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Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba April 2008

HIGHLIGHTS

Domestic Affairs: Debates on critical topics regarding Cuban culture and society took place at the 7th Congress of artists and writers. The Cuban government reorganizes the island's health care system. New regulations on property over state owned housing are in place. Authorities break up a peaceful demonstration by the Ladies in White at Revolution Square. A new Minister of Education is appointed after severe criticism regarding the education system was made public. President Raul Castro announces the VI Communist Party Congress for 2009, and the end of the two-year "provisional" period.

Economy: President Raul Castro launches a reform of agriculture and prioritizes food production. The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) finances a bank and creates a \$100 million program to fight the rising cost of food. The Cuban government raises social security payments. Cuba announces a recovery of its tourism industry.

Foreign Affairs: A high-ranking Russian delegation delivers a greeting from President Vladimir Putin to Raul Castro. Cuba takes side with China on the dispute with Tibet. Bolivia's Foreign Minister visits Havana. Cuba reiterates its support to Evo Morales' government amid the separatist referendum in Bolivia. Panamanian President Martin Torrijos visits Cuba.

Security: The First International Conference on Security and Defense agrees that the existing system in the Western Hemisphere must be reconstructed based on new concepts.

US-Cuba Relations: Washington reiterates that Cuba must make bolder democratic changes before it initiates conversations with President Raul Castro. The US Interests Section in Havana says that the number of illegal Cuban emigrants trying to get to the US increased over the past six months. The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry denounces the US government "inaction" on the case of Luis Posada Carriles. Cuba and the US exchange accusations following the break up of a peaceful demonstration of the Ladies in White.

LO MÁS RELEVANTE

Asuntos domésticos: Debates sobre asuntos críticos de la cultura y sociedad cubanas caracterizan el VII Congreso de los escritores y artistas. El gobierno cubano reorganiza el sistema de salud de la isla. Entran a funcionar nuevas regulaciones sobre la propiedad de viviendas pertenecientes al Estado. Las autoridades junto a una turba disuelven una manifestación pacífica de las Damas de Blanco en la Plaza de la Revolución. Es nombrado un nuevo ministro de Educación después de hacerse públicas fuertes críticas sobre el sistema de educación. El presidente Raúl Castro anuncia el VI Congreso del Partido Comunista para el 2009 y el fin de dos años de “provisionalidad”.

Economía: El presidente Raúl Castro lanza una reforma de la agricultura y prioriza la producción de alimentos. La Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (ALBA) financia un banco y crea un fondo de \$100 millones para combatir el costo creciente de los alimentos. El gobierno cubano aumenta los pagos de la seguridad social. Cuba anuncia una recuperación de su industria turística.

Asuntos exteriores: Una delegación de alto nivel le entrega a Raúl Castro un mensaje de saludo del presidente Vladimir Putin. Cuba se alinea con China en la disputa sobre el Tíbet. El ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Bolivia visita La Habana. Cuba reitera su apoyo al gobierno de Evo Morales en medio del referendo separatista en Bolivia. El presidente de Panamá Martín Torrijos visita Cuba.

Seguridad: La Primera conferencia Internacional sobre Seguridad y Defensa acuerda que el actual sistema del Hemisferio Occidental debe ser reconstruido basado en nuevos conceptos.

Relaciones Cuba- Estados Unidos: Washington reitera que, antes de iniciar conversaciones con el presidente Raúl Castro, Cuba debe hacer grandes cambios hacia la democracia. La Sección de Intereses de EEUU en La Habana dice que el número de cubanos inmigrantes ilegales que tratan de llegar a las costas de EEUU ha crecido en los últimos seis meses. El gobierno de Cuba denuncia la “inacción” del gobierno de EEUU en el caso de Luis Posada Carriles. Cuba y EEUU intercambian acusaciones después de la disolución de una manifestación pacífica de las Damas de Blanco.



DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

April 1: Cuban President Raul Castro presided over the inaugural session of the 7th Congress of the Union of Cuban Artists and Writers (UNEAC), underway until April 4, at Havana’s Convention Center. Some 400 delegates from all Cuban provinces are attending the Congress, including National Prize winners in the areas of literature, dance, theater, cinema, radio and TV. The representatives of Cuban culture and arts will be

analyzing, during the Congress, a large array of issues that will strengthen the cultural policy implemented by the Cuban revolution. (*ACN*, 1/4/08)

April 1: Tackled from an analytical point of view, without any complacency and aimed toward the future, relations between culture and society took centre place at the 7th Congress of UNEAC (Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba). The report presented before the plenary and read by president of the commission, Helmo Hernandez, highlighted the need to define "the new map where Cuban revolutionary culture will be registered." We have considerable experience, and a serene, wise analysis will help us reject what is really useless, without ruling out the permanent exercise of criticism and the implementation of fields to favor it, says the document. After reviewing the vast process of analysis generated within Cuban society and during preparation of the forum, the text says that unity of all forces has always been the fundamental strategy of the Cuban Revolution. This unity does not mean homogeneity of thinking, but rather the harmonizing of different views, it adds. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/4/08)

April 1: Cuban writer Leonardo Padura said that the congress of writers and artists, running in Havana April 1-4, will be able to meet expectations if it aims for a comprehensive working approach. "If, from what is discussed and agreed on, the congress can lead us to a prospect of comprehensive work in the Cuban cultural universe, all expectations will be met in the near future," Padura told the press, while attending the 7th Congress of UNEAC (Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba) at the Havana Convention Center. "I hope these expectations are met, not only from what is to happen here in the four-day congress, but above all, from what they will generate as a working projection," commented Padura, who is currently the most published Cuban novelist abroad. "We are aware that the Cuban press needs a deep renovation that must be implemented from an essentially cultural view," asserted Padura. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/4/08)

April 1: A coalition of internal dissidents demanded the government of Raúl Castro to comply with the two human rights pacts it signed at the UN last February and to publish them "in full," according to a statement handed to the media. Under the title "Comply with the Pacts," the Liberal Union of the Republic of Cuba (ULRC) calls on "all Cubans, without exception, to demand from the regime the publication in full" of the pacts signed at the UN and pleads for "solidarity from the international community." (*AFP*, 2/4/08)

April 1: Cuban shops began selling computers, DVD players and other consumer electronics. But it remained to be seen whether people living on state salaries of about \$20 a month will be able to afford them. Resolution No. 43/08, which allows the purchase of electronics, was one of the reforms Raul Castro's government quietly unveiled in efforts to liberalize internal restrictions on the island's 11 million inhabitants. (*Sun Sentinel*, 1/4/08)

April 1: Cubans crowded shops to buy DVD players and electric bikes that went on sale for the first time as new President Raul Castro moved to lift many restrictions in the one-party socialist state. Stores were authorized to sell dozens of electric goods that were previously banned, including microwave ovens, flat-screen televisions and even

computers. "This should have been done long ago. They should never have been banned," said Felipe, a 53-year-old engineer, who lined up impatiently to buy his first DVD player. The Philips and Panasonic DVD players were priced between \$118 and \$162, much more expensive than in other countries but lower than the going rate on Cuba's thriving black-market. Computers, which until now could only be bought in Cuba by government or foreign companies, were also supposed to go on sale but none had changed hands by the end of the day. At a shop in western Havana, Microsoft keyboards and mice were on show, but Dell laptops and desktop computers were still in their boxes awaiting for prices to be decided. A saleswoman said computers with 80 gigabytes of hard drive memory, 512 megabytes of RAM and a Celeron P4 chip made by Intel would sell for about \$865. "This is all good and fine, but my purchasing power is too low to buy anything," said Yaima, a teacher who earns 592 pesos a month, about \$26.60. "I'll have to wait until they strengthen the peso." (*Reuters*, 1/4/08)

April 2: Fidel Castro sent a letter to over 400 delegates gathered at the 7th Congress of the Cuban Union of Artists and Writers expressing that although he can not attend the forum he is aware of the concerns of all members of the organization. He said that two days ago an article in the international press read about 30 brilliant inventions, which transformed the world: the CD, the GPS, the DVD, the cell phone, the fax, Internet, microwave, Facebook, digital cameras and e-mail, among others. The amount of dollars involved in the sale of each product gives the transnational corporations such long figures that they have become unintelligible. Or what is worse, each of those products will be replaced with a new and more effective invention; while not even the intimate conversation of a couple at a park bench can be kept in secret. In this same direction, Castro asked in his letter: "Does this kind of existence, proposed by Imperialism, make any sense at all? Can mental and physical health be guaranteed under the unknown effects of so many electronic waves, for which neither the human body nor the mind has been prepared in its development?" "A Congress of Cuban artists and writers cannot miss addressing these knotty issues," Castro said and added that "many will say that this is fatalism. I reply: No, it is not. Fatalism is not putting forth the problem. If that were the case, I would not use your time to read these lines." [[Carta al VII Congreso de la UNEAC](#)] (*AIN*, 2/4/08)

April 2: Cuba's state-run television broadcaster will start a 24-hour channel with mostly foreign content in a move to provide Cuban audiences with more variety. The Cuban Institute of Radio and Television, ICRT, made the announcement at a conference of the Cuban writers and artists guild, where intellectuals have criticized the poor television programming in the socialist state. ICRT vice president Luis Acosta said the new channel will have content from a dozen countries, but he did not give details. Cuba has five channels that are all run by the state. One of them, Cubavision International, can only be seen over cable television. It broadcasts official Cuban news and culture to the world 24 hours a day. Cuban cable TV distributed in Havana and at beach resort hotels includes three Chinese channels. (*AP*, 3/4/08)

April 2: Cuban writers and artists urged authorities and colleagues to "embrace" new technologies instead of banning or disregarding them. Close to 400 delegates attended the

7th Congress of the National Cuban Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC). “We are in the presence of a new war waged by means of new communication technologies, the entertainment industry and marketing strategies, in which socialism has lost many battles,” according to the event’s opening report. [[Cultura y Sociedad](#)] (AP, 3/4/08)

April 2: Norberto Collado Abreu, the helmsman of the Granma yacht that carried Fidel Castro from Mexico to Cuba to launch his revolution in 1956, has died in Havana. The Cuban News Agency did not give his age or the cause of death. The agency said Collado Abreu served in the navy during World War II, but his political leanings later landed him in prison, where he met Castro and joined his revolutionary movement. Both were freed under amnesty and went into exile in Mexico, only to return and launch the uprising that would topple dictator Fulgencio Batista. Collado Abreu held various posts in the Cuban navy under Castro until 1981. (AP, 2/4/08)

April 2: Cubans who sign up for cell phone services will be able to call direct anywhere in the world -- albeit at high rates --, and will also be able to receive calls free of charge from anywhere, according to an official document. An internal document of the Cuban Telecommunications Company (ETECSA) indicates that the rates will be \$2.91US per minute to the United States (2.70 CUC, Cuban convertible peso) and \$2.64US (2.45 CUC) to the rest of North America. For South America, the rates per minute will be \$4.80US (4.45 CUC), while for the rest of the world they will be \$6.31US (5.85 CUC). One CUC equals \$1.20US and 24 Cuban pesos. (AFP, 2/4/08)

April 3: Lawyer Yamilé Llanes Labrada, wife of political prisoner Dr. José Luis García Paneque, deemed her husband’s situation as “extremely worrisome”. García Paneque, jailed in “Las Mangas” prison in Bayamo, Granma province, lives together with very dangerous criminal prisoners, amidst increasing repression and intimidation, causing his wife to fear for his safety. (*Radio Martí*, 3/4/08)

April 3: The growing disconnection between the state and young people in Cuba is a hot topic in the closed congress of the government-allied union of writers and artists. The union, known as UNEAC, is holding its first congress in 10 years in Havana's convention center. In a lengthy article, the Communist youth daily *Juventud Rebelde* noted that only 1,453 writers and artists, or 17 percent of the union membership, were under the age of 40. Just 3 percent of the 400 participants in the congress were under 40. "The numbers speak for themselves," the article said. "The average age of the membership is 60 years," filmmaker and writer Victor Casaus was quoted as saying. "Where is the continuity of Cuban culture?" Playwright and critic [Norge](#) Espinosa asked: "What is the relevance of the UNEAC to young people today? What is its impact? (...) The truth is that a lot of talent has been lost because [young people] have not found a space." (*Sun Sentinel*, 3/4/08)

April 3: A meeting of Cuban intellectuals denounced the communist nation's ills while also praising the reforms and new freedom of expression under new President Raul Castro. The Congress of Writers and Artists was a sign of the times and it was given ample state media coverage in Cuba, where Raul Castro has promised to lift "excessive

prohibitions" on daily life since he succeeded his brother, Fidel Castro, as president on February 24. "We must prepare for the new future of our country" was the headline Communist Party newspaper Granma gave to historian Eusebio Leal's speech at the meeting. "We are all expectant (...) because what the country felt up to yesterday was not convenient, today it finds necessary," said Leal, one of the country's most respected figures and a friend of Fidel Castro. Leal pulled out a cellphone and praised a recent measure allowing ordinary Cubans to have them. "Every day the news is encouraging ... dealing with themes as profound as in 1959 (when the revolution triumphed)," Leal said, referring to other recent measures granting more land and freedoms to farmers. (*Reuters*, 4/4/08)

April 3: "The Revolution is today stronger and more prepared to find answers to questions and solutions to problems," said Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage during a plenary session of the 7th Congress of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) that concludes today at Havana's Convention Center. Lage, who gave his impressions on the event and described its debates and documents as profoundly revolutionary and, hence, critical, said he was satisfied for dedicating a few hours to listening and learning. "It has been useful to listen to new and not so new ideas, to concepts that I regard as correct and others that I need more time to analyze," he stressed. "I do not agree with the pessimism of a few – fortunately only one or two – and I join the optimism of the vast majority and I understand the impatience of all because it is also mine," he added. Lage said he was concerned about those who think that low prices and high salaries are the result of bureaucratic decisions and not of what is possible to achieve. "Nothing can be criticized with the necessary harshness if we forget our recent past, where we come from and where we still are to some extent, a historic period of almost two decades in which we decided to maintain an ideal of justice that was almost impossible to maintain and we did for the astonishment of all and even of ourselves, and we did it because we have Fidel with us," Lage noted. (*ACN*, 4/4/08)

April 3: After decades of being browbeaten by Communist state-run television, a new 24-hour channel with foreign content is being offered to Cuba's television viewers, many of whom were so bored they had turned off their sets years ago. It's the latest incremental change by the country's new president, Raul Castro, younger brother of the ailing Fidel. And like the new freedoms, which allow ordinary Cubans to buy mobile phones and stay in hotels – if they can afford the hard currency rates – the changes are designed to breathe life into Cuba's collapsing political and economic system, as well as to raise revenue for the Castro regime. "They are probably doing it because Cuban television is so bad that people have illegal satellites or rent pirated DVDs. They will do anything to avoid watching state-run television," said the dissident writer Miriam Leiva from Havana yesterday. "They are giving us the circus, without giving us bread." (*The Independent*, 4/4/08)

April 3: The certain and immediate danger to the planet and the human species posed by global warming to the atmosphere is the central issue of the Human Development Report (HDR) 2007/2008, issued by the United Nations Development Programme, titled "Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world." The report was

presented in Cuba in the National Aquarium's theater by Susan McDade, UNPD permanent representative in Cuba, along with deputy ministers Jose Antonio Díaz Duque and América Santos, of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (CITMA), and Juan Manuel Presa, of the Ministry of Basic Industry (MINBAS). The occasion was a meeting of scientific, productive, educational and investigative institutions in Cuba to review the progress of the National Science and Technology Program and the impact of global warming on the island. José Antonio Díaz Duque, deputy minister of CITMA, expressed thanks for the opportune publication of this report by the UNDP and noted that international commitments have been very weak given the seriousness of the problem; at the same time, he noted, the immense majority of consumption systems are absolutely unsustainable. Cuba is a pioneer in the scientific development of research into climate change, the high-ranking official affirmed. He reported that measures for adaptation and mitigation are now underway on the island. Other efforts underway include reforestation. (*Granma International*, 3/4/08)

April 4: Topics that are taboo in Cuba, absent from media coverage and missing in the political discourse were nevertheless present in debates at a congress of intellectuals who advocated a greater role for criticism in society, and more room for dialogue and participation. "This is one more sign that the country is changing. Analyses are much more realistic, and there's a shift in attitude among officials when they face criticism," a participant at the Seventh Congress of the Cuban Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC) told IPS. "Most conflicts over publicly circulated works arise because appropriate, respectful dialogue is not established in time between officials and the artists, who quite rightly feel committed to the integrity of their work," said critic Helmo Hernández. The analysis went to the essence of present-day Cuban society. "We must delve into and debate not only what socialism means, but also, most importantly, how to make it an attractive and culturally desirable goal," said essayist and poet Víctor Fowler, one of the participants in last year's e-mail debate on cultural freedom. In Fowler's view, socialism must be transformed into "a pleasant way of life marked by an extremely wide spectrum including lifestyles, sexual identities, entertainment, folk practices, religious forms, open spaces for people to use, and new forms of interpersonal communication." Becoming more attractive is a "categorical imperative" for "a social process, in this case a socialist revolution that is already half a century old and has, in addition to external enemies, the contradictions that the process itself has generated in its progress, and the attrition that wears down so much strength," said Fowler. (*IPS*/ 7/4/08)

April 4: A Cuban blogger who regularly criticizes the island's communist system in her posts has won Spain's prestigious Ortega y Gasset journalism prize in the digital category. Yoani Sánchez, 32, uses Internet cafes in Havana to run her blog, "Generacion Y", named after the generation of 30-something Cubans whose names begin with the letter Y as a result of the Soviet influence on the island during the 1980s. She recently complained that the government has blocked Cubans from accessing her blog, but hinted that there are easy ways to get around the restrictions. (*The Miami Herald*, 4/4/08)

April 4: Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto advocated creating in people, particularly youth, solid cultural references to challenge false models of alleged capitalist

postmodernism. "We cannot accept or be satisfied with our youth saying our messages are low quality and boring, that the canned TV programs from the United States are more entertaining," Prieto said. Addressing the closing session of the 7th Congress of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), the Cuban official stressed that rejection of "pseudo-cultural garbage should become an instinctive reflex." "We need to wage a battle against colonialist contamination, so that our people can enjoy their own authentic culture and others that open new paths in the world," he noted. The Cuban minister praised the Congress decision to create a permanent commission on culture and values, aimed at restoring the spirit of society wherever it has been damaged. Prieto also advocated for the UNEAC to remain alive and alert, so it can wage the war being forced upon Cuba in the cultural and symbolic field. "UNEAC should keep participating in discussions and remain united around the Revolution's cultural policy," he added. The minister listed the millions Cuba has invested in cultural and social projects over the last decade, and pointed out that some of those stemmed from discussions held at previous UNEAC events. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/4/08)

April 4: Cuban President Raul Castro praised the way in which the 7th Congress of the Union of Artists and Writers (UNEAC) developed over the past four days. During the closing session of the forum, Raul Castro said that it was a congress marked by varied discussion and that he agreed with most of the opinions expressed by participants. "It is this variety of opinions that we fight for, said the Cuban head of state, who reiterated that the best decisions stem from major discrepancies. In his brief statement at the end of the plenary session, Raul Castro said that like Fidel, he followed the development of the Congress. He reminded participants about the need to be well informed since some of the issues raised during the debates had already been addressed. After expressing appreciation, on behalf of Fidel Castro and himself, for the paintings presented by artists Humberto Hernandez and Vicente Hernandez, Raul said that, like many of the intellectuals attending the forum, he still maintains his spirit of struggle, something that must always be present disregarding the age. (*ACN*, 4/4/08)

April 4: Filmmaking has not escaped the overwhelming "machismo" of Cuban society. Getting a foot in the door in the industry, an almost exclusively male preserve, is still wishful thinking for most women directors. In the five-decade history of the state Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry (ICAIC), only one feature-length fiction film has been entirely directed by a woman: "De cierta manera" (One Way or Another), by Sara Gómez (1943-1974). Her work was considered defiantly critical and controversial, and is hardly known outside academic circles or the world of film critics. Filmmaker Rebeca Chávez is now in the final stages of editing "Rojo vivo" (Red Hot), her film inspired by the armed struggle against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952-1959) in the city of Santiago de Cuba, 850 kilometres east of Havana. Danae Diéguez, a professor at the Faculty of Media, Communication and Audiovisual Arts of the Cuban Higher Institute of Art (ISA), has devoted special attention to the study of women's participation in local filmmaking, where "political will has not been enough to eliminate machismo and the patriarchal culture." Diéguez, who is writing her doctoral thesis on "Women Behind the Lens: Cuban Films Directed by Women," told the press that it is both a cultural and economic phenomenon. Combine both elements, and you get

what probably prompted Cuban filmmaker Mayra Vilasís to say "it's easier for a woman to become an airline pilot than a film director." (*IPS*, 4/4/08)

