said Cuba spent \$560 million on US food and agricultural products and associated shipping and other costs last year, and more than \$2.2 billion since December 2001. Alvarez said that if the embargo were lifted, US-Cuba trade in goods and services -- including tourism -- could balloon to \$21 billion in the first five years. (*AP*, 27/3/07)

March 28: The five Cubans found guilty of conspiracy and espionage in the United States in 2001 were judged in accord with the principles guaranteed by the laws of that country, an American diplomat said in Geneva before the UN Human Rights Council. After recalling that the five were found guilty of acting as agents of a foreign government, as well as conspiring to commit espionage in three cases, the political advisor for the US mission to the UN in Geneva, Velia De Pirro, said that the men received the full protection of the US legal system. She was responding to accusations that, shortly before her remarks, had been made before the council by the wife of one of the five condemned Cubans. Gerardo Hernandez, Rene Gonzalez, Antonio Guerrero, Ramon Labañino and Fernando Gonzalez were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 15 years to life behind bars for being members of the so-called "Wasp network" broken up in South Florida in September 1998. Adriana Perez, the wife of Hernandez, told the UN panel that "the deprivation of freedom of our relatives for nine years violates their human rights, the prevailing international conventions and treaties and also the U.S. Constitution." In response, De Pirro said that the five condemned spies never denied their clandestine activities in the service of the Cuban government and added that Washington firmly believes that they were tried respecting all legal guarantees of due process. (*EFE*, 28/3/07)

March 28: US Creighton University has impressive credentials in legal studies, mediation, team projects and international outreach. All of those qualities are on display this year as Creighton scholars help Cubans address some important economic challenges. Creighton's \$375,000 project, funded through a grant from the US Agency for International Development, could help Cuba chart a constructive new course for the post-Fidel Castro era. A team of researchers from the Creighton School of Law and the university's political science department is working to resolve long-standing international legal disputes over private property claims in Cuba. This effort, entering its final months, is aimed at improving economic opportunities for ordinary Cubans by encouraging an appreciation for property rights. The property claims involve more than \$6 billion in investments lost by American businesses and citizens with financial ties to pre-Castro Cuba. The legal processes being developed also could be used by Cubans who had American assets frozen. The goal of the Creighton project is to find ways to make the repayment of larger claims an economic engine for a new and more democratic Cuba, one open to free-market principles. (*Omaha World Herald*, 28/3/07)

March 28: Thirteen US Democratic Congress members, including several who favor easing sanctions against Havana, decried Cuba's recent expulsion of three foreign journalists. "As members of the new majority in the United States Congress, we write today to express our concern with the recent expulsion of three veteran foreign journalists from Cuba as well as the continued restriction and abuse of native journalists in Cuba," the legislators wrote in a letter. Addressed to the Cuban diplomatic mission in Washington, the letter is signed by a mix of Democrats who oppose or

favor the Bush administration's tough stance against Havana. In February, the Cuban government refused to renew the press accreditation of Gary Marx of the Chicago Tribune, César González-Calero of Mexico's El Universal newspaper, and Stephen Gibbs of the BBC, presumably for reporting critical of Havana. (*The Miami Herald*, 30/3/07)

March 28: Cuba has agreed to buy \$16.3 million worth of Nebraska wheat and pork, Governor Dave Heineman said after completing a trade mission to the island nation. The new contracts mean total sales of Nebraska agricultural products to Cuba will hit \$60 million, fulfilling all previous trade promises made by Cuban officials, Heineman said. Even more encouraging, he said, is that Cuban officials are continuing to negotiate with representatives from the Farmland Foods and Hormel companies. Those talks could yield sales above and beyond the previous promises and indicate that trade will continue, even without formal agreements, State Agriculture Director Greg Ibach said. "We have established Nebraska as a reliable supplier of high-quality agricultural products," he said. Ibach and Heineman spoke from the Miami airport on their way back from a four-day trip to Havana. (*Omaha World Herald*, 29/3/07)

March 29: Ailing Fidel Castro published an article in state media criticizing US environmental policies, emerging from months of silence on political matters during his long recuperation from intestinal surgery in an apparent move to reassert his voice on international issues. The article, signed the day before, was written in the same kind of apocalyptic style Mr. Castro traditionally has used when discussing the impact of US international policies on developing countries, and there was no reason to doubt that the ailing 80-year was its author. In his article, Mr. Castro quotes extensively from a Washington-dated story by The Associated Press reporting on the meeting between Mr. Bush and US auto makers and their comments about using corn to create ethanol as an alternative to fossil fuels. The Cuban leader noted that Cuba has also experimented with extracting ethanol from sugarcane. But if rich countries decide to import huge amounts of traditional food crops such as corn from developing countries to help meet their energy needs, it could have disastrous consequences for the world's poor, Mr. Castro wrote. [[Fidel Castro's Editorial in Granma](#)] (*Globe & Mail, AP*, 28/3/07)

March 29: Cuba denounced at the Human Rights Council in Geneva that the United States is hastily implementing the so called Bush Plan for "the annexation of the island". Cuban delegate Rodolfo Reyes said that the plan represents a strengthening of the anti-Cuba policy of hostility, aggressions and blockade by current US administration. The intention is to speed up what they call a "change of regime" in Cuba, for which they have increased recruitment, organization, and financing of mercenaries used in the anti-Cuba strategy, he added. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/3/07)

March 30: A year before a Miami woman at the center of an international child-custody dispute lost her two children to child-welfare investigators, she offered to give her daughter, then 2 years old, to a family friend in Texas "as a gift." The mother, who immigrated to the United States in 2004, was living in Houston near a family friend from the small city of Cabaiguán in central Cuba. Faced with withering emotional problems, the woman asked the friend, Iraida González, to raise the toddler as her own daughter. But after a few weeks, González said, she stopped hearing from the Miami mom. In December 2005, the woman's great-uncle called González to say the mother had slashed her wrists, and the children were "taken away by the state." The girl, now 4, has since become the focus of a dispute: The mother has lost custody of her and the girl's brother, now 12. The children have different fathers, both in Cuba. The boy's dad has agreed he can stay in the United States -- but the girl's father, a fisherman and office worker in Guayos, near Cabaiguán, wants his daughter back. The state Department of Children & Families says the father in Cuba is not a fit parent and the kids should remain in the custody of a Cuban-American family in Coral Gables. (*The Miami Herald*, 30/3/07)