

FOCAL Chronicle on Cuba

December 2002

Domestic Affairs

December 1: Municipal assemblies have nominated the candidates for members of the national and 14 provincial assemblies of the people's power. The municipalities of Santiago de Cuba and Segundo Frente, in the Santiago de Cuba province, nominated Fidel Castro and Raúl Castro, respectively. (Granma, 2/12/02)

December 2: Cuba said it has a drug problem spawned by tourism and vowed to crack down on traffickers using the island as a route from South America to the United States or Europe. "We are going to confront the problem with a very heavy hand," Attorney General Juan Escalona told reporters. "Cuba has been used as a transit country. Lately we have seen cases of shipments being hidden here for sale in Cuba," Escalona said at a news conference announcing an international penal studies conference to be held in Havana. Between 1997 and 2001, some 190 foreigners were arrested in Cuba for possession of drugs, mainly at airports but also on boats, he said. Many were detained connecting to flights to Europe. Some had swallowed plastic bags containing cocaine. Cuban authorities have detected pills of Ecstasy entering the country, and small plantations of marijuana have been discovered and destroyed, he said. Fidel Castro's government has moved to close down nightclubs and banned blinking strobe lights on dance floors because they are seen to encourage drug use. Escalona called the drug problem "incipient." (Reuters, 2/12/02)

December 2: Cuba's top prosecutor defended the island's continued use of the death penalty as a deterrent to atrocious common crimes, but noted that the measure is used selectively. Although there have been no executions in Cuba in more than two years, "there is no modification from a legislative point of view," Attorney General Juan Escalona told reporters. Along with especially grievous common crimes, Cuba maintains the death penalty for crimes against state security, Escalona said. (AP, 2/12/02)

December 2: A group of promoters of the opposition Varela Project has expressed dissatisfaction with the reply received from the National Assembly (Cuban Parliament) to their petition to publish the Project in Cuba, and with the method employed to send such reply to the parties concerned. "The way in which the Assembly has delivered its reply is typical of a repressive operation by the State Security and is plagued with contradictions between the letters it attaches and the document itself", according to declarations signed by Oswaldo Payá and other members of the Coordinating Committee of the Varela Project. (AFP, 2/12/02)

December 3: Fidel Castro urged the country's rum drinkers to abstain during the upcoming holidays and warning that anyone who wanted to buy the national alcoholic beverage "will pay dearly for it." "How much damage has rum caused in any society?" Castro said during a speech overnight at Havana's medical school that lasted until next day. Castro lamented the fact there are "supporters of the revolution who like to toss down a few once in a while," warning the foreign scholarship students to stay away from "bums and parasites" during their stay in Cuba. IN his speech he also noted that "some rascal" had offered students money to carry out "an illegal activity," apparently referring to Cubans who purchase government permits given to foreign students allowing them to buy cars on the island. (EFE, 4/12/02)

December 3: Although before the law in Cuba blacks and whites enjoy the same rights and opportunities, blacks live in poorer houses, have lesser-paid jobs and receive little of remittances from abroad, according to a recent study by the Anthropology Centre, an agency of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment. The study was circulated to a group of scientists and

has provided revealing information on interracial relations on the island. Whites hold a higher number of jobs in more affluent sectors of the economy like tourism and firms with access to the U.S. Dollar. In those sectors, 80% of the work force is white and only 5% is black, concludes the study. Researchers were also concerned by the negative perception of blacks, including by members of the same group. (AP, 3/12/02)

December 3: After a long silence on the issue of AIDS, the Cuban Catholic Church has decided to cooperate with local authorities in the fight against the disease and offered a mass for the victims of the HIV. Caritas-Cuba, a catholic organization that is conducting the campaign against AIDS, said that the Catholic Church has worked extensively with patients, but had never done this type of event before. (World Data Service, 3/12/02)

December 3: Not only women and seniors but children as well are the subjects of domestic violence in Cuba carried out by adults who replicate traditional repressive patterns of behaviour. Specialists on the matter affirm that domestic violence against children is a little-known, invisible and with no reliable statistics phenomenon, which remains hidden behind the doors of Cuban homes. Research conducted in several parts of the country reveals that child abuse in the bosom of the family goes from threats, verbal and sexual abuse and beating to grievous bodily harm and sometimes even death. (Servicio de Noticias de la Mujer, 3/12/02)