April 6: Sixty five pilots that graduated in Camagüey, Cuba, include 20 women. Graduates are going to work for the Cuban Aviation Enterprise and Aero Caribbean, since none of them have before faced accidents or risks linked to their professional capacity; said Alejandro Ballesteros, head of the institution. Located at "Ignacio Agramonte" International Airport, this school belongs to the Institute of Civil Aeronautic of Cuba and was opened on April 26th 2003. The origin of "Ignacio Agramonte" International Airport dates from 80 years ago, when an air station that belonged to Pan American Airways Company was opened. (*Cuba Headlines*, 6/4/08)

April 7: More than 30 women have become pioneers of female Freemasonry in socialist Cuba, founding two lodges under the auspices of the Women's Grand Lodge of Chile, which will provide them with support and advice until they can function independently. "We want them to do things in their own way, according to their customs," Mónica Morós told the press. She is the grand chancellor of the Chilean lodge, which sent a delegation of over 40 women Masons to Havana to initiate the Cuban women and set up the Venus and Victoria lodges. Digna Gisela Medina, Worshipful Master of the Venus Lodge, said that some 60 Cuban women want to be initiated into Freemasonry, and the group will now focus on creating a third lodge, possibly at Caibarién, on the north coast, which will allow them to form the Women's Grand Lodge of Cuba. The group of new Masons includes doctors, teachers, technicians of various specialties, musicians, singers, psychologists, homemakers and university students. The youngest is 18 and the eldest is over 60. "We're ready to grow," said Medina, who led the organisational work prior to the creation of the two lodges. (*IPS*, 7/4/08)

April 8: The Cuba chapter of the Latin-American Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR) criticized the government's decision to give lands in usufruct to peasants' co-operatives because "it maintains the dependency" of producers." "It is precisely the state's control over the land, which is the main reason for the agricultural sector's lack of productivity. Hence, this measure does not change the fundamental cause which has generated the extreme poverty that characterizes Cuba's (agricultural) fields," said in a statement the president of the organization, Belinda Salas Tápanes. "FLAMUR advocates for private property on the land and the establishment of co-operatives independent from the state's tutelage, as a means of achieving real sustainable development in rural areas," said Salas Tápanes. (*EER, Cubanet*, 8/4/08)

April 8: President Raul Castro's government has begun to reorganize Cuba's family doctor program, a pillar of the communist country's universal free health care system. More than half the offices will be closed and staffing at the remainder increased, medical sources said of the health reform. Cubans complain that the family doctor program has been short on staff since the government began sending thousands of doctors to Venezuela in 2000. In the provinces, family doctor offices will now be staffed by a doctor and nurse the entire day, instead of just in the mornings, health care sources said. "There has been a lot of movement in recent weeks. They are painting the offices,

developing a system to insure a proper lunch for staff and more equipment is arriving at the clinics as well," a nurse in central Cuba said. In Havana, a sprawling city of 2.2 million people, there is a similar plan, but it will take more time due to a lack of doctors and nurses and will include for now traditional offices with a doctor only in the morning. (*Reuters*, 8/4/08)

April 7: One fireman died and nine other people were injured due to a large fire that started at "El Encanto" store in Camaguey city, in eastern Cuba, Cuban press reported. Over 500 men from the Interior Ministry and the Revolutionary Armed Forces fought the fire for over six hours until they finally extinguished it. However, the flames destroyed the two-story department store, the biggest in the province. Jesus Garcia, head of the civil defense, said the fire was the worst in Cuba in 30 years. Officials were investigating the cause of the fire. Fires are not frequent in Cuba and most of them have occurred in forest regions in drought seasons. (*EFE, EER*, 8/4/08)

April 8: Cuban President Raul Castro conferred the Medal for Bravery, post mortem, on young firefighter Alejandro Clivillé Sariol, who died from a heart attack caused by asphyxia, while trying to put out a blaze at a local department store in Camaguey, in eastern Cuba. The distinction acknowledges the heroic action of the young firefighter, said Rosario Penton, member of the provincial bureau of the Cuban Communist Party, as she addressed participants at the burial ceremony. Firefighter Alejandro Cliville was one of the first to arrive at the place in flames, a department store named El Encanto, in downtown Camaguey. A dozen of people were also hospitalized without risk for their lives as a result of the blaze, which was put out in six hours. (*ACN*, 8/4/08)

April 8: The preservation and management of coastal areas is one of the topics to be dealt with by environmental experts from 12 nations gathered in Havana to attend a conference on protected areas. Maritza Garcia Garcia, director of the National Protected Areas of Cuba (SNAP) told the press that the holding of the Fifth Regional Conference on Protected Areas constitutes a recognition of the international work carried out by Cuba to protect the environment. She highlighted the joint effort by several Cuban institutions and governmental entities to boost protection measures in coastal areas throughout the country. SNAP's action program covers 22 percent of the national territory, including 263 protected sites, 80 percent of which are of national interest. (*ACN*, 8/4/08)

April 9: Prominent dissident Oswaldo Paya issued a call to the public to participate in the Cuban Forum Campaign so that "fair and needed changes" are made on the communist-ruled island. In a communique released in Havana, Paya, the leader of the illegal Christian Liberation Movement, said that he was calling on "all Cubans of all ages, political positions and experiences without exception" to achieve Cuban rights "without foreign interference or intervention." The campaign sets forth three "first steps" that should be taken in Cuba, including the "release of those who are imprisoned for peacefully defending, exercising and promoting human rights." Paya, the 2002 recipient of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for human rights, also called for changes in the laws to guarantee freedom of expression, the press and association, the ability to freely leave and enter Cuba and the right to own private companies. He said that "to

achieve the spaces of participation that will be opened with these changes in the laws (...) a national dialogue (must be) convened and free elections (held) for a Constituent Assembly so that Cubans can truly democratically and sovereignly decide on their present and their future." [[Cuban Forum: The First Steps toward Change](#)] (*EFE*, 9/4/08)

April 9: The Archdiocese of Havana's magazine, "Espacio Laical", has called on Raul Castro to unveil his political agenda and to allow Cubans to participate in the reforms he has begun since his election as president of Cuba. The current situation "needs to be fixed. As such it is inescapable, indeed necessary—inasmuch as possible—to involve citizens more in this process of adjustment, change and transformation," the magazine stated. While the magazine acknowledged that change in Cuba will take time, "the current state of daily life" in the country makes change urgent. For this reason, the publication called on President Castro to make known his political agenda for the country. In order for the Cuban people to be involved and to be assured that it will indeed be carried out, Castro must make his plans known "in a sufficient manner," the magazine stated. [[Por Todos y para el Bien de Todos](#)] (*CNA, AFP*, 10,11/4/08)

April 10: Communist Cuba is revamping the state wage system to create more incentive by allowing workers to earn as much as they can, local media said, in the latest sign new President Raul Castro wants to improve the country's economic performance. Under Labor and Social Security resolution nine, and for the first time in decades, there is no limit on a state employee's earnings, state-television reported. "For the first time it is clearly and precisely stated that a salary does not have a limit, that the roof of a salary depends on productivity," economic commentator Ariel Terrero said. The Cuban state controls about 90 percent of the country's economic activity and employs the vast majority of the labor force, often setting wages from central offices in Havana. Cuba has always prided itself on its limited range of salaries, while at the same time some jobs do have perks and in the past bonuses were available for some workers. However, the egalitarian approach has come under fire in recent years for holding back production. "One reason for low productivity is there is little wage incentive and this breaks productivity and stops bigger salaries," Terrero said. He said the resolution, signed in February but yet to be published in the official Gazette, is aimed at breaking the cycle. (*Reuters*, 10/4/08)

April 10: After 30 years, the Catholic Church celebrated its first mass in a church confiscated by the Cuban government in 1975 and returned in 2006, after an extensive restoration. According to the Episcopal Conference, the church in question is the church in Tarará, a beach resort to the east of Havana which in the last 50 years has been a holiday camp for school children, a children's hospital for the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion, tourist marina and Spanish language school for Chinese students. Although it was originally a catholic church – the Church of Santa Elena --, it had to be consecrated again, as during 30 years of official occupation it was used as a warehouse and a discotheque. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/4/08)

April 10: A group of 18 well known Cuban dissidents announced in Havana that they had created an "Agenda for the Transition" -- a political platform for the process that "is

approaching" and which should take place in an "atmosphere of national reconciliation." "We are convinced that the process of transition that is approaching in Cuba should take place in an atmosphere of national reconciliation," said Martha Beatriz Roque, who with Vladimiro Roca directs the new organization. Among the other members are Elizardo Sánchez, René Gómez Manzano, Félix Bonne Carcasés, Guillermo Fariñas, Jorge Luis García Pérez (Antúnez) and Francisco Chaviano and Héctor Palacios. Other dissidents, like Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas, did not answer an invitation to join the effort. (AFP, *The Miami Herald*, 11/4/08)

April 11: Thousands of Cubans will be able to get title to state-owned homes under new regulations, a step that could lay the groundwork for broader housing reform. The measure was the first legal decree formally published since Raúl Castro succeeded his brother Fidel as president in February. It came a day after state television said the government would also do away with wage limits, allowing state employees to earn as much as they can as an incentive to productivity. The housing decree spells out rules to let Cubans renting from their state employers keep their apartment or house after leaving their jobs. They could gain title and even pass it on to their children or other relatives. Those who could take advantage of the new law include military families, sugar workers, construction workers, teachers and doctors. (AP, 12/4/08)

April 11: Recently announced agricultural reforms in Cuba could be the springboard for more changes, Cuba's official newspaper said. The official Granma newspaper also welcomed the lifting of restrictions in several sectors of the economy. It will now be easier for state workers to own their homes and pass them on to their children. Wage limits are to be removed to allow more incentives. The official newspaper said the reforms were initiated by Fidel Castro and expanded on by Raul with contributions from millions of Cubans with a view to improving socialism. But in a separate article, Fidel Castro criticized what he terms people who worship selfishness. Referring to a report on wealth disparities in Romania - a former Communist country - he warned of the dangers of easy access to consumer goods. [[Bush, los millonarios, el consumismo y el subconsumo](#)] (BBC, 12/4/08)

April 13: Cuban First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura urged workers to fulfill their duties during a tour around the municipality of Santiago de Cuba. "If everyone does his duty, no one will defeat us," said Machado Ventura, who is also a member of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). According to Granma news daily, the Cuban VP, accompanied by Misael Enamorado Dager, First Secretary of the PCC in the province of Santiago de Cuba, visited production centers and farms, where he described as very positive an ongoing strategy to replace the importation of vegetables for the tourist sector of the territory. During his tour, Machado Ventura also learned about the work being done to improve the quality of potable water and its supply to the people in Santiago de Cuba. He also checked on the construction of the fourth Computers Palace of the country and spoke with workers who are refurbishing several gastronomic centers in Santiago. Also, Machado Ventura presided over the PCC Assembly in the municipality of Santiago de Cuba. "To change everything that needs to be changed means to transform things in order to achieve better results after we have identified and solved the existing

problems,” he said. The VP added that the PCC has new tasks ahead and that modifications will continue to take place always respecting the principles of the Revolution and Socialism. (*ACN*, 14/4/08)

April 14: The International Festival of Poor Cinema to be held in Gibara, Holguin from the 14 up to the 20 of April 2008 is a way to jump over the fence of banality and fake glamour of some media, to debate problems invisible for the great media and to wake up sensibility in the eastern Cuban communities. This sixth edition, to be opened with the Cuban film *Personal Belongings* made by Alejandro Bruges, will show about 120 productions from 20 countries, among them Palestine, Greece, Italy, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay and Cuba. The event will recall the memory of Octavio Cortazar through the showing of his main work, the documentary *Por Primera Vez* (For the first time). (*Cuba Headlines*, 14/4/08)

April 14: Cuban National Bio-preparation Center researchers are involved in the making of a compound used in Cuba to counteract proliferation of the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito, transmitter of dengue disease. The new biological control emerged from the work by Cuban scientists to protect people from the transmitting agent's effects. The new product, patented by LABIOFAM Laboratories and made of natural substances, is called BACTIBE and biologically eliminates the *Aedes Aegypti*, which affects around 50 million people in tropical areas of the world, according to the United Nations Organization. (*AIN*, 14/4/08)

April 14: Walterio Carbonell's remains (1920-2008) were buried in the Colon Cemetery, in Havana. Along with his relatives, cultural figures and workers from the José Martí National Library, where he worked for many years, paid their last respects to the distinguished intellectual. During his eulogy, sociologist Esteban Morales emphasized Carbonell's prolific intellectual career and the relevance of his essay "How national culture emerged," which should be a standard for reflection for Cuba's social scientists, he said. In the '60s, Walterio clashed with authorities on the island for publicly disclosing his ideas on prevailing racism in Cuba. Eliades Acosta, head of the Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Party, attended the burial, along with vice-ministers of Culture. (*Granma, Cubanet*, 15,18/4/08)

April 14: Lines stretched for blocks outside phone stores as ordinary Cubans were allowed to sign up for cellular phone service for the first time. The contracts cost about US\$120 (euro76) to activate — half a year's wages on the average state salary. And that doesn't include a phone or credit to make and receive calls. Still, lines formed before the centers opened, and waits grew to more than an hour. "It's great. It's really great. And everyone wants to be first to sign up," said Usan Astorga, a 19-year-old medical student who stood for about 20 minutes before her line moved at all. Getting through the day without a cell phone is unthinkable now in most developed countries, but Cuba's government limited access to cell phones as well as kitchen appliances, hotels and other luxuries in an attempt to preserve the relative economic equality that is a hallmark of social life in communist Cuba. (*AP*, 14/4/08)

April 15: La Soledad” Church and “La Merced” Complex (church and convent), two symbolic buildings of the colonial architecture in Camaguey, have been nominated to the National Awards of Restoration and Preservation, respectively. Restorative and conservative works have been carried out recently for keeping the originality of architectural and artistic values of both buildings, which are located in the downtown of this legendary city, founded in 1514. (*AIN*, 15/4/08)

April 15: A former Cuban consul in Mexico who once fled the island using a fake passport and claims he worked for Cuban intelligence is asking authorities to let island residents travel abroad without government approval. Pedro Anibal Riera Escalante made the request to parliament. Expectations are high that President Raúl Castro's government may drop the travel requirements. Riera in 2000 used a false Mexican passport to board a commercial flight from Havana to Mexico, but was denied asylum in Mexico, which sent him back to his homeland. He got a five-year prison sentence and is now free. Riera claims he was a top anti-CIA intelligence official for Cuba for 25 years. He was consul in Mexico 1986-91. (*AP*, 16/4/08)

April 15: Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez along with other members of the Expedición (Expedition) cultural tour performed in Sancti Spiritus's provincial prison. At the beginning of the show, also attended by Cuban artists Augusto Blanca, Carlos Ruiz de la Tejera and Ernesto Rancaño, the founder of the Cuban Nueva Trova movement explained to the inmates the motivations of the artistic tour and expressed his confidence on the improvement of human behaviour. Miguel Acebo Cortiñas, member of Cuban Central Committee and first secretary of Cuban Communist Party in this province and Fidel Pérez Luzbert, president of the government were also present as well as other local leaders and artists. (*Escambray*, 16/4/08)

April 15: A small number of inmates from the Nieves Morejón prison in Sancti Spiritus, were selected to attend a presentation of the artistic brigade headed by singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez. Only a limited number of prisoners with short sentences and those who collaborate with the guards were allowed to attend the event. The rest of the prisoners watched the show on closed-circuit television, except those who do not support the revolution. (*Cubanacán Press*, 18/4/08)

April 16: Fidel Castro’s latest missive is a direct attack on a column published in one of Cuba's state run newspapers, which suggested that the latest series of reforms launched by Raul Castro are a step toward progress. Although Castro has written slight barbs at his brother's policies before, it was the first reference to a recent string of reforms recently enacted that reversed years of Castro regulations. In a column published in *Granma*, the Communist Party daily, the former Cuban leader chided those who seek changes to avoid a repetition of the "special period" of retrenchment in Cuba that followed the demise of the socialist bloc. In the article, titled "Making No Concessions to Enemy Ideology," Castro wrote that, "People must be very careful with everything they say, so as not to play the game of enemy ideology. They cannot blame the Special Period for the system that imperialism has imposed upon the world". In what may have been veiled advice to reformers, Castro wrote: "Meditate hard on what you say, what you affirm, so you don't

make shameful concessions." The article, Castro said, was written "after listening to a public comment disseminated by one of the Revolution's mass media, which I shall not mention specifically." He appears to be taking a direct jab at an article published on April 11 in the Havana daily *Juventud Rebelde*, written by senior columnist Luis Sexto. Titled "Going in reverse is not going forward", it refers to the concessions - the adjustments - Cuba had to make after it lost the economic backing of the Soviet Union. "For example, if the experience accumulated in our deteriorating circumstances indicates that big agricultural companies are not recommended and that (...) family or individual labor be cooperatized or encouraged, why should we insist on that which does not prosper or that which needs an excess of resources for completion?" Sexto wrote. "Is a `concession' a step backward?" he wrote. [[Making No Concessions to Enemy Ideology](#)] (*The Miami Herald, Granma International, EFE, 16/4/08*)

April 16: Cuba said that a series of reforms ordered by new President Raul Castro will strengthen socialism and it will not tolerate attempts by the United States and local dissidents to subvert it. "There is no space for the dreams of adversaries, internal mercenaries and fifth columnists," an editorial in the ruling Communist Party newspaper *Granma* said. "There will be a more perfect socialism sustained and defended by a united people led by Fidel, Raul and the party's leadership," it said. Since officially taking over in February as Cuba's first new leader in almost half a century, Raul Castro has lifted restrictions on Cubans using cellular telephones, staying at hotels and buying computers and DVD players. He has also begun to decentralize agriculture to provide incentives to private farmers, and lift wage caps, among other measures. A number of dissident organizations have condemned the moves as too little and too late, and are demanding freedom for political prisoners, a market-based economy and multi-party democracy. (*Reuters, 16/4/08*)

April 16: Cuban sports authorities laid down the law after a wild melee broke out two days earlier during Pinar del Rio's 7-6 victory over Sancti Spiritus in game seven of the baseball western division semifinal. A note published in the state press called the 20-minute brawl initiated by Pinar del Rio players shameful and demanded the "strictest respect" for the sport and its fans. "We expect that the final of this National Series, in Santiago de Cuba as in Pinar del Rio, will be played at the height of our sports movement and what the Cuban people deserve," the note said. An accompanying message from the Pinar del Rio team apologized to the Cuban public: "What happened has nothing to do with the conduct and ethic that has marked Pinar del Rio teams in the history of Cuban sport." (*Sun Sentinel, 16/4/08*)

April 18: Raul Castro plans to lift Cuba's restrictions on foreign travel, Spanish daily *El Pais* reported, citing unidentified people close to the government. Cubans will no longer need special permission to leave the island or a legalized letter of invitation after the rules are introduced in the next days or weeks, the newspaper reported. Cubans have previously had to obtain a so-called white card, a process which could take months with no guarantee of success, the newspaper reported. The white card will now be restricted to some government officials, members of the armed forces and some others, such as recently qualified doctors, the newspaper said. (*Bloomberg, 18/4/08*)

April 18: One of Cuba's youngest "prisoners of conscience" was recovering after he was nearly strangled to death by a fellow prisoner, while security personnel watched nearby, pro-democracy activists and family said. Normando Hernandez Gonzales, 38, was allegedly attacked on April 14, by a fellow inmate at the Carlos J. Finlay military hospital in Havana, where he has been hospitalized for seven months due to tuberculosis and several other potentially life-threatening diseases, all of them contracted in jail. He was transferred last September from Kilo 7 Prison, in central Camaguey Province, north to the hospital in the Cuban capital, a nine-hour bus ride away. His wife Yaraí Reyes Marín explained in a telephone statement released by the Cuban Democratic Directorate (CDD), a pro-democracy group, that her husband was nearly strangled to death by a common prisoner sentenced for murdering a police officer. The attack happened as four guards were watching, she was quoted as saying, adding that another prisoner unsuccessfully attempted to defend Hernandez Gonzalez. He, "has gouges on his neck and left shoulder...[The guards] waited until he was partially suffocated, and after that, when they saw that the other prisoner was unable to remove the attacker from Normando, that was when they went in to remove him," Reyes Marín reportedly said. (*BosNewsLife*, 18/4/08)

April 20: Cuba will air the award-winning US television drama *The Sopranos* and current series *Grey's Anatomy*, the Communist youth newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, said. HBO's *The Sopranos* depicts the life of a New Jersey Mafia boss and his family and will be broadcast by state-run TV Tuesday evenings, while ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*, which follows the lives of doctors working in a hospital, will be broadcast on Thursdays. *House*, *Friends*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond* have entered Cubans' living rooms, and the forensic series *CSI* is a huge hit on the Caribbean island where programming is weighted heavily toward educational, variety and children's programming, propaganda, Latin American and Cuban soap operas and sports. Cuba has four national TV channels and various provincial stations, all government operated. (*Reuters*, 20/4/08)

April 21: Cuba opened the International Information Sciences Congress Info 2008 with the participation of over 600 experts from about 20 countries. The agenda includes issues like quality procedures and knowledge, analysis and visualization of information, training and qualification in information society and metadata, among others. Another important event will join the activities foreseen at the International Workshop on Business Intelligence and Knowledge Process between Companies 2008. The first Info Congress was held in Cuba in 1988 and has been held every two years since. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/4/08)

April 21: Dissident leader Leonardo Miguel Bruzón Ávila was arrested along with activists Omar Bustamante Mustelier and Armando Leiva, in his home in Havana. The arrest took place after Bruzón celebrated a Christian ritual in his home, and later shouted, time and again: "freedom for all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Cuba." The detainees were interrogated and released 24 hours later. (*Cubanet*, 25/4/08)

April 21: A group of Cuban women peacefully demonstrating for the release of their jailed husbands were roughed up by a mob and arrested near the offices of President Raul

Castro. The 10 women, members of the "Women in White," gathered at a park at the edge of Cuba's Revolution Square, where the government and Communist Party headquarters are located. They wore white T-shirts emblazoned with the faces and names of their loved ones, but carried no signs. "We are here to demand the release of our husbands and won't leave until they are free or they arrest us. We have waited long enough, we want to talk to the new president," group leader Laura Pollan said. Moments later, a bus pulled up and about 20 female corrections officers tried to arrest the women, who sat on the sidewalk, clasped arms and refused to move. "They are dying, they are dying," one woman yelled with tears in her eyes as the corrections officer tried to move her toward the bus. A mob of about 100 government supporters, mainly women from nearby government buildings, quickly entered the fray, pushing the women, picking them up, throwing them into the waiting bus and yelling insults. The women's husbands and other relatives were arrested in a massive government crackdown in 2003, which landed 75 dissidents in prison for long terms on charges of working with the United States to subvert the government. "After forcing them into the bus they dropped the Havana residents at their homes and sent the others back to their homes in the provinces," Marta Bonachea, a spokesperson for the women, told the press in a telephone interview. (*Reuters*, 21/4/08)

April 22: Cuba launched a blistering attack on the wives of imprisoned dissidents, accusing them of working with its arch-enemy, the United States, to subvert one-party socialist rule. The women, known as the "Ladies in White", have staged an unprecedented series of small demonstrations since their husbands were arrested in a political crackdown in 2003 that landed 75 dissidents in prison on charges of working for the U.S. government. Fifty-five remain behind bars. On April 21, ten of the women staged a sit-in next to Havana's Revolution Square to demand that President Raul Castro's government release their relatives. They were detained, put on a bus and driven home by police. A government statement carried by Cuba's official media attacked the women's protest for being a "provocation (...) ordered by their Yankee masters". State-run television showed photos of the women meeting with Michael Parmly, the head of the US Interests Section in Havana, which a commentator called "the headquarters of the Cuban counterrevolution." The "Ladies in White," who earned their name by marching silently every Sunday along a Havana boulevard dressed in white, were defiant in the face of the government attack. "We were born out of government repression and we have no particular political agenda," said one of their founders, Miriam Leiva. "Our objective is purely humanitarian, to free the prisoners of March 2003." (*Reuters*, 22/4/08)

April 22: The outcome of the quiet protest by 10 women, half of them members of the dissident group Ladies in White, underscored the Castro government's willingness to lift some restrictions on the lives of Cubans while refusing to tolerate even the slightest dissent. "The message is clear: zero political tolerance," said dissident Elizardo Sanchez, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, which is illegal but tolerated by the state. "At least in the area of human rights, there is no significant change in Cuba." A government statement read on the state media called the demonstration a "crude and shameful provocation" by mercenaries carrying out orders of

anti-Castro forces in Miami. The statement was published in the state press. (*Sun Sentinel*, 22/4/08)

April 22: The break-up of a demonstration by a small group of Cuban women demanding the release of their imprisoned dissident husbands came just a few days after a government warning that in Cuba there is no space for "subversion" or the dreams of "internal mercenaries." "This is a bucket of cold water for those who believe in a gradual democratisation of our country," moderate dissident Manuel Cuesta told the press, commenting on the incident, when female police officers broke up a sit-in by 10 members of a group known as the Women in White. Cuesta, spokesman for the Arco Progresista, a dissident coalition of small groups with social democratic tendencies, said he is "worried" because he sees the police removal of the protesters as an indication of a change in attitude from the stance seen since Raúl Castro took over as president from his ailing brother Fidel in February. He said the authorities had been taking a more lenient stance with respect to the few street protests held by dissidents, but "the message sent out now is much stronger, because the government's power was brought to bear on these women." (*IPS*, 22/4/08)

April 22: Activists Abel López Naples and Santo del Pozo Rodríguez were sentenced to three years in prison by the provincial court of Isla de la Juventud on March 25, under the alleged crime of illegally attempting to leave the country. The trial was held behind closed doors, and only two relatives were allowed to attend. The accused were also charged with antisocial and counterrevolutionary conduct. (*Cubanet*, 22/4/08)

April 22: The Cuban Council of State, on a proposal of the Communist Party Central Committee Political Bureau, has appointed Ana Elsa Velazquez Cobiella as new Education Minister, an official note reported. Velazquez substitutes Luis Ignacio Gomez Gutierrez. Before her appointment, she was head of the Frank Pais Higher Pedagogical Institute in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba, the text states. This education science doctorate and deputy to the Peoples' Power National Assembly graduated in 1980 and has been a teacher since she was a university sophomore, so she has 30 years of experience as a professor or leader. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/4/08)

April 23: An ailing Fidel Castro took partial credit for firing Cuba's long-serving education minister, indicating that he would remain influential behind the scenes as long as he is able. Castro, who was succeeded by his younger brother Raul Castro as president this year after almost half a century at the helm, blasted former minister Luis Ignacio Gomez for being "burnt out" and "losing revolutionary consciousness." In a newspaper column, Castro laid into Gomez for traveling abroad too much and taking personal credit for advances in Cuba's education system. Gomez was viewed as one of Fidel Castro's staunchest supporters who for the last decade had faithfully carried out educational reforms proposed by Castro and questioned by many teachers and parents. Many Cubans have criticized the decline of Cuba's vast free education system during grass roots discussions fostered by Raul Castro on the socialist state's ills. "In this special and important case, in addition to my personal views, I was consulted and completely informed," Fidel Castro wrote in an article published by the ruling Communist Party

newspaper Granma and other state-run media. He also reiterated his role in picking new members of Raul Castro's government which was formally installed on February 24. "I'll express my modest opinion as long as I am able and desire to do so," the elder Castro wrote. [[Los vivos y los muertos](#)] (*Reuters*, 23/4/08)

April 23: A group of peaceful dissidents in Santa Clara founded the Dissident Central Coalition (Coalición Central Opositora - CCO), with the aim of organizing non violent struggle of the dissidents in the central region of the country. The CCO will be presided over by Idania Yanes Contreras. (*Cubanet*, 25/4/08)

April 24: Cubans are reported to have taken out 7,400 new mobile phone contracts in the 10 days since restrictions were eased. The figures were made by Maximo Lafuente from the state telecoms company Etecsa. Etecsa expects to sell 1.4 million new mobile phone contracts in Cuba in the next five years. Until President Raul Castro lifted restrictions, mobile phones could only be bought by government officials and people working for foreign firms. The number of new mobile phone contracts is impressive given that it costs about £60 just to set up a new contract while the average monthly salary in Cuba is less than £10. In the past, many Cubans used illegal phones or asked permitted users to sign up on their behalf. (*BBC*, 24/4/08)

April 25: In an effort to limit the losses within its ranks, Cuba's Communist Party has called on members near retirement not to shirk party-related tasks and cautioned that "disease is not a reason for deactivation." Party militants may not quit even if they have senile dementia, according to an internal document issued in January by the Organization Department of the party's ruling Central Committee. The document recognizes that in recent years there has been "an incipient tendency to an increase in applications for deactivation from workers in different sectors, close to retirement." The applications "are justified by health or family problems, and arguments are also raised about the lack of physical and mental conditions to deal with the complex tasks tackled by party cells, which they don't want to join," says the document. It was included in the bulletin "Internal information for the nuclei," which is distributed to militants for the purpose of discussion. The document proposes taking advantage of the retired militants to promote the work of mass organizations, such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, as well as the police and other government agencies. The document concludes: "It is necessary to reiterate that disease is not a cause for deactivation, so long as it is not an ailment that deprives the militant of his mental faculties, which does not include senile dementia." (*The Miami Herald*, 25/4/08)

April 25: Italian fashion big-wig Rocco Barroco has presented his first-ever show in Havana, Cuba, and was taken by the famous Latin American curves. Using a line-up of fresh talent from the island, Barroco put his Summer 2008 collection on show. For me this is an immense pleasure, because these boys and girls have beautiful bodies. It is a pleasure to see them dressed in European fashion," Barroco said. Presented in the gardens of the luxurious Hotel Nacional, the show was open to a small gathering of artists, designers and Cuban models. Barroco is the biggest fashion name to have visited Cuba in some time. (*ITN*, 25/4/08)

April 25: Through the use of various actions from the bottom up, Cuba is planning to revitalize its Primary Health Care System (APS), which has been affected by organizational flaws, poor salaries, and the sending of physicians on aid missions to other countries. APS National Director Cristina Luna said that the (community level) family doctor and the polyclinics (the level prior to hospital level) are going to play an important role in order to attain "excellent health care" in Cuba. During a recent National Scientific Drive for Family Medicine held in Havana, Luna presented a plan aimed at strengthening the APS. Luna said that the polyclinics should solve 80 per cent of the community's health problems, and that this requires personnel trained in the installed technologies and provision of quality service, as well as the stability of cadres (supervisory personnel). She explained that the family doctor service is being divided into three categories. The first category of service will be provided by a physician and a nurse during an eight-hour period. The second will be provided only by nurses, preferably nurses with a bachelor's degree. According to the official, category three service will have a physician and a nurse available 24 hours as well as equipment, greater decision-making authority, and a module with different types of medication in keeping with the number of inhabitants and the morbidity rate. (*Notimex*, 25/4/08)

April 28: President Raul Castro announced that Cuba will convene its first Communist Party congress since 1997 -- a gathering that could chart the island's political future long after he and his older brother Fidel are gone. The congress -- planned for next year -- follows a series of minor social changes the younger Castro has decreed during his first two months in power to make life easier and less restrictive for ordinary Cubans. "We have worked hard in these past few months, and will have to do so even more," Raul Castro said during a Central Committee gathering aired on state television. He said the nation's leadership must prepare for "when the historic generations are no longer around." Fidel Castro's post could be awarded to someone else at the congress, scheduled for the second half of 2009. An exact date has not been set. Under Cuba's constitution, the Communist Party is "the higher governing force of society and the state" and is responsible for setting the country's political and social agenda at five year intervals. Cuba's last Communist Party congress was held in 1997 and the following one in 2002 was postponed without any official explanation. The fourth party congress in 1991, when Cuba was still recovering from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, helped open the way for modest economic and political reforms, including the direct election of parliament, a rapprochement with churches and creation of small-scale private businesses. Much of the Communist Party's leadership consists of men and women who were children -- or not yet born -- when Castro's revolutionaries toppled a dictator and marched into Havana in January 1959. (*AP, EFE*, 28/4/08)

April 28: Cuban leader Raúl Castro has put an end to his country's nearly two-year "provisional" period, increasing the powers of old functionaries in the Communist Party who also make up the hierarchy of the governing Council of State appointed in February. "The accords we have approved put an end to the provisional period begun on July 31, 2006 with the proclamation of the Commander in Chief," he said. Castro reformed the Politburo by promoting three new members and creating an oversight commission. The

announcement made on Cuban television and reported in state-controlled media is viewed as a return to a more institutionalized power structure. Cuba has been functioning in a provisional mode since Fidel Castro fell ill in July 2006. During a meeting of the Central Committee, Raúl Castro stated that the congress will "set the nation's political and economic directives." The announcement was accompanied by other important decisions, such as the naming of three new members of the Politburo, the institution of a reduced commission and the creation of seven subordinate working commissions that include: Ideology and Culture, Economy, Food and Agriculture, Import Substitutes and Increasing Exports, Education, Science and Sports, Health and International Relations. According to Granma, the three figures elected to the Politburo are: the current Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Commander Ramiro Valdés; 76; the President of the Cuban Workers Union, Salvador Valdés Mesa, 56; and the Vice Minister of Defense, Gen. Alvaro López Miera, 64. This oversight committee is to be headed up by Castro himself; the first Vice President of the State Council, José Ramón Machado Ventura; Comandante Juan Almeida Bosque; Minister of the Interior Abelardo Colomé Ibarra; Vice President of the State Council Carlos Lage Dávila; Defense Minister Julio Casas Regueiro; and Central Committee member Esteban Lazo Hernández. (*The Miami Herald, Reuters, 30/4/08*)

April 28: New Cuban President Raul Castro announced that all death sentences had been commuted to prison terms of 30 years to life, with the exception of three people charged with terrorism. "The Council of State decided to commute the death penalty imposed on a group of prisoners," Raul Castro announced at a Communist party Central Committee meeting, in a speech broadcast by state-run television. Castro said two Central Americans charged with hotel bombings in the 1990s that took the life of an Italian tourist, and a Cuban American charged with murder during an attempt at armed infiltration of the island, were not included and their cases were still on appeal. "This does not mean we have eliminated the death penalty from the penal code," Raul Castro said. He blasted the United States for allowing Cuban Americans to use its soil to launch violent attacks on the country. "It would be irresponsible and ingenuous to renounce the dissuasive power that capital punishment has on the real terrorists, the Imperialist mercenaries," he said. Cuba has been under pressure from human rights organizations to eliminate the death penalty, which is carried out by firing squad. Three people have been executed since 2000, all of them involved in a failed 2003 boat hijacking. (*Reuters, 28/4/08*)

April 29: The Cuban government does not generally provide statistics on the prison population or the number of people facing the death sentence. But Elizardo Sánchez, president of the dissident Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said that according to his group's estimates, around 30 people on death row will benefit from the decision. Reacting with little enthusiasm to Raul Castro's announcement commuting death sentence to a group of prisoners to life sentences or 30-year terms instead, the dissident leader told the press that "what would be truly meaningful would be the immediate abolition of capital punishment, because otherwise the risk of it being applied remains latent." With respect to the prisoners who will have their sentences commuted, Sánchez said that "some have been awaiting execution for more than 10 years. But other dissidents said that was unlikely to happen. "I would say

this is virtually a permanent de facto moratorium. I think it is improbable that after making this public commitment, a sentence of this kind would be carried out again," said Manuel Cuesta Morúa, spokesman for the moderate opposition coalition Arco Progresista. (*IPS*, 30/4/08)

April 30: Several religious leaders and personalities reacted favourably to Raul Castro's announcement that a group of prisoners facing the death penalty, some of whom have been waiting for years for a pronouncement by the Council of State, will now serve life sentences or 30-year terms instead. "It is a gesture that merits our support and I am sure that as we move towards a climate of mutual respect in international relations, capital punishment will be completely eliminated," Reverend Raúl Suárez told the press. The Baptist preacher holds a seat in the Cuban parliament, where he has publicly spoken out against the death penalty. "Neither in Cuba nor anywhere else in the world does this punishment effectively fight crime," said Suárez, who is the director of the ecumenical Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Centre (CMMLK). Orlando Márquez, director of the magazine "Palabra Nueva", put out by the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Havana, said the announcement was "very good news and a bold and mature step by the Cuban Council of State, taking into account how deeply rooted support for this kind of punishment is among a large part of Cuban society." "Any gesture of clemency and respect for life, of which this is one example, exalts, rather than weakens, the state that makes it," said Márquez. "Socialism must be based on moral considerations, above all, and if we examine things from another point of view, to some extent we are all responsible for what other people do," said Raymundo García, the founder of the Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue, a Cuban civil society organisation in the city of Cárdenas, 150 kilometres east of Havana. "The death penalty is not a solution, but part of the problem," the Baptist preacher told the press. (*IPS*, 30/4/08)



ECONOMY

April 1: Cuba is lending unused land to private farmers and cooperatives as part of a sweeping effort to revitalize a floundering agricultural sector and step up food production. Government television said that 51 percent of arable land is underused or fallow, a problem officials hope to rectify by temporarily transferring some of it to private farmers and associations representing small, private producers. The president of Cuba's national farmers association, Orlando Lugo, said "everyone who wants to produce tobacco will be given land to produce tobacco," and it will be the same for coffee or anything else. It was not clear how much land had been transferred and under what terms. (*AP*, 1/4/08)

April 1: Making the most of industrial capacities and yield with the lowest possible production costs are crucial tasks in the current sugar cane harvest in order to manage efficiency, said Cuban Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales. In remarks to local journalists, Rosales said we have advanced in the devised development strategy, supported by investments, which have had a relevant role in sugar cane production. He noted that 30

sugar refineries boast an upward trend in efficiency, but another 14 have failed to exploit their potential and must do their best to match up to their peers. Rosales referred to government efforts to support the harvest by securing more inputs and investments; therefore, cohesion achieved may lead the provinces to accomplish the task. Current international prices of sugar, either raw or refined (\$380 per ton), justify sugar production in the country. This harvest is going better than that of last year, but we are still unhappy, as we know we can do better, he stressed. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/4/08)

April 2: In 2009, the Colombian government will set up a small ethanol plant in Cuba with a production capacity of 5,000 litres a day, announced the minister of Agriculture, Andrés Felipe Arias. The official indicated that during the visit of a Cuban delegation it was agreed that “a pilot plant with Colombian technology would be installed.” Colombia is the second largest producer of biofuels in Latin America, after Brazil. Presently it produces a million litres of ethanol a day and 170,000 of biodiesel. (*EFE*, 2/4/08)

April 2: CEIBA Investments, a closed-end fund that invests only in Cuba, plans to list on the London Stock Exchange (AIM) in June, a sign of growing interest in the socialist state since Fidel Castro was sidelined by illness. The fund, registered in the Channel Islands, announced this week it raised its capital by 18 million euros (\$28 million) to 88 million euros (\$137.3 million) in a share placing that was 70 percent oversubscribed. CEIBA is the only fund dedicated exclusively to investing in Cuba, focusing on real estate development and tourism. It is the foreign shareholder of the Cuban joint venture that owns the Miramar Trade Center, Havana's main business district. "We will be the first vehicle for investment in Cuba to be quoted on a major market," said the fund's managing director, Sebastiaan Berger, a Dutch lawyer. Berger said the oversubscription of shares at a time of gloom on financial markets showed that investors were really interested in Cuba. (*Reuters*, 2/4/08)

April 2: Jamaica's Agriculture minister Dr Christopher Tufton was scheduled to leave the island for a four-day working visit to Cuba. While in Cuba, Tufton, who will be accompanied by a small technical team from his ministry, will have discussions with government officials on a wide range of topics. "We are going to look at a number of issues including greenhouse and lobster projects and the possibility of that country providing agricultural extension services to Jamaica," Tufton told the press. (*Jamaica Observer*, 3/4/08)