December 3: In celebration of the Pan-American Health Organization's (PAHO) 100th anniversary, the Cuban people and Fidel Castro received special recognition for advances in healthcare. Cuban results in primary medical care and collaboration with other countries were highlighted in the diploma that PAHO representative in Cuba, Patricio Yépez, gave to Castro on Latin American Medicine Day. (Granma, 4/12/02)

December 5 : A square named for filmmaker Cesare Zavattini, one of the leading figures in Italian neorealism, was dedicated in Havana with some of his disciples in attendance. Among the participants were Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Argentine producer Fernando Birri. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Zavattini's birth, activities have been organized in conjunction with the Festival del Nuevo Cine currently taking place in Havana. (EFE, 5/12/02)

December 6: Elián González turned 9 years old, with celebrations planned in all the schools of his hometown. The Communist Party youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde dedicated a full page to the famous shipwreck survivor. Cuban officials say they have tried to create a relatively normal life for the child who lived under the eye of television cameras during his seven-month stay in the United States, from November 1999 to June 2000. But few 9-year-olds have a museum dedicated to the fight for their custody or see their birthday celebrated in schools throughout their hometown. Fidel Castro himself showed up in Elián's school for his 9th birthday. (AP, 6/12/02)

December 6: A Cuban dissident who had been freed from prison was detained again after police blocked a meeting of a human rights club, his wife said. Elsa Morejon said that her husband, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, was detained with about 12 other people. "There was going to be a meeting over topics of human rights" with people who had come from the nearby province of Matanzas, she said. But officials "did not let them enter the house where it was going to be." She said the club members then lay down in the street in protest and that police arrived and took them away. (AP, 7/12/02)

December 17: Fidel Castro joined 11,000 other Cubans at a massive chess match in Havana, taking part in what Cuban officials billed as the world's largest chess exhibition. Castro spent a little more than an hour before a chessboard, one of a dozen people playing Cuban Grand Master Silvino Garcia, before heading off to take part in a summit of Caribbean leaders. (AP, 8/12/02)

December 7: Even though Cuba boasts some of the world's best-equipped laboratories and talented scientists, its high-profile efforts to clone a cow are proving much more difficult than originally imagined. The Cuban scientist's goal is to someday clone a cow with the seemingly magical ability to produce human medicines in its milk. Cuba's communist government -- which is far from unique in such research -- hopes it brings scientific prestige, and leads to inexpensive medicines it can dispense to its people for free and export for badly needed cash. (The Detroit News, 7/12/02)

December 9: Fidel Castro called the first Cuban sports Olympiad held in Cuba, after the island decided not to participate in the Central American and Caribbean Games in El Salvador, a "colossal and beautiful battle". He also announced that the second edition would take place in 2004. (World Data Service, 9/12/02)

December 9: With the presentation of a conference on the effectiveness of the Cuban vaccine against the meningococcal disease (or syndrome), the 6th Latin American Congress of Immunology (ALAI HAVANA 2002) opened in Havana. Primary immunity, Immunology and Tumor Immunotherapy, Immunology and Reproduction, Immunotechnology, Viral Diseases, Bacterial Diseases and cancer, among others, were the main topics to be discussed. (Prensa Latina, 9/12/02)

December 10: Ten opponents of Cuba's communist government held meetings to mark International Human Rights Day, saying it was the first time dissidents had gathered simultaneously across the island. "We have won this space with years of jail," Martha Beatriz Roque, an economist, told about 70 opposition members meeting in her home in Havana as security agents watched from a street corner. Ms. Roque said the fact that the police had allowed the meeting to take place was a sign that Fidel Castro, in power since 1959, was feeling international pressure to improve human rights in his one-party state. Similar meetings were being held at the same time in all 14 provinces of Cuba, said Ms. Roque. The meeting was attended by an American diplomatic official, Gonzalo Gallegos, a public affairs officer, but European and Latin American diplomats invited to the event did not show up. (Reuters, 11/12/02)

December 10: Cuban authorities say at least 14 people have been killed and more than 70 others injured after a passenger train derailed in western Cuba. The train was traveling from Havana to the eastern city of Santiago when it jumped the tracks in the town of Coliseo, about 125 kilometers east of Havana. The dead include a Salvadoran medical student. The train's operator was also reported killed, which could slow the investigation into the cause of the derailment. (VOA News, 10/12/02)