April 2: Cuba's minister of government said Havana and Russia need to overcome past differences in their relationship and boost trade links, a Cuban news agency reported. During the first session in eight years of a bilateral intergovernmental commission in Havana attended by Russia's Transportation Minister Igor Levitin, Ricardo Cabrisas, Cuban Minister of Government, said that he hoped Moscow shared his views. Levitin, in his turn, told the commission that bilateral trade in 2007 reached \$363 million, and the visit by the Russian delegation was aimed at finding new mechanisms to expand trade and economic ties, adding that Russia is interested in developing commercial ties with Cuba. Cabrisas also expressed hope that the signing of a number of bilateral documents would strengthen the work of the commission. (*Itar-Tass*, 2/4/08)

April 3: Communist Cuba's soaring food imports and a decline in its cash crops of sugar, tobacco, coffee and citrus have led new President Raul Castro to launch what is developing into a sweeping reform of agriculture. Decision-making, from land use to resource allocation, has moved from the national to local level, stores are opening where farmers can buy some supplies for the first time in decades and increasingly they can sell their produce directly to local consumers and state institutions like schools and hospitals. For years, the country has leased plots of land to individuals interested in coffee and tobacco farming with poor results. The reforms, rolled out since late February when Raul Castro succeeded his ailing brother Fidel Castro to become Cuba's first new leader in 50 years, are coming none too soon, local experts said. "We have been calling for these changes for many years and expect more will be needed in the future," a local economist said, asking his name not be used. "It is the opportunity we have been waiting for, local and more direct attention from the authorities and resources so we can work," farmer Diogenes Fernandez said in a telephone interview from the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba. "Up to now our hands have been tied, there was nothing to work with, little motivation. Now everything is changing," Fernandez, a member of a state cooperative, said. (*Reuters*, 3/4/08)

April 3: Russian Transportation Minister Igor Levitin ended a four-day visit to Cuba, where he led his country's mission to the 8th Cuba-Russia Intergovernmental Commission on Economic, Commercial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Levitin attended the signing of one protocol, two memorandums and the final document of the Commission in ceremony held at the Cuban Ministry for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation. The Russian mission is also made up of Vadim Zingman, Commission Vice President and official of the Trade and Economic Development Ministry, Inter-governmental Commission Secretary Yury Gorskiy plus 100 officials, specialists and businessmen. Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas led the Cuban mission while MINVEC official Belkis Barnet was the secretary of the bilateral commission. During his visit Minister Levitin met with his Cuban counterparts for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, Transportation, Communications, and MINVEC, plus the leadership of the Civilian Aeronautic Institute and President Raul Castro. (*ACN*, 3/4/08)

April 4: The wall of prohibitions that has marked Cuban life for years has begun to crumble, with the lifting of the bans on Cubans staying in upscale tourist hotels and buying mobile phones and computers. The obstacle now is money, or lack thereof. "It doesn't matter if I have to spend 10 years saving up to go to Varadero. It's my right," a Cuban colleague told the press, referring to a popular resort. She said she was never able to accept the unwritten ban on Cubans staying in hotels reserved for tourists, which dates back to the 1990s. María Ramírez, a 70-year-old retired nurse, said she is grateful that she belongs to "another era," and treasures her good memories. "I stayed in the Habana Libre hotel and the Hotel Nacional when you could pay in pesos, in the early 1960s. I was able to give myself that treat, but I don't think my daughter could afford to stay a single night there," she said. With the Cuban monthly salary averaging 400 Cuban pesos, equivalent to 17 dollars, hotels that charge 70 to 100 convertible pesos (CUCs) a night are off-limits

to people like Ángela, Ramírez's daughter. (IPS, 4/4/08)

April 7: Cuba's baby steps toward liberalization may not be enough to attract demand in the island country's debt, despite the fire-sale price. Some liberalization has taken place and Cuban loans are indeed cheap compared with peers, but any meaningful changes may be slow in coming, market players said recently. Cuban loans are out-of-bounds for Americans due to the decades-old embargo but are fair game for other investors. After Raul Castro took over from his more famous, ailing elder brother Fidel, Cuba has allowed its citizens to buy the latest in electronics and stay in hotels previously reserved for tourists - some of the many changes that Cubans have cheered. For Peter Bartlett, the chief executive officer and managing director of boutique investment bank Exotix, the main reason to invest in Cuban debt is its bargain-basement price amid a dearth of available emerging-market sovereign debt. Cuban debt trades around 18 cents on the dollar, compared with 21 to 23 cents on the dollar for similar instruments from North Korea, another nation often shunned by the international community and in the periphery of emerging markets. London-based Exotix, which focuses on emerging-market illiquid and distressed debt and equity, is all but alone in repackaging Cuban loans into tradable notes. "We're getting several calls a week, whereas we used to get one call a week" about Cuba when Fidel Castro was still in power, Bartlett said. (*Dow Jones Newswires*, 7/4/08)

April 7: The government of Raul Castro will support the most efficient Cuban agricultural co-operatives — which farm their own land — with “material and technical resources” to increase food production. “Fifteen CPAs (Agricultural Production Co-operatives) in the entire country will be guaranteed material and technical resources, which will allow them to increase output,” reported the weekly newspaper *Trabajadores*. Under a program that will run until 2010, these units must increase their harvest up to 138,000 tons of product a year (up from three million Cuban quintals). (*AFP*, 7/4/08)

April 7: A senior Communist Party official said increasing domestic food production in Cuba was a "matter of national security." The comments, published in the weekly *Trabajadores* newspaper, underscored efforts by Raul Castro's government to decentralize the state-dominated agricultural sector in order to improve efficiency and cut red tape. "Producing food in Cuba is a question of national security, given runaway inflation and scarcity on the world market," Maria del Carmen Concepcion, a member of the party's highest body, the secretariat, said during a meeting with farmers and their representatives. In the meeting with farmers, Concepcion heard complaints about large quantities of milk that are lost each day because of inadequate transportation, and farm equipment that lies idle due to a lack of electricity. Cuba has about 250,000 family farms and 1,100 private cooperatives in an economy that is 90 percent state controlled. They till less than a third of the land, and more than half of Cuba's arable land lies fallow. (*Sun Sentinel*, 7/4/08)

April 8: The Cuban government is considering opening up the farming sector to greater foreign investment and closing down farming cooperatives that have proven to be “totally inefficient”, top officials said. “We are currently studying some business proposals in agriculture”, Minister of Foreign Investment Marta Lomas told reporters, adding that in matters of foreign investment “nothing is off the table”. She said the effort was focusing

on “rice production”, but that foreign investment could also benefit “other sectors like livestock”, and take on “different (business) formulas other than joint ventures, such as looking for financial backing”. The measures are part of President Raul Castro's much vaunted economic and social reform programme for Cuba, which he has been implementing since he officially took over from his ailing brother Fidel Castro in late February. (*Thomson Financial*, 8/4/08)

April 9: Cuban agriculture minister Ulises Rosales del Toro told the local press that recent heavy rainfall could cause Cuban sugar output to fall by 20% from the scheduled level. Cuban sugar cultivation is up to 80% mechanised, and bad weather makes the operation of some equipment difficult. In addition, the rain itself can affect the quality of the sugar cane. The crop season runs from January to March, but in some cases it is extended until early May. Unofficial estimates place sugar production in Cuba at 800,000-900,000 tons in 2008. Cuba's sugar industry has been struggling to recover since former president Fidel Castro scaled down production between 2002 and 2004, decommissioning several of Cuba's most important sugar mills. In addition, in 2007 unfavourable weather conditions caused crop output to fall below expectations, forcing the Caribbean island to import sugar from Colombia and Brazil. (*Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 9/4/08)

April 9: Canadian tourists fleeing a harsh winter and buoyed by their strong dollar are flocking to Cuban beaches in record numbers and helping Cuba's tourist trade end a two-year slump. Cuban hotel managers said a surge in Canadian "snowbirds" led to unprecedented tourism during the winter months of January through March. And prospects for hotels during the summer improved when the government of Cuba's new President Raul Castro lifted a ban on Cubans staying at resort hotels formerly reserved for foreigners only. The tourist trade, a major source of hard currency for Cuba, peaked in 2005 with the arrival of 2.3 million visitors, but dropped to 2.1 million last year, of which some 600,00 were Canadians. But in January this year Cuba received more tourists than in any high season since it opened up to foreign investment and tourism in the mid-1990s: 247,386 visitors. Almost half were Canadians, a 30 percent increase over January last year. (*Reuters*, 9/4/08)

April 9: Citrus activity in Cuba will receive a new impulse with the investment in infrastructure for the sector. In Matanzas, the western part of the country will have a new facility of cooling with a storage capacity of half million tons of fruits and juices. Thus, the company Cítricos Victoria de Girón will have facilities for storing, cooling and shipping fresh citrus and juices coming from plantations in Jagüey Grande. It would have availability for receiving volumes from the firms Ceiba in La Habana and Arimao, in the central province of Cienfuegos. Cooling capacity increases and transport costs reduces since the distance between the facilities and the main points of departure to international markets is shorter. (*Fresh Plaza*, 9/4/08)

April 9: Cuba was the first country signing a trade agreement at the 18th International Fair of Vietnam, taking place at the Hanoi exhibition center, with 700 exhibitors from over 15 countries. The 3-million-dollar agreement was reached in biotechnology, for the

sale of a batch of Heber Biotec vaccines to Vietnam's Hapharco. The signing ceremony was presided over by Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Thi Doan, and Cuba's Deputy Foreign Trade Minister Nelly Cubillas, and Cuban ambassador Jesus Aise Sotolongo. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/4/08)

April 9: Cuba and its allies in Latin America opened the first branch of a development bank designed to break the region's dependence on the World Bank and other US-backed lenders. The bank is the financial arm of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA, a trade alliance funded by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his country's oil profits. Its other members are Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia, which are among the region's poorest nations. The ALBA bank will start with about \$1 billion in assets and could offer up to twice that in loans and aid for development projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, Venezuelan Finance Minister Rafael Isea said. The inaugural branch opened for business in communist Cuba in a fourth-floor office in the Miramar Trade Center, a gleaming, high-rise enclave of shops and business suites in one of Havana's most exclusive neighborhoods. "ALBA is filling a void (...) financing productive projects to give more employment and (serving as) an instrument to fight against poverty," said Cuban Central Bank President Francisco Soberon. (*Business Week*, 9/4/08)

April 10: The island's sugar minister, Ulises Rosales del Toro, told state radio that recent downpours could mean another lower-than-expected sugar harvest. The season runs from January to March but occasionally stretches into May. At the start of this season, Rosales said the island planned to process 12 percent more cane than the previous year, which yielded 1.2 million tons of sugar. The industry had expected up to 1.6 million tons of sugar in 2007 before inclement weather ruined that goal. To date, the island has produced between 800,000 and 900,000 tons of sugar, according to an estimate by Reuters news service. (*Sun Sentinel*, 10/4/08)

April 10: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that his government has approved funding to build an iron and nickel foundry with Cuba. Cuba is among the world's largest producers of nickel, which is used to make stainless steel. Venezuela and Cuba signed an agreement last year to produce stainless steel using Cuban nickel — a project slated to involve some US\$1.1 billion in joint investment. "We have large iron reserves, Cuba has large nickel reserves," Chavez said in a televised address, adding that Venezuela has not made the necessary alliances to process the metals domestically. Chavez did not say how much money it would take to build the foundry or where it would be located. (*AP*, 11/4/08)

April 11: Despite the existing restrictions placed by the US State Department on foreign companies operating in Cuba, AirBridgeCargo, a subsidiary of the Russian airline Volga-Dnepr, has joined a project for the creation of an international air hub in Cuba. Earlier, only those Russian corporations that were state-owned, such as Sheremetyevo International Airport and Aeroflot, participated in the project. Sheremetyevo is responsible for the creation of infrastructure, while Aeroflot is in charge of the passenger sector. (*RBC Daily*, 11/4/08)

April 11: Vietnamese and Cuban enterprises are seeking more business and investment co-operation, Vice Chairman of the Viet Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), Doan Duy Khuong, said at a meeting of the Cuba-Viet Nam Entrepreneurial Committee in Hanoi. "With solid, traditional relations, bilateral trade and economic co-operation between two nations have developed stably," Khuong said. Last year, bilateral trade reached nearly US\$300 million, an increase of 45 per cent over the previous year. Important commodities of trade include coal, rice, medicine, footwear, garments and textiles, computers, electronic products and household electric appliances. Bilateral trade is expected to reach \$60 million in the first quarter of this year. "The full potential of co-operative relations, however, has yet to be realised," said Khuong. Companies in the two countries have found the great distance between them has been a handicap. The Vietnamese Government is committed to exporting 400,000 tonnes of rice to Cuba this year. It will also supply computer components, fans and light bulbs. Firms will also boost co-operation in the biotechnology area. Cuba's Heber Biotec Co has signed a \$2.5 million product-exchanging contract with local Ha Noi Pharmaceuticals Co. (*Viet Nam News*, 11/4/08)

April 11: Belize's Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Rene Montero and the Cuban Ambassador Eugenio Martinez visited Central Farm in the Cayo District of Belize, where they inspected a sugar cane plot multiplication unit, which involves thirty varieties of sugar cane. These are being tested under a greenhouse environment with all the agronomic practices that go with quarantine and plant health. The varieties come from five different countries, namely, Cuba, Barbados, India, Queensland and Brazil. These are going to be tested for smut resistance and sucrose content. After Belize officials are convinced that the varieties are suitable for the environment in Belize, they will be multiplied and distributed to farmers. This initiative is an effort between Cuba, who provided the planting materials and the two technicians, jointly with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Belize Sugar Industry Control Board. Montero and Martinez expressed the desire for further cooperation between the two countries and promised to continue finding new areas between Cuba and Belize to cooperate, especially in the areas of agriculture. (*Caribbean News Net*, 12/4/08)

April 11: Cuba will invest about 10 million dollars in three years for the rehabilitation of public lighting system in the country, the director of UNE National Electric Union of Cuba Antonio Pias announced. The objective is to install 182,000 new lights for the public lighting system in all the establishments where works of rehabilitation, normalization or new electrification are being carried out, the official specified in statements disclosed by Granma newspaper. Pias announced that about 7,100 lights are already distributed all around the provinces and they hope to complete by 2008 the fourth part of the needs in that area. (*Granma*, 11/4/08)

April 12: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said in the central city of Cienfuegos that national food programs are growing to confront price hikes on the world market. Cuba will invest this year one billion dollars more than in 2002 on food imports, assured Lage at the end of his tour of this province, where he attended the opening of a pasta factory.

To buy one ton of pasta from abroad costs 1200 dollars while home production costs 980, noted Lage at the opening ceremony of a modern plant with the highest technology and designed to produce 12,000 tons annually. The factory, built in one of the facilities of a sugar factory dismantled this present year, is part of a national program to increase domestic production from 20,000 to 70,000 tons in four years. The also secretary of the Ministers Councils Executive Committee visited a recently built plant that will produce 20 tons of CO2 daily, used to produce soft drinks. The revolution is going now through a process of construction, recovery and progress which nobody dreamt of 10 years ago, emphasized the leader. (*Prensa Latina*, 12/4/08)

April 12: The Colon Free Zone (ZLC) in Panama is one of the main sources of supplies for Cuba, whose transactions are expected to increase after the government's decision to liberalize the sale of a wide range of home electrical appliances. "Cuba buys everything", said a Customs official. Preliminary figures provided by the ZLC indicate that in 2007 Cuba purchased goods worth about \$220 million dollars, an increase of 3.0 per cent from 2006, and of 24 per cent compared with 2005. (*Notimex*, 12/4/08)

April 13: Mexican touroperators work to reach the figure of 100 thousand visitors to Cuba during 2008, reported a release of the Ministry of Tourism (MINTUR) of the island. The website of MINTUR adds that the quantity chartered for the current year represents a considerable growth compared to 2007. The initiatives include offers related to Cuba's attractions, such as its natural beauty, the hospitality of the people and diverse features of Havana and Varadero, classified as top ranking excellence. Other resorts such as Cayo Santa Maria, Cayo Coco and Cayo Largo would be promoted. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/4/08)

April 14: Communist Cuba is expanding sales of agricultural equipment to small farmers and looking at new ways for them to sell their goods. Orlando Lugo, president of the official National Association of Small Farmers, said growers island-wide can now buy formerly controlled production tools such as machetes, wire, boots and herbicide for a local weed called "marabu." The equipment went on sale in recent months at just three stores on the island. Lugo said on state television that the government is also examining new ways small farmers can commercialize goods. (*AP*, 15/4/08)

April 14: Cuba said it has saved more than \$1 billion over two years and eliminated blackouts with its "energy revolution" that focuses on conservation and new power sources. Basic Industry Vice Minister Juan Manuel Presa said the savings occurred in 2006 and 2007, as the government replaced nine million regular light bulbs with energy-saving models and swapped 2.3 million old refrigerators for newer models. Presa spoke to the press during a gathering of the Petrocaribe regional energy group. (*AP*, 16/4/08)

April 14: Cuba achieved the first million tons of oil of the extraction plan expected for the first quarter this year, which means an increase in efficiency in the field. Director of Prospection of CUPET (Cuba Petroleo), Rafael Tenreyro, highlighted before national TV the importance of the figure due to the high price of crude of over \$100 a barrel in world markets. He said that the country's production forecast was achieved with enough

volume to meet 50 percent of the domestic demand, as work was carried out using modern, efficient technologies also included in prospecting and drilling. Tenreyro announced that three new wells were drilled during the first quarter, with ongoing exploratory studies of land and sea, mainly seismic research, in northwestern Pinar del Rio province. (*Prensa Latina*, 14/4/08)

April 15: While hundreds of Cubans have been lining up to buy cellular phone services previously available only to foreigners and certain state workers, fewer are taking advantage of the lifting of the hotel ban. The end to what government critics have called tourism apartheid on the communist island came quietly after midnight on March 31. The first two weeks of the lifting of the hotel ban generated about \$378,000 for the state, according to a tourism official who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to the foreign press. The two-week figure included 46 Cubans who spent \$5,024 on hotel stays and eight who spent \$1,763 on car rentals, the official said. Excursions generated \$61,398 in revenue. "We believe more people will come with time," the official said. "It is still very early." (*Sun Sentinel*, 15/4/08)

April 15: Brazil's state-run oil company Petrobras is studying the possibility of oil exploitation in Cuba, according to Director of International Operations Jorge Zelada. Zelada said that the studies are based on a cooperation agreement signed with the Cuban Oil Company (CUPET) at the beginning of 2008, when the Brazilian president was in Cuba. The study will look at areas in Cuban waters in the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf of Mexico waters are divided in equal parts between Cuba, the US and Mexico and some of the best quality oil in the world is pumped in this area by US and Mexican companies, which makes the Cuban part, almost untouched, a good prospective for good findings. (*ACN*, 15/4/08)

April 16: Cuba's minister of basic industry said plans by a consortium of companies to drill in Cuba's Gulf of Mexico waters this year have been rescheduled for 2009, according to the country's state-run media. "In the Gulf of Mexico we are doing seismic studies and our perspective is we should resume drilling in the area next year," Basic Industry Minister Yadira Garcia was quoted by the official *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper as stating. Garcia said last year that drilling by a consortium led by Repsol-YPF of Spain would begin in 2008, if a rig could be rented. Interest in Cuba's Gulf of Mexico blocks picked up after Repsol discovered a small deposit of light oil in 2004 that was not commercially viable. Repsol has since joined forces with Norsk Hydro and ONGC Videsh of India. Seven foreign companies have signed exploration agreements with Cuban state oil company CUPET for 28 of the 59 blocks available in the deep Gulf of Mexico waters of Cuba's economic exclusion zone fronting the United States. (*Reuters*, 16/4/08)

April 17: South Africa's Cabinet agreed to cancel 926.8 million rand (\$117 million) owed to it by Cuba because the country was unable to repay the debt. "This debt arose out of the insurance cover which was provided to Cuba by the Export Credit Insurance Corp. of South Africa Ltd. for the export of diesel engines and pesticides in 1996," government spokesman Themba Maseko told reporters in Pretoria, following the

Cabinet's bi-monthly meeting. ``Given the assessment of Cuba's debt position, government is of the view that Cuba was not in a position to meet its obligation in the foreseeable future," Maseko said. (*Bloomberg*, 17/4/08)

April 17: The Ghana-Cuba historical bond of friendship was taken to a new level following the signing of a Permanent Joint Commission Cooperation in Accra. The Joint Commission covered broad areas of cooperation including education and sports, health, trade and investment, tourism, scientific and industrial research as well as initiative for the private sector. Ghana's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Cooperation and NEPAD, Akwesi Osei Adjei initialed for Ghana while the Cuban Senior Minister of Government, Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz signed for his country. Under the agreement, 200 Cuban specialists including professors and technicians would be sent to the School of Medicine and Health Sciences of the University for Development Studies, Tamale, to give lectures in human anatomy; biochemistry; biochemical medicine and histology; as well as institute the new doctors' training programme in Ghana. Concerning agriculture, Ghana would assist Union Confitera of Cuba to become members of the Federation of Cocoa Commerce, UK, to enable Cuba to purchase cocoa from the Cocoa Marketing Company. To this end, the two sides have agreed to implement the training in Cuba of personnel from the Cocoa Processing Company in the manufacture of Artesanal chocolate. (*ModernGhana*, 19/4/08)

April 18: Cuba has begun clearing sickle bush from thousands of hectares of rice land as soaring prices force it to reconsider importing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of the population's main staple, local media reported. "The Ruta Invasora rice farm is working to recover a large part of its land largely covered with Marabu (sickle bush) and other brush," Camaguey province's weekly Communist party newspaper reported. Before the collapse of former-benefactor the Soviet Union, Cuba's nine provincial rice farms, covering 150,000 hectares, produced up to 260,000 tonnes of consumable rice. Decapitalization, plague and drought followed. Last year the farms produced around 70,000 tonnes while dry-land rice farms at the municipal level and private producers added another 150,000 tonnes to output. In recent years, Cuba has imported more than 500,000 tonnes of rice annually, mainly from Vietnam. "The price of a tonne of rice has gone from \$223 in 2002 to \$855 this year," Igor Montero, the vice president of state-food importer Alimport, said on national television. The price and availability of rice is a politically volatile issue in Cuba, with the government subsidizing the cost through a ration system. Rice is the Caribbean island's most important staple, with minimum domestic consumption estimated at 700,000 tonnes annually. (*Reuters*, 18/4/08)

April 18: The engines currently operating in the trucks that circulate in Cuba, with their high levels of gas consumption, will be replaced with more modern and efficient engines from China, said Vice President Carlos Lage during a visit to the workshops of the Shaping Company of Guanajay. Lage told workers and managers of that company, which is engaged in the engine replacement, that the first 12,000 engines purchased for that purpose are already in Cuba. Lage's tour around business facilities in the province of Havana included the Evelio Prieto bus assembly plant, also in Guanajay. There, he disclosed the purchase of 5,000 Chinese buses that will arrive in Cuba in the next 4 to 5

years. Some of them –around 600 to 800– will be assembled in this plant under the supervision of Chinese technicians assisted by our experienced workers. On his visit to the liquid feed plant in Artemisa, Lage said that the investments aimed at increasing pig food production and at avoiding damage to the environment should have priority. He highlighted the importance of using the leftovers from food consumption in major social centers and of using, at the same time, less imported products, such as soy. (*Granma*, 21/4/08)

April 19: Cuba is spending \$2 billion to upgrade public transportation and has imported 3,000 modern buses just for the capital. The Chinese buses Yutongs are less sturdy than the “camellos” (camels) and crews are repaving streets to spare them wear and tear. The camellos, hulking 18-wheeled beasts, iron mutants made of two Soviet-era buses welded together on a flatbed and pulled by a separate cab, have long been Havana's public transport nightmare — bumpy, hot and jammed with up to 400 passengers at a time. The Yutongs' fares are double the camello's but offer far more seats and a dramatically smoother ride. Riders can climb on and off easily, ensuring faster trips. The camello was born in response to fuel shortages in the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba lost its annual \$6 billion in subsidies. The economy has since recovered thanks to heavy borrowing from China and nearly 100,000 barrels of oil a day from Venezuela. (*AP*, 19/4/08)

April 19: Business people from several countries show increasing interest in participating in the EXPOCARIBE Business Fair to take place in Santiago de Cuba in June, to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the second largest business event in Cuba. Traditional participants include nations like Spain, Panama, Germany, Guatemala, Holland, Italy, Viet Nam, Venezuela, Belgium and others. The President of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce Raul Becerra predicted a promising success of the fair on this occasion, with an attractive performance of artistic talents from the eastern provinces. (*Prensa Latina*, 19/4/08)

April 19: Cuban Fishing Industry Minister Alfredo Lopez said that the island is working at setting up a joint venture with close ally Venezuela in order to "revive the deep-sea fishing industry" and overcome the "insufficient supply" of fish in the country, local media reported. Lopez said that Cuba is currently developing two strategies to solve the problem of a lack of seafood products, and the first is "to revive the deep-sea fishing industry, but in this case together with Venezuela." Last December, during Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's visit to the communist-ruled island for the 4th Petrocaribe Summit, the two countries signed 14 accords, including three for the constitution of new mixed companies - chemicals and petrochemicals; agriculture and food distribution; and fishing. "We are working to constitute a mixed company that will have the chance to use the experience our people have," the state news agency Prensa Latina quoted the minister as saying. As a second strategy, Lopez mentioned the development of fish farming, which in 2007 closed with a production record of more than 22,000 tons of species like lobsters, shrimp, tilapia, catfish and grass carp. He also said that last year the island invested more than \$30 million in imports while collecting \$90 million from lobster exports alone.

In 2006 the countries of the European Union, one of the chief markets for this kind of exports, bought more than 5,000 tons of seafood products from Cuba, including 1,400 of farmed shrimp and some 1,200 of wild shrimp. (*EFE, AFP, 20/4/08*)

April 22: The Government of Ghana and the Republic of Cuba held the XIV Session of the Permanent Inter-governmental Commission in Accra. This was in accordance with Article 1 of the Agreement for Scientific, Technical and Economic Cooperation, signed between both Governments in the city of Havana, on 17th April 1982. Based on the proposals on possible areas of cooperation, both countries reviewed the progress of their cooperation, and noted with satisfaction the results of such a collaboration, especially in the area of health, education and sports. They further approved the programme for the Scientific, Technical and Economic Cooperation for the period 2008 to 2010. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Regional Cooperation and Nepad, Akwasi Osei Adjei, expressed optimism that with diligent implementation of the decision taken by the two countries, they will witness a positive growth in both their public and private sector activities. (*Ghanaian Chronicle, 22/4/08*)

April 23: Cuba's exports of goods grew some 27 percent last year, compared to 2006, state media reported, citing Foreign Trade Minister Raul de la Nuez but not providing the complete figures. The minister said at an awards ceremony for export firms that exports of goods last year were the highest in the past 27 years. The increase was due largely to exports of nickel, whose price has risen sharply on the international market, and sales of generic medicines and biotechnology products. (*EFE, 24/4/08*)

April 23: Representatives from the Cuban and Brazilian Institutes of Scientific and Technological Information (IDICT) will sign a cooperation agreement in Havana. Carmen Sanchez Rojas, Director of the Cuban IDICT, announced that she will sign the accord with her Brazilian counterpart, Emir Suadien, during the last day of sessions of the INFO 2008 Congress that is underway at the Convention Center in Havana with the participation of experts from 15 countries. She explained that during her visit to Brasilia last November, the two institutions decided to implement actions of mutual exchange and cooperation that will be included in the agreement. This accord will be the first of its type between the two centers and it will include professional training and transference of technologies. (*ACN, 23/4/08*)

April 23: In Cuba, analysts say that Cuban ethanol production will be limited to production from sugar by-product that does not affect the food sugar output. A Reuters report, quoting local sources, said it would be unthinkable for Raul Castro to increase ethanol production from food sugar, given Fidel Castro's characterization of the practice as a "crime against humanity". But it was not clear how Cuba would finance the conversion of its ethanol capacity to making cellulosic ethanol from bagasse. Currently, Cuba imports 85 percent of its food, and other analysts say that the intergrated product stream from revived ethanol production — including sugar, ethanol, paper, cattle feed — could revive Cuban agriculture in a country where former sugar plantations have been overrun by weed infestations. A Biofuels Digest news analysis was published on April 18 on the Castro regime's secret buildup of sugar ethanol production capacity, while calling

biofuels a “crime against humanity” in public comments. The potential for Cuba to produce between 2 billion and 3.2 billion gallons per year of sugar cane ethanol has been projected by industry analysts. (*Biofuels Digest*, 23/4/08)

April 23: President Hugo Chavez joined with his allies to create a \$100 million program to fight the rising cost of food for Latin America's poor. Chavez and leaders from Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua also promised joint programs for agricultural development in addition to the new Food Security Fund, though they provided no details on how the programs and fund would work. "This food crisis is the biggest demonstration of the historic failure of the capitalist model," Chavez told Bolivian President Evo Morales, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage during a summit in Caracas. Addressing participants at the meeting, the Cuban Vice-president addressed the impact of the food price hike on large sectors of the population. Industrialized nations destine nearly 10 percent of their resources to purchasing food, while the poor and underdeveloped countries dedicate as much as 65 percent to that activity, said Carlos Lage. Therefore, he said, the poor nations can not face the current scenario. The current crisis finds its origin in the unfair international economic order, in which developed powers dedicate huge budgets to prepare and launch wars, said the Cuban Vice-president and in that direction he pointed to the United States, which destines some 500 billion dollars annually to that objective. Add to that the irresponsible management of the US economy, now under recession, he said. Cuba imports most of its food -- much of it coming from the United States. Cuba expects to spend \$1.9 billion on food imports in 2008 -- about 20 percent more than last year. (*AP, ACN*, 23/4/08)

April 24: Cuba and Qatar have signed agreements to enhance tourism and health cooperation, according to a statement published by the Cuban Tourism Ministry. Under the accords, a hotel jointly owned by Cuba's Gran Caribe Hotel Group and Qatar's Diar Real Estate Investment will open and a new general hospital involving Cuban specialists will be built at Dukhan city, some 80 km west of Qatar's capital Doha. The ministry said the two nations signed the accords in Doha during the recent fourth session of the inter-governmental commission. (*Xinhua*, 24/4/08)

April 27: Cuba said it could not afford to increase wages for government workers, but it would raise social security payments. About 90 percent of the Cuban economy is controlled by the state, which employs the vast majority of people and provides all pensions through the social security system. May 1, International Workers Day, is a major holiday in Communist Cuba and expectations were high among health and education employees that state wages would be increased to mark the date. The expectations were fueled by an announcement in local media this month, which said Cuba was revamping the state wage system to create more incentive by allowing workers to earn as much as they can. But a government statement published by all state media made it clear that some wage earners would have to wait for better economic times. "It is not possible right now to increase salaries of all sectors, because the country does not have the resources necessary," the statement said. "Increases will be granted by sector and priority, always after a rigorous evaluation of the economic and financial conditions."

However, judges, court personnel and employees in the district attorney offices will receive raises, the statement said. Raul Castro, upon taking over as leader from his ailing brother Fidel Castro in February, promised to make wages better reflect one's work, a major complaint of the population. (*Reuters*, 27/4/08)

April 28: A staggering 12 percent rise in the number of tourists arriving in the eastern city of Holguin was achieved during the recently concluded winter season, compared to the same period in 2007, breaking historical records. Carlos Zambrano, Tourism delegate to the eastern region, said that in the period between November 2007 and March 2008, more than 93,150 visitors, mostly from Canada and England, landed in this part of the country, attracted not only by its beaches but also by the history and culture of the province. The 2005 local record of visitors and tourist-per-day rates in the province were broken by the end of March, where a total of 4,830 rooms are currently available, noted Zambrano. During the winter season, an average of fifty flights a week landed at Holguin's Frank Pais International Airport, said the expert. (*CAN*, 28/4/08)

April 30: Cuba announced that its crucial tourism industry appears to be recovering from a two-year slump, with a 15 percent increase in visitors during the first quarter of the year. The number of international visitors topped the 1 million mark on April 28, 22 days faster than last year, state-controlled news media reported. Officials credited well-attended conferences and trade fairs for the increase, singling out an ongoing gathering dedicated to cultural tourism that has attracted more than 1,000 visitors. Maria Elena Lopez, a vice minister of tourism, reported a 15 percent increase in foreign visitors this year compared with the first three months of 2007, but she did not provide further data, according to the Communist Party daily *Granma*. The number of foreign tourists peaked at about 2.32 million in 2005, but slipped to 2.15 last year, according to official statistics. Officials said the decline of 70,000 visitors in 2007 cut revenues by nearly US\$14.5 million (euro9.3 million) below 2006 levels -- a blow to a nation that has turned to tourism to generate much of its hard currency revenue. Canada, Britain, Spain and Italy rank as top sources of visitors to the island. (*AP*, 30/4/08)

April 30: Cuban President Raul Castro and visiting Panamanian President Martin Torrijos signed an energy cooperation agreement, local media reported. The agreement was signed during a ceremony at the Revolution Palace in Havana. The agreement aims to expand bilateral cooperation and exchanges in the rational and efficient use of energy, the use of renewable energy for promoting economic development, environmental protection and social equity. "We thank this project for keeping alive the solidary memory and spirit, for what represented Omar Torrijos (former Panamanian president), for the brotherhood between Cuba and Panama and between the Latin Americans," Torrijos said. The two countries also signed energy, fishing and other cooperative agreements. Cuba and Venezuela have already provided free eye operations to poor people across the region, including 20,000 Panamanians, through a program known as "Operation Miracle," Torrijos said. (*Xinhua, The Miami Herald*, 1/5/08)

April 30: Qatar Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, was to meet President Raul Castro to discuss plans to build hotels in Cuba and for a new Qatari hospital to be staffed

by Cuban doctors. The talks came after the two countries "signed important agreements on cooperation in the areas of health and tourism, among others," said a brief notice published in the official daily Granma. Under one accord, a new general hospital to be entirely staffed by Cuban specialists is to open in the Qatari town of Dukhan, 80 kilometers (50 miles) west of Doha, the Cuban foreign ministry said. The other agreement sets out the creation of the first joint venture between Grupo Hotelero Wider Caribbean, Cuba, and Qatari Diar to build hotels on the communist-ruled Caribbean island. (*AFP*, 30/4/08)



EXILE COMMUNITY

April 1: In Miami, the Cuban Democratic Directory criticized a statement released in Costa Rica by the Christian Democrat Organization of America (ODCA) last March, which advocates for dialogue with the government of Raúl Castro. In a communiqué, the exiles organization laments ODCA's "position which is contrary to the international consensus of denying legitimacy to that dictatorship (the Cuban government)". At the end of March, ODCA sent the Cuban embassy in Mexico a request to meet with the Cuban government to promote change on the island. (*EFE*, 1/4/08)

April 6: Hundreds of former Cuban prisoners of conscience now in exile, leaders of anti-Castro organizations and members of Congress met at the House of the Political Prisoner, in Little Havana, Miami, to honour those who have lost their freedom in the name of democracy. The first time José Martí was sent to prison was remembered on International Prisoner's Day, April 5th. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 7/4/08)

April 13: The Christian Democratic Party of Cuba (PDC) elected sociologist Andrés Hernández as the new president of the organization, during its 10th Congress, taking over for Marcelino Miyares, who led the PDC for seven years. Miyares will be in charge of International Relations. He was a promoter of several initiatives in support of transition, democracy and conciliation, such as Cuban Consensus and the Costa Rica Declaration. (*EER*, 14/4/08)

April 24: Frank Calzon, one of Washington's highest-profile exiled opponents of Fidel Castro who once was knocked out cold by a two-fisted blow to the head by a Cuban diplomat, considered his 20-something former chief of staff a model employee. Felipe Sixto took care of the day-to-day workings of his Center for a Free Cuba as Calzon pursued his anti-Castro activism, urging foreign governments to take a tough stance on Havana and sending materials to dissidents on the island. But nothing prepared Calzon for the realization that Sixto may have illegally pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars in US taxpayer money intended for efforts to propel democratic changes in Cuba. Calzon, who says he felt a "personal betrayal," expressed his outrage in a series of interviews with Miami Spanish-language radio stations and with The Miami Herald editorial board. He also embarked on what would become a successful effort to recover the money. The amount of money involved in the alleged fraud has not been made public

although government officials say it involves several hundred thousand dollars. Now, Calzon and others in the exile community are wondering how the mild-mannered Sixto, known as a can-do individual dealing with the tragedy of his wife's battle with cancer, went astray. Calzon, whom Havana has accused of being a CIA agent, realized something was wrong back in January. Calzon is looking to pick up the pieces. His lawyer, Filiberto Agusti, says the Center is presenting USAID with a report of what happened. Agusti says Sixto has returned most of the money, with the remainder to be paid over ``the next year or so." (*The Miami Herald*, 24/4/08)

April 28: Almost 100 members of associations of Cuban residents in Barcelona reiterated their commitment to the defense of the Cuban Revolution. In a meeting held in Barcelona with the presence of the Cuban Ambassador to Madrid, Alberto Velazco, participants approved an action plan to mobilize and organize Cuban residents in Spain. The initiative aims at taking steps against the US economic blockade against the Caribbean nation and in favor of the release of five Cuban anti-terrorist fighters who remain unjustly imprisoned in the United States since 1998. The event in Barcelona was attended by Cuban residents from the Spanish communities of Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia, Aragon and the Balearic Islands as well as from the principality of Andorra. (*ACN*, 28/4/08)

April 28: Older Cubans who came to the US in the early 1960s after the Castro revolution are mostly committed to a hard-line policy. Meanwhile, the number of younger Cuban-Americans who vote more on economic issues is growing. That may signal a shift away from a reliable Republican bloc in Florida, where, in the hotly contested 2000 election, overwhelming support for George W. Bush by the Cuban community helped him win the state and the presidency. In a focus group of 18-to-40-year-old Cuban-Americans before Florida's January primary, no one raised Cuba when asked their top 10 issues of importance, says Sergio Bendixen, president of Bendixen & Associates, the public-opinion research and consulting firm that conducted the session. Asked if they care about the Cuba issue, one respondent replied, ``Only for the sake of my grandmother." Even some of the older immigrants now are calling for new tactics. ``Raul doesn't have the same ability to maintain control over the system as Fidel Castro had," says Francisco Hernandez, the 71-year-old head of the Cuban American National Foundation, an advocacy group in Miami. ``Things are going to change. We should somehow help those changes to take place." (*Bloomberg*, 29/4/08)

April 28: In Miami, sociologist Héctor Palacios, a prominent Cuban dissident, said that Raúl Castro is not committed to making the real changes the country needs, adding that the recent measures implemented by the government are nothing more than "a strategy to prolong their grip on power". "Raúl Castro (...) will not be able to stay in power unless he plays these charades (...) because Fidel Castro has left him the dreadful inheritance of a one-man system which will disappear after his death", said the dissident, sentenced to 25 years in prison during the so-called Case of the 75. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 29/4/08)



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

April 2: Cuban President Raúl Castro Ruz received Evguienevich Levitin, Minister of Transportation from the Russian Federation, who is leading his country's delegation to the 8th Session of the Russia-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission for economic, commercial and scientific-technical cooperation. During the amicable meeting, the Cuban president emphasized the historic friendship between the two peoples, the successful development of bilateral relations and his confidence in the consolidation of these links. The co-president of the Russia-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission delivered warm greetings from President Vladimir Putin. "We need to actively promote cooperation in high-tech and investment sectors, such as biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, where your country has a lot of achievements. As it turns out, we should move to implement bilateral investment projects and create joint ventures," Putin said in his message. The Russian president also said relations between Russia and Cuba, resting on principles "of friendship, solidarity and mutual understanding," had stood the test of time and passed through a difficult period of adaptation. "I am pleased to point out that political dialogue between Moscow and Havana has become more trusting, with more dynamic trade and economic relations, while cultural and humanitarian cooperation has become stronger," Putin added. Russia's outgoing president also told Raul Castro that President elect Dmitry Medvedev also intends to continue developing relations between Moscow and Havana on a mutually beneficial basis. (*Prensa Latina, Ria Novosti*, 2/4/08)