December 10: On the recommendation of the national political leadership, the Cuban Council of State has decreed the dismissal of Juan Mario Junco del Pino as Construction Minister and his replacement in the post by Fidel Fernando Figueroa de la Paz, who has occupied the post of deputy construction minister since 1997. The decision responds to the fact that the results expected from this body have not been attained, as well as the need to restore the potential of a sector, which despite the effects of the material difficulties that the country has faced, is capable of attaining greater quantitative and qualitative results with greater strictness, discipline, organization and control. (World Data Service, 10/12/02)

December 13: A flag and bumper stickers of the militant anti-Castro group Alpha 66 were tied and pasted to the house of Oswaldo Payá, main advocate of the Varela Project. Scrawled on the bumper stickers were "Death to informers" and words that included "spy" and "traitor."

December 13: Oswaldo Payá said the Cuban government denied him the exit visa needed to leave the country for a ceremony at the European Parliament, where he is to receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. (CNN, Notimex, 14/12/02)

December 14: Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya received permission to leave Cuba, three days before he is to receive the European Union's top human rights award. "The situation had been uncertain up to the final moment," he said, hours before he was to board a flight for Spain. Paya had been trying for weeks to get an exit visa so that he could go to Strasbourg, France, to receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. (AP, 14/12/02)

December 15: During the reopening of a clinic in Alamar, Havana, Fidel Castro reiterated that Cuba is working for high-quality medical care. The reopening of the clinic is the first part of the program to modernize Havana hospitals. Another part of the projects is renovation of 362 doctors' offices (neighborhood clinics) that are in critical situation in Havana. Castro spoke of research in the eastern provinces into the situation of all people with physical and emotional disorders, and the causes of such disorder to "have a healthier society and end the families' terrible suffering." (Prensa Latina, 16/12/02)

December 15: Fidel Castro assured anxious island residents his recent criticism of the national drink, rum, did not mean prices were going up, or that he was contemplating prohibition. "Some people have misinterpreted my words concerning alcoholism," Castro said. "We are not going to establish a dry law ... and at no point did I say we would raise the price of rum." Castro, apparently responding to popular discontent, devoted a good portion of his two-hour speech to explaining he meant only that government-sponsored street parties would not serve free rum, and that spirit prices were already high at the stores due to increases in recent years. (Reuters, 16/12/02)

December 17: The ten permanent working commissions of the National Assembly of People's Power -- also known as the Cuban Parliament -- are meeting at Havana's International Convention Center. Among the issues being discussed include important economic and social projects which will be implemented over the next 12 months, as well as setting the national budget for the year 2003. The meetings began in preparation for the 10th Regular Session of the Fifth Legislature of the National Assembly of People's Power. (Radio Habana Cuba, 18/12/02)

December 19: The dissident movement Todos Unidos (Everyone United), made up of the main groups of Cuba's internal opposition, issued a 36-point proposal aimed at reinforcing the Varela Project. The spokesperson of the group, Vladimiro Roca, said that "efforts are underway to substantiate each of the proposals." He also pointed out that the objective is to "reinforce popular support around the Varela Project". Increased salaries and pension payments, the right to own a home and vehicle, and the chance to open a private business were among reform proposal. They were fashioned "taking into account the horrible economic, political, social and human rights situation the immense majority of our people suffer," said leaders of Todos Unidos. Vladimiro Roca is a veteran activist and former political prisoner. (AP, 20/12/02)

December 19: During this Christmas season the Catholic Church advocated for the unity of the Cuban family which deems fragmented and overwhelmed due to material scarcities. The Protestant Church for its part announced it would celebrate Christmas with a message of peace and hope for all Cubans who are going through difficult times of material shortages. (AP, 19/12/02)

December 21: Fidel Castro has excused himself from a session of Cuba's parliament for the first time in 25 years because of a leg injury. In a letter read out by National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcon, Castro said his doctors had ordered him to rest, "Owing to a small accidental injury in the left leg with inflammation and other theoretical risks, the medical tyranny has imposed upon me the terrible punishment of three or four days' rest," it said. "I don't have any other alternative but to obey." "I must take care of my left leg because with it I have made the best steps of my life." (The Australian, 23/12/02)