April 3: India's Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi met with Cuban Communist Party officials visiting the Asian country. Gandhi and Fernando Remirez de Estenoz, head of the Foreign Relations Department at the Central Committee of Cuba's Communist Party, agreed on the excellent relations between their countries and talked about ways to further expand bilateral exchange. The Indian leader recalled his visit to Cuba in 2007 and said he was impressed by the Cuban educational and healthcare systems which, he said, every country should learn from. During the meeting both parties agreed that India and Cuba are long time friends and share common positions in the international arena. India's Parliament speaker Somnath Chatterjee also welcomed the Cuban delegation, and said Cuba and Fidel Castro are sources "of inspiration for his people and his motherland." Remirez de Estenoz is concluding an Asian tour that also took him to China and Viet Nam. (*ACN*, 3/4/08)

April 4: The human rights arm of the Organization of American States condemned Cuba for multiple violations, drawing an angry response from its allies Venezuela and Nicaragua, which argued that Havana had been unable to defend itself. In its 2007 annual report, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a semi-autonomous unit of the OAS, said Cuba restricted political rights and freedom of expression, lacked free elections and an independent judiciary and "created a permanent panorama of breached basic rights for the Cuban citizenry." The report also faults Cuba for the lack of independent trade unions and threats and attacks against rights activists. The commission also noted that foreign reporters were stripped of their work permits because "their assessment of Cuban problems is not acceptable to the Cuban government," the report

said. It said Cuba jailed 26 journalists, more than any other country in the hemisphere. Cuba is also found to have violated multiple articles of international rights treaties and was urged to free jailed dissidents. One of the prisoners, Jose Gabriel Ramon Castillo, was confined to 15 months of solitary confinement and "suffered damage to his central nervous system and other pathologies," according to the report. (*McClatchy Newspapers*, 5/7/08)

April 5: Jean Enarson stood in an Edmonton warehouse, carefully checking off items destined for Cuba. The items are part of a huge collection of medical equipment that a group of Albertans recovered from the Canada's East Central Health Region for needy Cuban hospitals. "In Cuba, a lot of the hospitals haven't had their equipment modernized since Castro (came to power in 1959)," said Al Bergsma, who helped organized the shipment. "We're putting equipment with lots of life left in it back in hospitals." Last year, Bergsma, from Rocky Mountain House, noticed some area hospitals were updating their equipment and wondered what would happen to the old items. He spoke with Dale Enarson, a friend through the Evangelical Free Church of Canada, who had done several mission trips in Cuba. The idea of sending second-hand medical equipment to the Caribbean country was soon born. (*Edmonton Journal*, 6/4/08)

April 6: The president of the Cuban Olympic Committee (COC) Jose Ramon Fernandez, condemned the campaign "aimed to undermine the international confidence on China's capacity to organize the Olympic Games". The Cuban Olympic Committee expressed its firm rejection of any attempts to interfere in China's domestic affairs, while recognizing the efforts made by the Olympic Committee and the Chinese government and people to guarantee the success of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In statements to the press in Beijing, Fernandez said the Asian nation, which he said holds such a "solid sovereignty, glorious history and millenarian culture" will not be put under pressure nor blackmailed. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/4/08)

April 7: Dozens of trade union leaders and social activists from Latin America, the United States and Europe have arrived in Havana to participate in the 7th Hemispheric Meeting against Free Trade Agreements (FTA). Sources from the Organizing Committee told reporters that everything is ready to hold the meeting, scheduled from April 9-11 and to be attended by more than 500 delegates. During the working sessions, participants will take concrete actions against neoliberal globalization. Cuban economist Osvaldo Martinez, chairman of the Parliament's Economic Affairs Committee, announced that the meeting will condemn "free trade tactics". FTAs have been criticized for being versions of the FTAA, promoted by the United States since the early 1990s, a model that "has failed and has been consigned to oblivion," Martinez noted. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/4/08)

April 7: Trade union leaders from 18 countries of all continents will attend the traditional May Day celebrations in Cuba. Representatives from all over the world have sent messages confirming their presence in Havana to celebrate International Workers' Day. Raimundo Navarro Fernandez, a member of the National Secretariat of the Cuban Workers' Confederation (CTC), also announced that Havana will host on May 2nd an International Meeting in Solidarity with Cuba in which all foreign guests of the May Day

celebrations will participate. (ACN, 7/4/08)

April 8: Cuba reiterated its proposal to create a fund managed by the United Nations, which would receive half of the world's current military spending, to finance economic and social projects in underdeveloped countries. Speaking during the inaugural session of the UN Disarmament Commission, the Cuban ambassador to the world body, Rodrigo Malmierca, expressed his concern for the interruption of the multilateral disarmament agenda in recent years, while the world's military spending continues to rise. According to Granma news daily, Malmierca noted that the United States alone, the main military investor, could spend more than \$700 billion this year. "The fact that the world military spending far exceeds the funds dedicated to achieving the Development Goals of the Millennium is counterproductive," Malmierca stressed. (ACN, 8/4/08)

April 10: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that his close friend Fidel Castro predicted the fall of the US dollar. Chavez said Cuba's 81-year-old former president mentioned the prediction some time ago before signs of a weakening dollar had begun to appear. "Fidel told me one day, 'Chavez, it won't be long before the crisis of the dollar occurs,'" the Venezuelan leader said in a televised speech. Chavez said Castro handed him a document he had written during one of their meetings in Havana that said "the United States has bought half the world with paper bills that don't have real backing. ... The world can't sustain that bubble." "There it is, the crisis of the dollar," Chavez said. (AP, 10/4/08)

April 10: The 7th Hemispheric Conference against Free Trade Agreements continued at the Convention Center in Havana with a panel that will analyze topics such as the criminalization of protest and social struggles, as well as the anti-terrorist fight and its regulations – according to imperial concepts – and US military bases in Latin America. Meanwhile, two other panels will discuss issues related to the environment, climate change and the defense of natural resources as well as bio-fuels and food sovereignty. Delegates from 32 countries are attending the event that was inaugurated the day before. During the opening session of the event, Dr. Osvaldo Rodriguez, president of the organizing committee, said that although the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) failed, it adopted a new face with the same imperialist essence: free trade agreements. (ACN, 10/4/08)

April 11: The seventh Hemispheric Meeting on the Struggle against Free Trade Agreements and for People Integration is set to conclude in Cuba. Over 500 delegates from 31 countries have participated in the meeting in Havana. During the event representatives from youth groups, students, jurists, professional associations and women's organizations discussed the current world economy, the challenges of globalization, and the unfair trading advantage first-world countries exert on developing nations. Strategies to resist neoliberal policies, terrorism and US military bases in Latin America were also on the agenda. The event was the third without the presence of its sponsor and creator, Fidel Castro. There was, however, a video of Castro's previous appearances played at the beginning of this year's conference. (*Iran's Press TV*, 11/4/08)

April 11: Cuba's official newspaper Granma published an article stating that "Tibet is an inalienable part of China" and the current campaign by some Western governments aims to "discredit China." "Tibet is an inalienable part of China," said the article, adding that some religious persons who aimed at separating the country incited violence and chaos. It said that the riots that broke out on March 14 in Lhasa, capital city of China's Tibet Autonomous Region, were an "incitement promoted from overseas by the Dalai Lama." The newspaper also reported that many historic registries had confirmed Tibet's being part of Chinese territory since ancient times. The article also pointed out that the current campaign by some Western governments aims to discredit China using well-known media tools and words like "repression" and "violation of human rights" to any incident within China's borders. It added that "some Western governments bet this time on the Beijing Olympic Games' failure," and the Dalai Lama is once more their "disciplined soldier." (*Xinhua*, 11/4/08)

April 12: The Ecuadoran president, Rafael Correa, suggested that the Rio Group become the new organization of Latin-American states to solve regional conflicts, and proposed the inclusion of Cuba, currently excluded from the OAS. In particular, he advocated for Cuba's inclusion, a country that in his opinion has been "segregated" and "discriminated against", in other fora like the OAS, from which it has been suspended since 1962. (*AP*, 12/4/08)

April 14: Bulgaria Health Care Minister Radoslav Gaidarski left for an official visit to Cuba that will continue until April 18. By the time of the visit Minister Gaidarski will meet Cuba's Minister of Public Health doctor Jose Ramon Balaguer Cabrera. Both ministers will sign a Memorandum of co-operation in the health care sector. The document foresees the establishment of collaboration between the Bulgarian Bul Bio - National Centre for the treatment of infectious and parasitic diseases, and Cuba's Institute for Tropical Diseases and the Centre for vaccine's production. (*News Bg*, 14/4/08)

April 14: Internal dissidents, exiles and Spanish intellectuals released a manifesto asking the governments of the European Union (EU) "to devise concrete measures in order to engage in a constructive and open dialogue with the entire Cuban civil society, in particular, with the democratic dissident movement". The signatories of the document titled "Yes to dialogue — with Cuba's people", called the current situation on the island deeply "serious", after the succession of Fidel Castro by his brother Raúl, and warn that "the country continues to be hostage to an elite determined to block any social, political or economic progress." [[Diálogo sí: también con el pueblo cubano](#)] (*EER*, 14/4/08)

April 14: Twelve Cuban migrants bound for the United States have landed in Honduras after crossing the Caribbean by boat. Honduran national police said the migrants arrived in Puerto La Ceiba on the country's northern coast. Immigration officials say more than 1,000 Cubans have made the sea crossing to arrive in Honduras since 2000. Most are granted temporary visas and immediately leave for the US. (*Sun Sentinel*, 14/4/08)

April 14: Baseball's 2009 World Cup is being shifted from Cuba to seven European nations in an effort to bolster the sport's bid to get back into the Olympics. Cuba agreed

to the move, the Italian baseball federation told the press. Italy will host the final, and games will also be played in six other European nations. An announcement was to be made in Rome, the federation said. (*AP*, 14/4/08)

April 15: The General Secretary of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), Luis Fernando Andrade, arrived in Cuba for an official visit at the invitation of Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. The ACS, comprised of 25 states and four dependent territories of the Greater Caribbean, is an organization of regional cooperation and integration to face common challenges among countries of the region. Cuba is one of its founding members and has worked in favor of its strengthening and revitalization. (*ACN*, 15/4/08)

April 15: President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has commended the Government of Cuba for its interest in Liberia's development. She says Liberia can learn many lessons from the Cuban experience as far as staying the course of development is concerned. The Liberian leader made the recommendation at the Foreign Ministry during talks with a visiting delegation of the Cuban Government. The delegation is in the country for the Second Session of the Liberia-Cuba Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation held in Monrovia, Liberia from the 9th -11th of April 2008. (*All Africa.Com*, 15/4/08)

April 16: The Lower House is debating with Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen on whether the Netherlands should resume a political dialogue with Cuba. In a letter to the House, Minister Verhagen writes "The human rights situation in Cuba is still poor and there is still no democracy". Nevertheless, the minister is considering reviving diplomatic relations with Cuba now that Raul Castro has come to power. Resuming relations with Cuba could be in the Netherlands' interests because the Dutch Antilles are neighbours and changes are taking place on the island. (*Radio Netherlands*, 16/4/08)

April 16: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque received Secretary General of ACS (Association of Caribbean States), Guatemalan Luis Fernando Andrade. Talks between Cuba's top diplomat and the Caribbean leader were held closed-door at the Foreign Ministry headquarters. According to his agenda, Andrade will also meet with representatives of several local bodies linked to the work of ACS. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/4/08)

April 16: Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev spoke at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, where he accused the United States of demonizing Fidel Castro and failing to appreciate what Castro accomplished for Cuba. Before his speech, Gorbachev held a brief news conference. In his first question, he was asked what he thought of Fidel Castro's decision to relinquish the presidency of Cuba. "I know both Fidel Castro and Raul," Gorbachev said, adding that he hosted the new Cuban leader and his wife while still governor of a Soviet province. "I think the Cuban revolution was a truly popular revolution. And I believe that we have to recognize that that was the choice of the Cuban people." "I think it was a mistake to demonize Fidel Castro," he said, saying that early US opposition pushed Castro into the arms of communism. "I visited Cuba and the Cuban

leaders visited our country many times," he said. "Today the Cuban people are well educated. They are healthy and they look good. I believe they have one of the best medical systems." "I believe Raul Castro will continue in many ways the cause of his brother," he said. "But I do believe there will be changes." (*Sun Sentinel*, 17/4/08)

April 17: Cuban Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Bruno Rodriguez arrived in Guatemala, where he will take part in the opening of an ophthalmologic center equipped by Cuba, at the Guatemalan western department of San Marcos. He will be received by Guatemalan Foreign Minister Haroldo Rodas, and will keep contact with Cuban doctors working in Guatemala. The center has up-to-date technology and will guarantee free medical attention to hundreds of thousands of people with low incomes. More than 20 Cuban helpers will work in the center, the third of its kind equipped by Cuba in Guatemala. After the inauguration, the Cuban delegation will tour places in Huehuetenango, Totonicapan and Retalhuleu, where Cuban public health personnel is working. A total of 400 Cuban public health workers are working in 18 of the 22 Guatemalan departments. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/4/08)

April 17: Acting president of Guatemala, Rafael Espada, thanked the government and people of Cuba for cooperating in setting up an ophthalmologic center built in the western department of San Marcos. "It is a very beautiful center that I was able to visit a few weeks ago and has high tech equipment that will be very useful in this region that has many patients with eye problems," Espada told the press. The modern installation that will be inaugurated on April 18, will have two surgery wards to attend low income patients with operations of several problems such as cataracts, tissue growth and cysts. There are about twenty Cuban cooperators that include two surgeons, one clinician, nurses and technicians to work in the hospital and it is the third of its kind equipped by Cuba in this country. "The installation of state-of-the-art technology and well-prepared specialists that were generously supplied by the Cuban government will help the elderly," added Joaquin Molina of the Pan American Health Organization. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/4/08)

April 17: In June, European Union member states are expected to consider whether to normalize relations with Cuba. This follows a call by the EU's Commissioner of Development to permanently lift diplomatic sanctions. Within the EU, the Czech Republic leads a group of former communist states that oppose engagement with Cuba. "It is as if the people who are fighting the Cuban regime are their brothers in a political sense, the people who are fighting for the same causes that the Czechs or Polish or the Hungarians were fighting for 20 or 30 years ago," explained Piotr Kaczynski of the Centre for European Policy Studies. Cuba's former colonial ruler, Spain, and a handful of other EU countries are pushing Brussels for engagement with Cuba, but the British Conservative and member of the European Parliament Edward Mcmillan-Scott says Cuba has done nothing to merit any change in relations. "I think that the European Commission is quite wrong to pretend that it's business as usual with Cuba; that somehow the departure of one Castro, and his replacement by another, has made some sort of difference. It hasn't. The regime is still as corrupt," Mcmillan-Scott said. (*VOA*, 17/4/08)

April 18: Cuba warned that the food security of developing countries is endangered for a variety of reasons, among them the rising cost of fuel. Jorge Ferrer, minister counselor of Cuba's permanent mission in Geneva, told the World Trade Organization that the spiraling cost of food is threatening world stability. During a meeting of the Trade Negotiations Committee known as the Doha round, Ferrer emphasized that the WTO's agriculture negotiations, which in practice reduce food aid and export credits, are also issues which must be taken into account. Obviously, the economic, political and social stability of an important group of underdeveloped countries cannot be put at risk solely as a result of trade considerations, he emphasized. (*Granma International*, 18/4/08)

April 20: The Seychelles islands and Cuba are celebrating their first three decades of cooperation. Margot Castro Maya, Cuba's Charge d'Affaires to this small archipelago located in the Indian Ocean, announced celebrations will include congratulation exchanges between Cuba and Seychelles governments. The diplomat added that festivities have already begun this month, to finish on July 26, Cuba's National Rebellion Day. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/4/08)

April 20: Cuba's Deputy Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez highlighted in Ciudad Guatemala the good state of relations between Cuba and Guatemala. Rodriguez spoke with the press shortly before winding up an official visit to Guatemala, where he attended the opening ceremony of the third ophthalmologic center equipped by Cuba. "We have had a full agenda reflecting the satisfactory relations and promising perspectives between the two countries," said the official. Rodriguez met with President Alvaro Uribe Colom, vice president Rafael Espada, Foreign Minister Haroldo Rodas and Health Minister Eusebio del Cid, among other government officials. He also presided over, along with Colom, the opening of the ophthalmologic hospital Carlos J. Finlay in the western department of San Marcos. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/4/08)

April 20: A group of 16 undocumented Cuban migrants has landed in Honduras after two weeks at sea, an immigration official said. Francisco Alvarado of Honduras' regional immigration office said the nine men, four women and three children were in good health after setting out on March 31 from the Cuban province of Manzanillo. "One of the motors broke down and while we repaired it, we were surrounded by sharks for a whole day," migrant Raymundo Legon Rivero told local television. Some of the migrants drank sea water after their drinking water ran out, Legon Rivero said. They reached the island of Guanaja on April 14 and were taken to mainland Honduras. Cubans bound for the United States are increasingly traveling through Mexico and Central America instead of trying to get past US Coast Guard patrols off Florida. (*AP*, 20/4/08)

April 21: Fidel Castro praised pope Benedict XVI's speeches on multilateralism pronounced during his apostolic visit to the US, stating that they are "the antithesis of the politics of brutality and force" carried out by the Bush administration. In an article published in local papers the former president of Cuba also noted that "it is not easy to analyse the Vatican's thought on thorny issues in a world where the US president and his rich allies have imposed a bloody war on culture and religion on more than a billion people, all in the name of war on terror". Castro, who is aged 80 like the Pope, thinks that

Benedict XVI proved all of his energy when he "came out of the aircraft barely touching the railings on the stairway". [[Paz y prosperidad](#)] (AGI, 21/4/08)

April 21: A newspaper report said Cuban President Raúl Castro wants to improve relations with Mexico based on conversations Mario Vazquez Rana recently had with Castro in Havana. Vazquez Rana said in an article published in his paper El Sol de Mexico, that the Cuban leader told him he wants Mexico and Cuba to return to the close friendship the two countries once shared. Relations between Mexico and Havana deteriorated under former Mexican President Vicente Fox, who criticized Cuba's human rights record. But President Felipe Calderon said he wants to continue to have warmer ties with the communist island. (AP, 21/4/08)

April 21: Foreign Ministry official spokesman Mikhail Kamynin has been appointed Russian ambassador to Cuba, a source from the Russian Foreign Ministry told the press. In 2002 -2005 Kamynin was Russian ambassador to Spain and concurrently, to Andorra, and was a Russian representative at the World Tourism Organization. Kamynin was a member of official delegations of the former Soviet Union and Russia at a number of international forums. He is a member of the Union of Russian Journalists and an Honorary Professor of the Spanish Society for International Research. He has a diplomatic rank of Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary ambassador. Kamynin speaks Spanish, English and Portuguese. (Itar Tass, 21/4/08)

April 22: Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo met in this capital former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who is attending the First International Conference on Security and Defense, "Granma" newspaper reported. Both leaders exchanged information on the regional and international situation, the role Cuba and Malaysia have played in strengthening the Non-Aligned Movement and the struggle for peace, against terrorism and for a better world, the daily states. They also discussed possibilities of cooperation and development of economic relations between both nations. The visitor also met with Fernando Remírez de Estenoz, member of the Secretariat and chief of the International Relations Department of Cuba's Communist Party Central Committee. (Prensa Latina, 22/4/08)

April 22: President Hugo Chavez welcomed the Cuban delegation that will participate in an Extraordinary Summit of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) called by the Venezuelan leader to analyze ongoing threats against the government of President Evo Morales in Bolivia and the food crisis that his region faces today. According to Granma news daily, the Cuban delegation to the meeting in Caracas is led by Vice Presidents Esteban Lazo – representing the Cuban Communist Party - and Carlos Lage – on behalf of the Government - as well as by the Cuban ambassador to Venezuela, German Sanchez. Chavez said that he had called the extraordinary meeting due to the ongoing attacks against the Bolivian government by right-wing imperialist movements. (ACN, 23/4/08)

April 23: The situation in Bolivia is on the table in Caracas at a special summit of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), called by Venezuelan

President Hugo Chavez. Interviewed on "Venezolana de Television," Chavez stated that the aim is to seek ways to avoid worsening the situation in the Bolivian territory, amid attempts to divide that country. "Bolivia is on the verge of breaking out and the fascist right-wing does not want to meet," said the statesman before accusing the US Empire of injecting hatred into those people through a media war. "We sometimes have the terrible and dramatic sensation that we can do nothing, but I had an idea of calling a special ALBA meeting and talking about the issue with presidents of Brazil, Ecuador and Argentina," Chavez noted. The summit, attended by Bolivian President Evo Morales, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, and Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage, will also analyze topics like food and energy alliances. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/4/08)

April 23: A warning about the danger of Bolivia "exploding" as a result of the "separatist plan behind the (May 4) autonomy referendum" in the eastern province of Santa Cruz was issued at a Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) summit. Bolivian President Evo Morales received the backing of the alternative trade bloc in a statement signed in Caracas with his counterparts Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, as well as Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage. The leaders of Dominica, the fifth ALBA partner, were unable to attend the emergency meeting convened by Chávez. The statement, read by the Cuban Vice President, expressed the presidents' "staunch rejection of the destabilisation plans that seek to undermine peace and unity in Bolivia" and the "separatist attempt" based on "a referendum that clearly violates Bolivia's constitution and laws. ALBA called on "the international community and especially that of Latin America and the Caribbean to act in a timely and decisive manner in solidarity with Bolivia." (*VOA, AFP, Telesur*, 23/4/08)

April 24: The president of Cuba's Councils of State and Ministers, Army General Raul Castro, received former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad. According to local TV news, Mohamad was attending the first International Conference of the Center for Studies on Defense Information. During the meeting, both personalities talked about the excellent Cuba-Malaysia relations, as well as different international issues. Raul gave the visitor the book "One Hundred Hours with Fidel", dedicated by the leader of the Cuban revolution. The commanders of the Revolution Juan Almeida, vice president of the Council of State, and Ramiro Valdes, information technology and communications minister, were also present for the Cuban party, while Malaysian ambassador in Cuba Zainol Abidin Bin Omar accompanied Mohamad. (*Prensa Latina*, 24/4/08)

April 24: Cuba's ambassador to La Paz, Rafael Dausá, insisted that the body of a Bolivian student who died on the island was sent to Bolivia following international norms and denied accusations of organ theft. The family of 22-year-old, Beatriz Porco Calle, who died in Cuba on March 29, claimed that the body arrived in Bolivia with no organs, including the brain. The young woman had been studying Medicine in Cuba and died of "cerebral haemorrhage", according to the forensic report received from Havana. The Bolivian foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, vowed to request a report from the District Attorney's office on the case, while adding that the Cuban government carried out the transfer of the body in accordance with current norms. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 24/4/08)

April 25: Fidel Castro accused the United States of scheming in the case of the recent death of a Bolivian student in Cuba to subvert (Cuba's) collaboration with the government of Evo Morales, according to an article published in the newspaper Granma. In an editorial, Castro described the death of 22-year-old Beatriz Porco, who was studying medicine in Cuba, and whose relatives claim that the body was missing several organs. "It is hard to write about this. But it is harder still to read the newswires broadcasting throughout the world the notion that the body has been stripped of its organs," said Castro. [[Nuestro espíritu de sacrificio y el chantaje del imperio](#)] (AFP, 25/4/08)

April 26: UNESCO's representative in Cuba Herman Van Hoof, says the use of informatics in Cuba is admirable, speaking at a round table during the International Congress on Information underway in Havana. The resident director of the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted the importance of the use of the new technologies in education. He said he has seen how they have been implemented in schools in the most isolated spots of the country. The UN official said Cuba's leadership in the achievement of the Millennium Goals relevant to education in Latin America is the result of the government's consistent and continuing policy that began in 1961 with the literacy campaign. Van Hoof noted that while illiteracy was eradicated in Cuba many years ago, it continues to be a problem in most Latin American nations. (Radio Cadena Agramonte, 26/4/08)

April 28: Bolivian Foreign and Religious Minister David Choquehuanca started a visit to Havana, to hold official talks with his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque and other leaders from the island. The delegation is also comprised of Jean Paul Guevara, general director of Bilateral and Religious Relations, Nelly Pinto, adviser of the minister's cabinet, as well as other officials from that ministry. Choquehuanca arrives in Cuba at a moment of particular political tension in Bolivia, when destabilizing plans and separatist attempts aim to ignore the current constitutional order and threaten that country's territorial integrity, Granma newspaper reported. The visit will be used to hold the Second Meeting of the Cuban-Bolivia Political Consultations, the daily stated. (Prensa Latina, 28/4/08)

April 28: Cuba and Bolivia signed three agreements to strengthen bilateral cooperation, in Havana. The host Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and his Bolivian counterpart David Choquehuanca subscribed to two agreements, one on the serving of judicial sentences and a second accord on the protection and recovery of cultural and patrimonial assets.

A third agreement on cooperation in the fields of sports and physical education was signed by the president of Cuba's National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) Christian Jimenez, and Saul Chavez Orozco, ambassador of Bolivia in Havana. (ACN, 28/4/08)

April 28: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque reiterated that the Cuban government is opposed to separatist plans orchestrated against the Bolivian state and people. "We are with Bolivia in the struggle against foreign plots that affect territorial

integrity," Perez Roque stated during official talks with his Bolivian counterpart David Choquehuanca at Havana's Foreign Affairs Ministry. Perez Roque noted that Cuba supports the deep social and democratic changes in which the Bolivians, led by President Evo Morales, have undertaken. The island's top diplomat pointed out that his country will continue collaboration in public health, which has allowed almost 12 million people to receive care from 2,000 physicians, nurses and specialized staff in the last two years. "So far," stated the Cuban minister, "about 190,000 low-income Bolivians have received free ophthalmologic surgery."[\[Declaración Conjunta\]](#) (*Prensa Latina*, 28/4/08)

April 29: The President of the Republic of Panama, Martin Torrijos, is on an official visit to Cuba on the invitation of Cuban President Raul Castro Ruz. Torrijos arrived at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport, where he was welcomed by Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas. The Panamanian President is being accompanied by First Vice President and Foreign Minister, Samuel Lewis; Trade and Industry Minister Carmen Gisela, and other government officials. During his stay in Cuba, Martin Torrijos is scheduled to hold official talks with Cuban President Raul Castro. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/4/08)

April 30: Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, is to arrive in Cuba on a working visit, invited by Cuban President Raul Castro. The heads of state are expected to develop and strengthen bilateral relations, Granma newspaper reported. This visit, the daily said, takes place after the successful celebration, in Doha, of the Fourth Session of the Cuba-Qatar Intergovernmental Joint Commission, in which both countries inked important accords of cooperation in health and tourism, among others. The visitor became the Emir of the State of Qatar on June 27, 1995 and has attended several international events, especially in the Persian Gulf countries and Arab nations. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/4/08)

April 30: Panamanian President Martín Torrijos met with Cuba's new head of state Raúl Castro and talked at length with his ailing older brother Fidel by telephone. Torrijos also placed the first stone for a monument to be built on a major thoroughfare in honor of his father, the late Panamanian leader Gen. Omar Torrijos. Fidel Castro was a longtime supporter of the elder Torrijos' successful push for a treaty under which the US agreed to turn over the Panama Canal. His son offered no specifics about his phone conversation with Cuba's 81-year-old former president, but members of Panama's diplomatic delegation described it as lengthy. Torrijos' visit was his fifth to the island -- and the first since Raúl Castro permanently assumed the presidency on February 24. Raúl had previously served in a provisional role for 19 months, since Fidel announced in mid-2006 that he had undergone emergency intestinal surgery. (*AP*, 30/4/08)



SECURITY

April 8: Russia sees no sense in deploying military bases in Cuba in response to the US missile shield in Central Europe, the Russian foreign minister said. "Our actions should

be dictated by pragmatism and a search for answers that won't draw us into a new costly arms race," Sergei Lavrov told Ekho Moskvu radio, when a journalist suggested the idea. (*Ria-Novosti*, 8/4/08)

April 17: In Mexico, twenty-nine countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, except Brazil and Cuba that refused to participate, agreed to put an end to cluster munitions in the framework of the Oslo Process, which promotes the global ban of this type of weapon. The Oslo Process promotes a complete prohibition on cluster bombs, a type of weapon that "commits an outrage against fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and causes indiscriminate and brutal harm to both combatants and civilians". The only Latin-American producers of cluster munitions are Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Peru, and until not long ago, Argentina. (*EFE*, 18/4/07)

April 20: The need to extend the defense capacity of people faced with current US belligerence was demanded by the first International Conference on Security and Defense meeting in Havana. At the event's opening, Malaysian former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad asserted that US military arrogance has made that northern nation the world's most aggressive country, as it is devoting extensive resources to military objectives. The Malaysian ex prime minister insisted that war is not the option to resolve conflicts, and noted that it has become an extremely expensive market due to its economic and human losses, especially civilian lives. However, he urgently supported military training as well as developing all possible defense capacities faced with intimidation by powers such as the United States and its allies. Mahathir Mohamad considered that the objective must be to fight for stability in the world and to not interfere in other nations' internal affairs. More than 100 delegates from 10 countries are attending the First International Conference on Security and Defense, and they were welcomed by Guillermo Rodriguez del Pozo, president of the Cuban Center for Studies on Defense Information. In his opening speech, he highlighted that the event is intended to forge well-founded proposals and formulae to face the serious problems that threaten the survival of humankind. The meeting is considered to be a contribution by the island to the scientific analysis of diverse issues related to security and defense on international, regional, and national levels. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/4/08)

April 21: More than 100 specialists from 10 countries began debates at the first International Conference on Security and Defense, an event which will conclude on April 23. Convoled by the Cuban Center for Defense Information Studies (CEID), the event is discussing the construction of a new security system in the Americas. Participants focus their attention on war and peace, armed conflicts, arms races, use of necessary resources for development, illegal weapons traffic and military bases. They will also analyze global problems affecting humankind, the traffic of people, migrations and the role of natural and energy resources vis a vis security. A space to discuss climate changes, their effects and how to face natural disasters also appear on the agenda. CEID, a non-governmental organization dedicated to a multilateral approach to global problems linked to national security, was created in September 2001. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/4/08)

April 23: The First International Conference on Security and Defense concluded with participants agreeing that the existing system in the Western Hemisphere, designed for the Cold War, must be reconstructed based on completely new concepts. Guillermo Rodriguez del Pozo, president of the Cuban Center for Studies on Defense Information (CEID), the organization that sponsored the gathering, said a new system must take into account the changing political conditions of Latin American and Caribbean countries. The three-day event brought together 139 specialists and academics including 29 foreigners from 10 countries and featured conferences by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Director of Cuba's World Economic Research Center Osvaldo Martinez, and Raul Valdez Vivo, president of the Níco Lopez School of the Cuban Communist Party. Del Pozo said that international security is a multi-dimensional concept and as such, several aspects were analyzed including economic, environmental and social factors. (*Granma*, 24/4/08)



TERRORISM

April 10: Two Salvadorans sentenced to death in Cuba nine years ago convicted of terrorism have “high hopes” that their sentence could be commuted to 30 years in prison, said a Colombian priest who gave them spiritual support this Wednesday in Havana. “They feel very hopeful, they are not down, but in good spirits”, said priest Noel Mojica to journalists. Salvadorans Ernesto Cruz León, 37, and Otto Rodríguez Llerena, 50, were sentenced in separate trials in 1999 for planting bombs in Havana and Varadero hotels in the summer of 1997, which killed an Italian tourist. (*AFP*, 10/4/08)



US-CUBA RELATIONS

April 1: Recent changes made by Raul Castro, the new Cuban President, to improve access to consumer products are "cynical" since most Cubans won't have enough money to buy them, a top US official said. "It's somewhat cynical that some time in the future they will have the right to buy a cell phone, if they are able to come up with the money", US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez told the Reuters Latin America Investment Summit in one of the first reactions by the Bush administration to the recent lifting of restrictions in Cuba. Gutierrez, a Cuban-American, and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are leading a commission trying to push for democratic changes on the communist-run island, and he thinks recent actions should not be seen as "reforms." "It's sad that after 50 years of suffering and 50 years living in fear with shortages and 50 years living with repression, Cubans now have the right to buy a rice cooker," he added. Stores started selling some of the electric goods that were previously banned in the socialist state, such as DVD players, with microwave ovens and computers expected in a day or so. (*Reuters*, 1/4/08)

April 1: Tom Casey, spokesman for the US State Department, has said that the ongoing wave of changes in Cuba is negligible. The US official told the media that while lifting the ban on Cubans' access to hotels would certainly be beneficial for a few Cubans, the majority of the population in the island would prefer to have freedom to express their ideas and to execute their political rights without fear of persecution. Casey said that the United States would be interested to see restrictions on civil liberties lifted in Cuba and full transition to democracy adopted. President Raul Castro has, in less than two months since officially becoming head of the Cuban state, implemented a series of marginal changes to everyday life in Cuba. (*Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 1/4/08)

April 1: The governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson, proposed at the OAS a new relationship between the United States and Latin America, and urged Cuba to free all political prisoners and carry out democratic reforms. Richardson expressed the need to take on a more realistic approach toward Cuba and urged the United States to reassess the trade embargo in exchange for reforms on the island. The former democratic presidential candidate made his remarks during the Twenty Seventh Lecture Series of the Americas, in Washington. (*OAS Press Release, Radio Martí*, 1/4/08)

April 3: In Washington, the Spanish secretary of state for foreign affairs, Bernardino León, said the advisers of the three presidential candidates to the White House believe that Spain is a “reference and a partner and a key ally” with regards to relations with Cuba. The statements were made after he met with the foreign affairs advisers for the three presidential candidates. León said that both the democrat teams of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, as well as that of republican John McCain “understand very well that Spain has to be a reference, a partner and a key ally with regards to relations with Cuba.” He also added that Obama’s advisers “obviously have a much more open position.” (*EFE*, 3/4/08)

April 4: Cuba must make bolder reforms, free political prisoners and improve human rights before Washington can engage President Raul Castro and end a half-century of isolation, a US official said. In an interview as part of a Latin American summit series, the State Department's top diplomat for the region, Tom Shannon, said recent reforms in Cuba showed pressure for change was building inside the communist island. "These things, as small as they are, are good but they are clearly not enough from our point of view," said Shannon, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Raul Castro, since officially succeeding his ailing brother Fidel Castro as president in February, has begun lifting some of the state's economic restrictions. Cubans can now buy computers, DVDs and other products, stay at tourist resorts and access cell phone service, all previously off-limits. Shannon said changes could not just be about what Cubans could buy. "We would urge the Cubans to be bolder, more audacious in their reform, and to ensure that as they undertake these reforms, that they build in a human rights and democracy (...) component," said Shannon. [[Shannon: Building an Enduring Engagement in Latin America](#)] (*Reuters, AFP*, 4/4/08)

April 5: A Miami jury has awarded almost \$253 million in a wrongful death case against Cuba, the biggest such penalty to date against the communist government, local media

reported. The Miami Herald said the Miami-Dade circuit court jury delivered its verdict on Friday after a civil trial that began on April 2. The Cuban government chose not to be represented in the courtroom, the Miami Herald said. The case involved Rafael del Pino Siero, a US citizen who was a friend of Fidel Castro but turned against him after the bearded revolutionary took power in 1959, the Herald said. It said Del Pino Siero, who broke with Castro over suspicions he was a communist, was captured while trying to help a Cuban escape to Miami in July 1959. He died in his Cuban prison cell 18 years later at age 51, leaving behind in Miami two children, Rafael del Pino Jr. and his sister Milagros Suarez. The jury award for Del Pino Jr. and Suarez was the largest such award handed down in the United States against Cuba since a court awarded \$188 million to the relatives of three people killed when two Brothers to the Rescue airplanes were shot down in 1996 by a Cuban fighter. (*Reuters*, 5/4/08)

April 7: In 1999 Cuban diplomats in Washington tried to enlist a noted journalist and literary editor to spy on members of the Cuban exile community and prominent US citizens, among them Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Robert Menendez. According to Robert Eringer, representatives from the Cuban Interests Section tried to recruit him to obtain financial information on the three Cuban-American legislators and to infiltrate the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). In exchange, the Cubans promised him exclusive contacts and business opportunities on the island, according to Eringer. Eringer, however, was then working as an undercover FBI agent. The revelations of Eringer's Cuban connections are revealed in his upcoming book "Ruse: Undercover with FBI Counterintelligence", expected to hit bookstores by mid-April. (*The Miami Herald*, 7/4/08)

April 7: Despite the embargo that cut most ties between the US and Cuba more than 40 years ago, all but 13 states — including South Carolina — take advantage of an obscure federal law that allows them to regularly sell agricultural products to Cuba. Since 2001, US farmers have sold more than \$1.5 billion in food and timber to the island. In 2004, South Carolina took the first step toward establishing business relations with the island. A trade delegation visited Havana and signed a deal to export \$10 million worth of agricultural goods, mostly chickens, to Cuba. Four years later, the deal is dormant. For now, South Carolina farmers are missing the boat. "The purpose of the whole trip was to sell South Carolina goods," said state Representative Chip Limehouse (Republican-Charleston), who was a member of that delegation. "It is a fairly complex transaction, and the Bush administration basically tightened things up. It's complicated and it's political." South Carolina's loss is every other state's gain. Pedro Alvarez, chairman and chief executive officer of Alimport, the Cuban government-owned import agency, said that since US law was changed to allow sales to Cuba, there have been more than 1,000 shipments of roughly 9.5 million tons of goods from the United States. Even the Communist state paper, *Granma*, is printed on paper from Alabama. "Your competitors are here, definitely," Alvarez told S.C. Press Association delegates visiting Cuba recently. (*Charleston Post Courier*, 7/4/08)

April 8: With help from Eastern Europe to Latin America, a loud and clear chorus of international condemnation of Raúl Castro's regime can help set the stage for democracy

to take hold inside Cuba, participants in a daylong conference in Coral Gables said. "This can no longer be just about the US versus Cuba. Other countries must condemn the island, too," said US Senator Mel Martinez (Republican-Florida), who hosted the Cuba Democracy Roundtable at the Biltmore Hotel. Sitting on a long rectangular table were current and former US-Cuba policymakers, local politicians, exile leaders, Latin America and Eastern bloc diplomats and former Cuban political prisoners. Calling it "a historic moment" in Cuban exile history as the younger Castro's political hold seems to be weakening, Martinez said that after 49 years of Castro family rule, other countries need to help Cubans build a democracy. A show of solidarity from abroad will remind Cubans that they're not alone and that the United States, which Cubans have been trained to hate through the communist government's propaganda, is not their only ally. Petr Kolar, Czech Republic ambassador to the United States, said his country is joining forces with Cuban opposition workers to send that message. "We want the Cuban people to know that life is better after communism. We are the success story (...) They deserve it, too," Kolar said during a break. (*The Miami Herald*, 8/4/08)

April 8: The coordinator for the US Cuba transition program, Caleb McCarry, will pressure the European Union (EU) into maintaining a hard line policy towards Cuba and reinstating its sanctions in June, criticized the official daily Granma. "McCarry (...) plans to visit Brussels, Belgium, this week with the intention of trying to force the EU to maintain a hostile position towards Cuba", said Granma which called him "proconsul". Granma indicated that the "long interventionist journey" of McCarry includes "Germany and Norway, as well as other European countries which he keeps secret, and could include Spain." (*AFP*, 8/4/08)

April 9: Cuban ambassador to Germany, Gerardo Peñalver, filed a protest on rejecting the visit to Berlin of Caleb McCarry, the Cuba Transition Coordinator at the US Department of State. "We reject this visit to Berlin and we have let the German government know through appropriate diplomatic and official channels," Peñalver said. According to Granma news daily, the Cuban diplomat added that "Mr. McCarry is the embodiment of an illegal mandate that violates international law." He recalled that McCarry has received \$60 million in addition to another \$200 million for his work to promote subversion and destabilization in Cuba. "We believe that it is our right to publicly denounce this new maneuver that aims at undermining Cuba's recent efforts to improve its relations with the European Union," Peñalver stressed. "We take this opportunity to recall that the Cuban people are the legitimate owners of their destiny and only the Cuban people have the right to choose their social, political and economic system without interferences of any kind," he concluded. (*ACN*, 9/4/08)