December 21: Cuban Parliament's 10th Ordinary Period of the 5th legislative sessions concluded with the approval of the economic plan, the State budget for 2003, and a new Military Court Law. First Cuban Vice President Raúl Castro and several high-ranking officials were present in the session. (Prensa Latina, 21/12/02)

December 21: The official Cuban daily Granma reported that "as a consequence of food poisoning" several hundreds of students in a teacher school received medical attention. No serious cases were reported. (Encuentro en la Red, 21/12/02)

December 24: Cuban pediatrician, José R. Jordán Rodríguez, received in Washington, the award of Public Health Hero in the Americas, which was granted by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). (Granma, 24/12/02)

December 24: The Cuban independent journalists movement has launched a bi-monthly publication aimed at promoting freedom of expression on the island. Under the sponsorship of the not legally recognized Manuel Márquez Sterling Journalists' Association, the magazine "De Cuba" is a rough edition with 52 pages and includes sections on politics, economy, culture, history, legal issues, sports, and humour. (El Nuevo Herald, 24/12/02)

December 25: Fidel Castro, who has not been seen in public for a week, told his countrymen that an insect bite that had caused his left leg to swell up will keep him in bed for another few days. In a letter published on the front page of Cuba's state-run newspapers, the 76-year-old leader reassured Cubans he was recovering from an infection he got from scratching a mosquito or ant bite over a week ago. "I am well, dear compatriots, and I feel more optimistic than ever about the future of the revolution," Castro said. (Reuters, 25/12/02)

December 29: Fidel Castro showed up for the presentation of a new book, making his first public appearance after a serious infection in his leg forced him out of the spotlight. The book presented was a collection of political cartoons drawn by Gerardo Hernandez, one of five Cuban men serving sentences in the United States on espionage charges. (The Australian, 30/12/02)

December 30: Cuba's Science, Technology and Environmental Ministry (CITMA) announced a 10.8% decrease of national solid waste in 2002 compared to 2001, vice-minister Fabio Fajardo was quoted as saying in official newspaper Granma. (BNAmericas, 31/12/02)

Economy

December 2: Cash-strapped Cuba and a consortium of Japanese companies have agreed to restructure a landmark, 100 billion yen (approximately \$775 million) debt accord signed in 1998, a Japanese business source said. Ms. Tomoyoshi Kondo, a vice president of the Nissho Iwai Corp. and head of the Japan-Cuba Economic Conference, arrived in Havana and was expected to sign the agreement later in the day. "The Cubans asked us to postpone principal payments until 2009, which was completely unacceptable, but we agreed to extend the grace period for two years and talk principal later," the source, close to the negotiations, said. (Reuters, 2/12/02)

December 4: The number of self-employed workers in Cuba keeps sliding according to figures published by the Cuban publication Statistical Yearbook 2001. Based on these figures, self-employed workers contributions to the state's coffers was 123.4 million pesos, a 40% reduction compared to 1997 contributions. (Cubanet, 4/12/02)

December 5: Several Spanish companies based in the autonomous region of the Basque Country have joined forces in order to set up Grupo de Exportacion a Cuba (Gececuba), which will insure their risks in connection with investments in Cuba. Cesce, the state-owned Spanish

entity which insures companies against risks of exporting abroad, decided in 1999 to cease to cover investments in the Caribbean island country owing to Cuba's high debts. Amongst the companies to found Gececuba are Fagor Industrial, Electra, Miesa, Guibe, Bikain and Maritima Candina. In total, Gececuba has roughly 30 members which have all invested in Cuba. (Expansion/FT, 5/12/02)

December 5: Spain will contribute 418.600 euros to the Human Development Program at the Local Level (PDHL) in Cuba. This is the most important program carried out in Cuba by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in cooperation with the government of the island. Thus, Spain will join Italy and Switzerland in support of this initiative. Spain's assistance will fund a project of food production for vulnerable groups in nine municipalities of Cuba's eastern provinces. (EFE, 5/12/02)

December 6: Turmoil in Venezuela has delayed oil shipments to Cuba, the Venezuelan embassy said. "The ambassador informs (...) that this problem will be solved in four days," said Armando Marin, the political officer at Venezuela's embassy in Havana, speaking at a news conference. (AP, 6/12/02)

December 10: The 2002-2003 Cuban sugar harvest started in the Cienfuegos province after a global restructuring of the industry that entailed the shutting down of almost half of all sugar refineries. (EFE, 11/12/02)