April 9: Senator Christopher Dodd, one of the most influential Democratic lawmakers on Latin American issues, proposed a new strategic partnership with the region that he said should be kicked off with a new policy on Cuba. Dodd, who has endorsed presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, said that so far US policy toward Latin America has focused too narrowly on trade, drugs and elections. He wants a new approach and says re-thinking the Cuba policy is a good place to start. "The Strategic Partnership for the Americas which I have just outlined, can begin in one place- Cuba," said the Connecticut

lawmaker and a well-known critic of the US embargo. He said policy toward Cuba has been ``agonizingly static for almost 50 years." "I believe we must dramatically alter our posture towards Cuba, by ending the trade embargo, lifting travel restrictions and caps on remittances to the struggling Cuban people, and by engaging in bilateral and multilateral talks on issues of mutual interest," he said. (*The Miami Herald*, 9/4/08)

April 10: The US Interests Section in Havana said that the number of illegal Cuban emigrants trying to get to the United States increased over the past six months even as Fidel Castro formally ceded power to younger brother Raul after 49 years as the communist island's leader. US diplomats reported at a press conference that in the first six months of the current fiscal year, which began last October 1, at least 2,815 Cubans tried to travel by sea to Florida, of whom 1,194 were intercepted by the Coast Guard. The figure is 21 percent greater than during the same period in 2007 and it must be added to the around 5,500 Cubans who tried to enter the United States over the borders with Mexico and Canada or through airports, making almost 10,900 Cubans who tried or managed to get into the country illegally in the past six months. "That is the response of the Cuban people," one US official said, to the government of Raul Castro. The Interests Section acknowledged, however, that the increase in the number of trips by sea was due in part to the fact that now most of them are undertaken on high-speed motorboats rather than the "crude boats" or rafts used by migrants to leave the island some years ago. (*EFE*, 10/4/08)

April 10: The United States has begun issuing fast track visas to Cubans who have relatives living in America. The first three sets of travel permits were issued by the US Interests Section in Havana. The Cuban Family Reunification Programme is partly aimed at discouraging illegal immigrants. Current visa applications can take between three and seven years. The new scheme is aimed at processing claims in just a matter of months. Two families with young children were amongst the first to receive travel permits to join their relatives in the US. According to US consular officials in Havana, as many as 40,000 Cubans could be eligible under the scheme, which was first announced late last year. There is a longstanding agreement between the US and Cuba to allow 20,000 people to emigrate legally each year. (*BBC*, 11/4/08)

April 11: The US Coast Guard is searching the Florida Straits for a reggaeton musician who left Cuba on April 7. Elvis Manuel, a musician known for his anti-Castro views, left Pinar Del Rio, Cuba, with his mother and other Cubans, possibly in two boats. The Coast Guard intercepted a vessel and found Manuel's mother aboard, but Manuel was not there. They believe the group might have left Cuba on two boats. "This indicates that they were coming out on two vessels, which is a big concern," said Ramon Saul Sanchez of the Democracy Movement. "The other vessel might have, something might have happened to it." Cuban-American fans held a vigil on the MacArthur Causeway. In a letter sent to Emilio Gonzalez, director of citizenship and immigration services, state Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart asked that Manuel not be repatriated if he is picked up by the Coast Guard due to a fear of political persecution. (*NBC6.Net*, 11/4/08)

April 12: Cuban reggaeton star Elvis Manuel and nine others were still believed missing at sea. But the singer's mother and 11 other migrants were sent back to the island. Dana Warr, a Coast Guard spokesman, said the search for a second vessel had been suspended and there has been no sign of Elvis Manuel Martínez Nodarse and nine other people, who friends say left Cuba on April 7. Elvis Manuel's family maintained a vigil -- but grew increasingly concerned about the 19-year-old singer. "I haven't heard anything from last night," his aunt, Mirtha Maria Nodarse of Miami, said. "I called Cuba, but nobody knows anything. My family's waiting for me to find out for them." Ramón Saúl Sánchez, head of the migrant advocacy group Democracy Movement, said he gave the Coast Guard a list of aliases the migrants may have been using to help locate Elvis Manuel. Sánchez said the family in Cuba had yet to hear from Elvis Manuel's mother, Irioska María Nodarse. He feared she was being held by Cuban security agents. "We fear that because his mother was the group's manager she is being held by state security," Sánchez said. (*The Miami Herald*, 12/4/08)

April 12: Cuba's top sports official accused the US government of masterminding protests to disrupt the torch relay for the Beijing Olympics, part of what he called a US plan to promote an international boycott of the games. American officials are behind "a ferocious" campaign against China, to convince the international community to boycott some or all of the games' events, Jose Ramon Fernandez, president of the Cuban Olympic Committee, told the press. "The promoters of all this are the United States," Fernandez said, noting that Cuba "fully supports China's right to celebrate the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing without interference of any kind." (*AP*, 13/4/08)

April 13: Federal prosecutors have begun cracking down on big-dollar smuggling operations that for years have hauled Cubans, Haitians and others into South Florida by boat. Federal authorities, alarmed by a series of migrant deaths at sea and signs of increasing smuggling operations from Cuba in the past three years, have begun cultivating informants to penetrate and shut down loosely organized rings that operate between South Florida and the Caribbean. They are also taking more suspects before grand juries and seeking tougher penalties. The new emphasis by the US attorney's office in Miami, with backing from agencies such as US Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Coast Guard, comes after years in which immigrant smuggling across the Florida Straits received at best sporadic attention, and then typically only in cases involving deaths. By contrast, a 1-year-old federal task force has tackled a series of smuggling operations -- including eight cases announced this month -- that involved no calamities. Those recent indictments accuse 18 Cuban Americans of plotting to sneak more than 200 Cubans into South Florida by boat in separate operations since 2005. (*The Miami Herald*, 13/4/08)

April 14: US Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen participated in a meeting in Miami, Florida, that was also attended by Luis Posada Carriles. According to Granma news daily, the meeting was organized by "a terrorist organization in Miami with links to the CIA". The Granma article recalls that, among many other terrorist actions, Posada Carriles was the mastermind of the mid-air bombing of a Cubana airliner in 1976, which killed all 73 people onboard. The article adds that Ros-Lehtinen, "Bush's top representative of his

foreign policy in the US Chamber of Representatives”, participated in the meeting organized by the Cuban Political Imprisonment, an organization founded in August 2002 that groups counterrevolutionaries with a violent past under the direction of notorious terrorist Sixto Reynaldo Aquit, who masterminded a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro in 1999 in Venezuela with the support of the Cuban American National Foundation, another Miami-based terrorist organization, Granma said. (ACN, 14/4/08)

April 14: The Port of Miami, Miami-Dade County's second largest provider of jobs and income, may face stiff competition from Cuba, according to the port's director. In a briefing to Miami-Dade commissioners, Bill Johnson said investments and improvements scheduled for Cuba's Port of Mariel should pose a concern. "Competition today is already significant outside US borders on the cargo side," Johnson told the press. The Port of Mariel, west of Havana, is the focus of a feasibility study by Dubai World Ports (DWP), the third-largest container port business in the world. In 2006, the Arab-owned container port business based in the United Arab Emirates agreed to give up control of six ports in the United States, including Miami, that came with its purchase of a British shipping conglomerate. DWP plans to develop the Port of Mariel as a major cargo shipping hub. "We've been told it could be a quarter-billion dollar improvement at the Port of Mariel for cargo, and that's of great concern," said Johnson. "If it goes forward, the anticipated completion date is 2012, and that's right around the corner." (*Local 10.Com*, 14/4/08)

April 15: Two Cuban men suspected of piloting an ill-fated migrant smuggling mission with reggaeton singer Elvis Manuel among the passengers are being held at the Krome detention center in West Miami-Dade County. Manuel has been missing since April 7; his mother, from Cuba, told the press he was lost when their boat sank; he is presumed missing at sea. The two unidentified Cuban men are being detained under an administrative smuggling charge, according to Victor Colón, assistant chief of the US Border Patrol in Miami. Under US law, immigration authorities have broad discretion to detain non-US citizens suspected of committing a crime. (*The Miami Herald*, 15/4/08)

April 15: The head of the US Southern Command, Admiral James Stavridis, told lawmakers the changes in Cuba under President Raul Castro were "interesting," but that only time would tell if they were real or "cosmetic." "I think it is too early to tell as yet, but it is interesting that Raul is opening some of the economic freedoms such as cellphones, access to tourist hotels, property rights," he told a congressional panel looking into his command's budget. "We need to watch to see if this is a sincere change or just cosmetic," he added. Stavridis was questioned on the reforms Raul Castro, 76, has introduced in Cuba since he took over as president from his ailing brother Fidel, 81, in late February. (*AFP*, 16/4/08)

April 16: Cuba's government said that recent reforms applauded by democracy advocates will actually strengthen socialism on the island, rather than undermine it. "There is no space for the dreams of adversaries," a strongly worded editorial in the Communist Party daily Granma stated. "There will be a more perfect socialism sustained and by a united people led by Fidel, Raúl and the party's leadership." The editorial seemed to have been provoked by the "Cuban Democracy Roundtable," a day-long conference held April 8 in

the exile stronghold of Coral Gables, Florida, and hosted by US Senator Mel Martinez (Republican-Florida.). Martinez, the first Cuban US senator, was quoted by the Miami Herald as saying the international community should be prepared to react if Cuban dissidents "take to the streets" in protest. The Granma editorial scoffed at the conference as the work of "mafiosos" and alleged it was an attempt to subvert the Cuban government. "The Cuban Revolution is not a castle made of cards," the editorial stated, "but an impregnable fortress." (*The Washington Post*, 17/4/08)

April 17: The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry (MINREX) denounced the US government conspiratorial inaction and the Bush administrations protection of Luis Posada Carriles. "Granma" newspaper published an official statement in which the MINREX recalls that May 8 will mark the first anniversary of the liberation of Posada Carriles in that country. The daily states that Judge Kathleen Cardone ruled that order, rejecting charges the US government had brought against Posada. The terrorist had only been accused of committing fraud and lying to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement to get his nationalization to the US, the publication stresses. "The judge said then: Terrorism is not the center of this case, it is migratory fraud. Terrorism and the decision whether a person must be or not termed as terrorist, hinge on the discretion of the executive branch," the declaration states. [[Declaración del MINREX](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 18/4/08)

April 18: The Minnesota House approved a resolution asking the federal government to end a trade ban with Cuba. However, despite the overwhelming 86-9 favorable vote, many Republicans refused to vote as a protest of Cuba's human rights history. The bill asks the federal government to end the 40-year-old trade embargo, which in 2000 was amended to allow limited sale of food, medical supplies and medicine. Representative Al Juhnke said Minnesota sold \$20 million worth of those items to Cuba last year. Juhnke, who recently visited Cuba as part of a state trade mission, said lifting the trade restrictions would help the Cuban people. (*Bulletin, South Washington County*, 18/4/08)

April 18: The White House dismissed as "cosmetic" changes in Cuba under new President Raul Castro on issues like access to cellphones and the potential easing of travel restrictions. "They're cosmetic," Dan Fisk, the US National Security Council's senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs, told reporters days before a three-way US, Mexico, and Canada summit in New Orleans. "We would hope that the international community, and I say that in the large terms, recognize that this isn't real change, this isn't fundamental change in the nature of the system," Fisk said. "And if you look at what the regime is doing in terms of the continued repression against dissidents and civil society activists, the iron fist is still very, very visible, especially to the average Cuban," he said. Fisk said US President George W. Bush, Mexican President Felipe Calderon, and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper were expected to discuss changes in Cuba when they meet on Monday and Tuesday in New Orleans. But while "all three countries agree" broadly on the need for "democratic evolution" in Cuba, "there are a lot of tactical disagreements and I'm not expecting that to change," said the US official. (*AFP*, 18/4/08)

April 18: New York Agriculture Commissioner Paul Hooker is leading a delegation of New York farmers to Cuba in the state's first trade mission to the country. Hooker says he plans to explore market opportunities during his visit from April 21-23. The goal of the trip is to encourage the export of New York fruits and vegetables to Cuba. The delegation includes: Kevin King of Empire State Forest Products in Rensselaer; John Cushing of New York Apple Sales in Castleton; and Lloyd Zimmerman of Black Horse Farm Inc. of Coxsackie. "Cuba relies on US imports and has expressed a keen interest in New York food and agricultural products," Hooker said. (*The Business Review*, 18/4/08)

April 18: Two Cuban nationals who tried smuggling 19 people into the country illegally will spend five years in prison, a federal judge ruled. Earlier this year, Daniel Espinosa-Ruiz, 41, and Carlos Pupo-Mendoza, 37, pleaded guilty to 19 counts of trying to bring people into the country for commercial advantage or private gain. Espinosa-Ruiz, the boat captain, also pleaded guilty to failing to abide by the orders of a federal marine officer to heave his vessel. Officials stopped the boat by disabling both engines with gunshots. (*Sun Sentinel*, 18/4/08)

April 21: There was no love lost between Representative David Rivera, a Miami Republican, and a group of Miami-based travel agents specializing in trips to Cuba. Rivera's proposal to increase state regulation of agencies selling trips to Cuba passed through a state Senate committee, but not before a heated debate from travel agents who came from Miami to speak on the issue. "This bill is presented as an anti-terrorism bill, but what it does is stop travel from Miami and Cuba," Armando García, president of Miami-based Marazul Charters Travel, told the Senate Criminal Justice Committee. Under Rivera's measure -- and a corresponding Senate version sponsored by Senator Carey Baker, a Eustis Republican -- any Florida travel agency selling trips to countries on the US State Department's list of terrorist nations, which includes Cuba, would pay up to \$2,500 in annual registration fees with the state. They also would have to place a bond of up to \$25,000. "He's playing politics with an issue that has nothing to do with politics," said Maria Teresa Aral, president of ABC Charters. "This is about economic development." García and Aral contend that additional restrictions would force customers to fly from Mexico or the Dominican Republic to get to Cuba. Only Miami International Airport, Los Angeles International Airport and John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York are allowed by the federal government to carry flights to Cuba from the United States. If the measure is approved by the Legislature, the travel agencies plan to go to court. "This will not end here," García said after the vote. (*The Miami Herald*, 22/4/08)

April 21: New York Agriculture Commissioner Patrick Hooker arrived in Cuba armed with steaks, wine, cheesecake and a feast of other products from his state, as one of America's top food producers looks to crack the communist-run island's food-import market. But in case all that food doesn't whet Cuba's appetite, New York is betting baseball might. Hooker, leading the state's first official trade mission to Cuba, also brought an engraved wooden Rawlings Sporting Goods Co. bat and presented it to Pedro Alvarez, chairman of Cuba's food import company, Alimport. "I think it's only fitting that you see here and now one of the great forest products that we make," Hooker told

Alvarez at a news conference, adding that the pair spent part of the afternoon chatting about the New York Yankees. The island spent about \$300 million to import US food and farm products through March and by the end of this year expects to buy a bit more than the \$600 million it purchased in 2007, Alvarez said. Those tallies include expenditures for shipping, banking and transportation. (*The Miami Herald*, 22/4/08)

April 23: A New York farm mission is winding up a Cuba trip without firm sales of products to the island. Trade consultant Kirby Jones, who organized New York Agriculture Commissioner Patrick Hooker's trip, says he hopes some contracts will be worked out after the group returns to the US. Hooker says Cuban officials are interested in New York apples, wines, and canned fruit. The Americans threw their Cuban hosts a dinner with New York-state produced products, including steaks and cheesecake. At a farmers market, delegation members sampled bananas and asked about tropical produce. The US embargo prohibits most trade with Cuba, but many American products can be sold directly to the island. (*AP*, 23/4/08)

April 23: Cuba and the US have exchanged words following the brief detention of women who were protesting to call for their jailed dissident husbands to be freed. The Cuban government has accused the women of working for the US. Washington responded by saying the women had the right to free assembly, as guaranteed by human rights accords which Cuba has signed. The women's husbands are among 75 people imprisoned during a 2003 crackdown on dissidents. Some 10 women from a group known as the Ladies in White, were staging a peaceful protest to call for their husbands' release. The women were detained by the police, forcefully put on a bus and driven home. The Cuban press launched a series of attacks on the wives, accusing them of working with the US to subvert the Cuban revolution. State-run television showed photos of the women meeting the head of the US Interest section in Havana. Washington responded by issuing a statement deploring the police action. It said the women were exercising their right to free assembly as guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Cuba recently signed up to. The statement also urged the Cuban government to unconditionally release those imprisoned in the crackdown. (*BBC*, *AP*, 23/4/08)

April 24: Cuba accused the United States and local dissidents of working together to subvert its government, the harshest warning it has issued to its opponents since a political crackdown in 2003. It said US diplomats in Havana have encouraged protests, hosted dissidents at receptions, invited them to take part in video conferences, provided them with access to the Internet and given them material support. "The United States Interests Section in Havana has been consolidated as the leading edge of the North American government's subversive policy and has strengthened its role as the general headquarters of the internal counterrevolution," the government said in a statement published in the ruling Communist Party newspaper *Granma*. It was the second complaint of US interference since police broke-up a peaceful sit-in by 10 women near Havana's Revolution Square to demand that new President Raul Castro release 55 of the 75 dissidents jailed in 2003 that are still behind bars. The government said a statement issued by the Interests Section deploring the incident and expressing support for the

women demonstrators was "irrefutable proof of US efforts to foment subversion in our country." "Cuba affirms its right to impede, neutralize and respond to these provocative actions conceived, financed and encouraged by the government of the United States and its Interests Section in Havana," it said. [[Statement by MINREX](#)] (*Reuters*, 24/4/08)

April 25: In an interview with CNN en Espanol, House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Democrat- California), said that "for years" she has opposed the embargo on Cuba. "I don't think it's been successful, and I think we have to remove the travel bans and have more exchanges -- people to people exchanges with Cuba," she said. (*CNN*, 27/4/08)

April 27: Coast Guard officials said they have called off the search for two missing Cuban migrants whose raft turned up on the Gulf Coast on April 25, about 300 miles south of New Orleans, far from the Florida Straits where most migrants are found. The two Cubans were among 12 people reported to be on the raft. Two other Cubans who were a part of the same journey were found dead, and the remaining eight were rescued. According to Coast Guard officials, authorities were alerted about the raft when crew members from an 800-foot tanker ship reported that they saw a raft "in distress" and that there were people in the water. It is unusual for Cuban migrants to turn up so far north, but this is not the first time, said Coast Guard Lt. Anastacia Visneski. (*The Miami Herald*, 27/4/08)

April 28: Jim Allen, president of the New York Apple Association, was part of a 20-member trade delegation that visited Cuba on April 21-23 for the state's first official trade mission there. "I'm cautiously optimistic that something could happen this season," said Allen, who added that storage supplies have been tight. Harvest of the new crop is expected to start the second week of August. "I'm more optimistic something could happen next season, should we decide to take it." The US exported 1,612 metric tons of fresh produce to Cuba in 2006, valued at \$1.1 million. Apples were by far the largest fresh produce export, representing 1,486 metric tons worth \$887,000, according to the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service. Cuban officials told Allen they receive about five containers a month of imported apples. Allen said he saw red delicious and golden delicious from Virginia during the three-day trip. Much of the fresh produce imported to the country goes to hotels and the tourist trade, such as high-end restaurants, he said. "We visited three grocery stores, and there wasn't an ounce of fresh produce in any of them," Allen said. "There were some open-air markets that had fruit, but I didn't see any vegetables." (*The Packer.Com*, 28/4/08)

April 30: With three days left in the legislative session, Representative David Rivera, a Miami Republican, was able to pass a controversial measure targeting travel agencies specializing in trips to Cuba. Florida-based travel agents selling trips to Cuba -- or any country on the US State Department's list of terrorist nations -- will have to pay up to \$2,500 in registration fees to the state and provide up to \$300,000 in bond money under Rivera's measure. The bill still must be approved by Governor Charlie Crist. Rivera's bill, sponsored in the Senate by Senator Carey Baker, a Eustis Republican, passed despite the protests of several Miami-based travel agents who visited the Capitol to lambaste the measure as "political pandering." (*The Miami Herald*, 1/5/08)