December 10: Cuba is struggling to restore its railway system, Latin America's oldest, amid an ongoing economic crunch and complaints about delays and the aging engines. The railway was born 165 years ago, and it has long been central to the economy, hauling tobacco for its famous cigars in the east and sugar cane to feed its mills in the west. Today, Cuba's 4,345 km of tracks still move about 60 per cent of all ground cargo across the island, as well as hundreds of thousands of passengers annually. While there are new efforts to restore the old US-made steam engines to attract tourists, average citizens complain about low-quality service, especially chronic delays. (Vancouver Sun, 10/12/02)

December 10: The reopening of a government office in Cuba that buys gold, silver, gems and jewelry from the public is an indication that the economy of the communist nation is once again facing difficulties reminiscent of the worst moments of the crisis of the 1990s. The "house of gold" was first opened in the early 1990s to shore up the weakened state coffers, in a country where the economy remains basically state-run. "They used to pay with checks with which you could buy clothes and other goods, but now they pay you with 'convertible pesos,' a currency that is basically the same as the dollar in Cuba, but has no value anywhere else," said a bank employee. But observers say the reopening of the "house of gold" might not bring the hoped-for results, because in the past few years, ownership of such valuables has become largely exclusive to the highest-income sectors, which would not likely be interested in relinquishing them. (IPS, 18/12/02)

December 11: Cuba's energy woes worsened as rolling power outages of up to eight hours a day hit the island. Large parts of the capital were without power, as the outages continued. "Unscheduled generator shutdowns have coincided with the planned maintenance of other units, affecting service," the power authority said in a brief statement. Residents polled by phone throughout Cuba said the power outages were the worst since the early 1990s, when the collapse of its former benefactor, the Soviet Union, plunged the country into an economic crisis from which it has yet to recover. (Reuters, 11/12/02)

December 11: Cuban Minister of Light Industries Jesus Perez Otton announced in Havana that his country is determined to import textiles and clothing from Iran. Conferring with Iranian Ambassador to Havana, Ahmad Edrisiyan, the Cuban minister said that a delegation will soon be

dispatched to Iran to get acquainted with its potentials to this effect and to assess their requirements. (IRNA, 12/12/02)

December 11: Shinichi Saito, Vice-President of the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), attended a ceremony marking the opening of a subsidiary of that entity in Cuba. (World Data Service, 11/12/02)

December 18: Cuba exported more than 70,000 tonnes of unrefined nickel plus cobalt in 2002, the state-run news agency AIN reported, compared with 77,000 tonnes the government said was sent abroad in 2001. "The export of this strategic product exceeded expectations arriving at a little more than 70,000 tonnes," AIN said in its annual report on economic activity in eastern Holguin province, home of Cuba's three nickel plants. (Reuters, 18/12/02)

December 21: In his report to parliament, Cuba's Economy Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said the economy expanded 1.1 percent this year, which he noted "compared favorably to the declines registered in Latin America." The economy minister said the main objectives next year are to "guarantee food distribution, cover the country's minimum power needs, guarantee the supply of medicines and improve social services." To accomplish those aims, he said, "the investment program will focus on energy-production projects with fast turnarounds, which will optimize the usage of Cuban oil to generate electricity." Cuba's recovery from a 1990s economic crisis slowed in 2002 and domestic finances deteriorated, as Havana printed pesos to lessen the impact of a foreign exchange shortage on the import-dependent island. A 5 percent decline in tourism, low sugar prices, hurricanes, shrinking foreign investment and credit and the U.S. trade embargo left the country short of cash to import oil and other products, Economy Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said in a customary year-end report to the National Assembly. (EFE, Reuters, 21,24/12/02)

December 21: Cuba has been preparing "back-up plans" to deal with a possible energy crunch that could arise from the crisis in Venezuela, the world's fifth largest exporter of crude, officials said. In the event that the country's problems should worsen, "Fidel Castro (...) requested that emergency plans be drawn up to deal with an extremely serious energy crisis," Central Bank president Francisco Soberon told lawmakers. "We have formulas in place to face any situation, with an eye toward guaranteeing the country's vital services," he said. (EFE, 23/12/02)

December 22: The Spanish Hotel group Sol Meliá, considered a leader in Spain, Latin America and the Caribbean, increased this year its operations on the island managing 24 hotels and 9300 rooms in the main tourist sites of the country. Despite a Cuban tourism slowdown, reaching 5% according to official figures, executives from Sol Meliá are planning to attract more vacationers from Canada, Germany, the UK, and France. (Notimex, 22/12/02)

December 25: Cruise ship visits to Cuba are projected to double in 2003, good news as the island struggles to recover from its losses in the tourism business. Gianluca Suprani, managing director of Havana's sole cruise ship terminal, said that 45,000 cruise ship passengers arrived here on 60 stops in 2002 — less than half of the 100,000 passengers who arrived on 200 stops the year before. But at least 75,000 such passengers are expected on 120 visits in 2003, said Suprani, who manages the terminal, a mixed enterprise between an Italian firm and the Cuban government. (AP, 25/12/02)

December 26: Carlos Lage, Cuban secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers, announced that oil workers have reached a total volume of 4.1 million tons of crude oil produced this year, a figure that is 20% higher than last year. Lage stated that this year's growth in relation to that of 2001 (750,000 tons) is higher than that produced in any year in the past 10 years. The other significant result, he added, is the preparation levels achieved in the country for the consumption of this oil. (Granma, 26/12/02)

December 27: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage inaugurated the Jardines del Rey International Airport. The airport -- built at a cost of 33 million US dollars and nearly 50 million Cuban pesos -- is located in Ciego de Avila province, which has become the third most popular tourist destination in Cuba, following Havana and Varadero. (Radio Habana Cuba, 27/12/02)

Exile Community

December 2: Two Florida Republican lawmakers, both Cuban exiles, have sent a letter to US President George Bush requesting the re-nomination of Otto Reich as assistant secretary of state for western hemispheric affairs. Reich lost his post recently because his recess appointment expired when the 107th Congress adjourned for the year. He was then appointed a special envoy for Latin American affairs by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican-Florida) and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Republican-Florida), along with some members of anti-Castro Cuban exile groups and other Hispanic organizations, are laying plans to pressure Bush to re-nominate Reich. (CNSNews, 2/12/02)

December 5: The Varela Project has the support of Cuban exile groups in South Florida, according to a poll commissioned by the Grupo de Estudios Cubanos (GEC). Of those polled, 68% believe the Varela Project is a good idea, while 23% think the opposite. However, once those polled are told what the project is about the approval ratings reach 82% while opponent fall to 10%. The poll was conducted by Bendixen and Associates in November and it included 451 exiles who live in the counties of Miami-Dade and Broward, and has a margin of error of 4.6%. (El Nuevo Herald, 5/12/02)

December 6: A Cuban-American company planning an awards ceremony to benefit AIDS causes scuttled the event when organizers discovered that conservative exile groups were gearing up to protest the rumored appearance of Cuban singer Rosita Fornés. The controversy began when word spread that Fornés --scorned by some in Miami because she has not publicly repudiated Fidel Castro's government and because she still lives in Havana -- might attend the event. (The Miami Herald, 6/12/02)

December 6: The "Queen of Salsa", Celia Cruz, is in a New York hospital in "critical" condition, informed her agent Omer Pardillo. (Notimex, 6/12/02) **December 16:** Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas' trip to Strasbourg to receive a prize from the European Parliament has had an impact on organizations of Cuban exiles in Miami. "It is a sign of the future", said Oscar Pena, of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights (Comite Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos). During a press conference half a dozen exile organizations welcomed the trip, but were also concerned by the Cuban dissident's safety while abroad. (El Nuevo Herald, 17/12/02)

December 25: Baseball's biggest spender, the New York Yankees, reached a preliminary agreement on a \$32 million, four-year contract with Cuban defector José Ariel Contreras. (The Washington Post, 25/12/02)

December 29: An anti-Castro group in Miami said having participated in an attempt inside Cuba against the life of spy Juan Pablo Roque, who allegedly was taken with serious injuries to a Havana hospital. The head of the Commandos F-4, a civic-military organization that operates through underground cells on the island confirmed the participation of his group in the assassination attempt. Roque was part of the Wasp Net in Florida and escaped to Havana in 1996. (El Nuevo Herald, 29/12/02)

Foreign Relations

December 1: Len Good, President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) leads a delegation visiting Havana. The delegation is carrying out an intense program of familiarization with the Cuban reality. Other members of the delegation include CIDA's vice-presidents, Bob Anderson, Americas Branch; José Touchette, Partnership Branch; and, Bruce Montador, Multilateral Programmes Branch. This the first visit of CIDA's President to Cuba where he arrived with a deep interest to know the country. Good said that Canada-Cuba cooperation shows an impressive development with 67 projects currently underway which despite not being generally to big, they are targeted to areas of need on the island. (World Data Service, 1/12/02)

December 1 : Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar has written Cuban officials asking that dissident Osvaldo Payá be permitted to leave that country to receive the Andrei Sakharov Human Rights Award bestowed upon him by the European Parliament. The Spanish government's wishes in the matter were communicated to leaders of the Democratic International of the Center (IDC) during a gathering of the body's leaders in Corfu, where it passed a resolution supporting Payá's candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize. (EFE, 1/12/02)

December 2: Cuba and Canada signed an agreement in Havana to cooperate on a project to strengthen the Caribbean island's forestry service on the local, provincial and national levels. The project, valued at CAN \$770,000 provides benefits to rural towns whose economies depend upon forestry products, and it also contributes to the sustainable management of the island's forests. Cuban Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Minister Marta Lomas and Canadian Agency for International Development president Len Good signed the agreement for their respective governments. (EFE, 2/12/02)

December 2: The 16th Guadalajara International Book Fair (FIL) in Mexico began the first day of its homage to Cuba with an extensive cultural program dedicated to Nicolás Guillén (1902-1989), the island's national poet. Other Cubans being honored include Cintio Vitier, Dulce María Loynaz, José Martí, Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Eliseo Diego and Roberto Fernández Retamar. (AIN, 2/12/02)

December 2 : The Mexican navy rescued six Cubans on board a small craft adrift close to the Cozumel Island in the Caribbean Sea, reported that military institution. (EFE, 2/12/02)

December 2: During the 17th Guadalajara International Book Fair, the launching of number 47 of the Letras Libres magazine was disrupted by a group of young people shouting slogans in favour of the Cuban government and hurling insults and verbal attacks at Cuban exile intellectuals taking part in a round table. (El Nuevo Herald, 3/12/02)

December 2: Fidel Castro's son presented a new book on Cuba at an international fair in Guadalajara, but said his father had "priorities" that kept him from attending the event in this western Mexico city. Fidel Castro Díaz-Balart presented the book "Cuba: Dawn of the Third Millenium" at the 16th annual celebration of a fair that attracts 32 countries from around the world. The book, edited by Castro Díaz-Balart, is a collaboration of works by several authors. Castro Díaz-Balart dismissed suggestions that his father did not attend because of recent tiffs between Cuba and Mexico, saying "there are simply other priorities." "There is a large delegation here (...) and I think that everyone who has to be here, is here," he said. (AP, 2/12/02)

December 2: The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) reiterated that Cuba had sent them a letter accepting the veracity of Javier Sotomayor's having taken nandrolone. "The letter was sent on September 4 to the IAAF, I can testify to that", said IAAF spokesperson Nick Davis to the press. Radio Habana Cuba (RHC) denied that Cuban sport authorities had agreed to Sotomayor's doping. According to RHC, the President of the Cuban Athletics Federation (FCA), Alberto Juantorena, "was not aware of any discussions on the case". But the IAAF insists that the letter is signed by Juantorena himself and addressed to IAAF General

Secretary Istvan Gyulai. [For more on this, see Chronicle on Cuba, November 2002.] (DPA, 2/12/02)

December 3: The 6th International Forum on Penal Sciences opened in Havana, to come up with strategies to fight terrorism, organized crime and money laundering in the world. Welcoming participants from twelve nations, Organizing Committee member Caridad Herrera said that the forum would allow for an exchange of views on different international crimes. Other topics included in the event are the international trafficking of people, international conflicts and war crimes, treatment in penitentiary systems and prisoner re-incorporation into society. Over 250 delegates representing 12 countries including the US, Spain, Mexico, France and Dominican Republic are attending the forum. (Prensa Latina, 3/12/02)

December 4: Canada decided to "thaw" political relations with Cuba and in the next few months contacts with Cuban officials will increase, said Canada's Secretary of State for Latin America, Denis Paradis. In statements to the press, Paradis pointed out that "now that the four dissidents have been freed, we have decided it would be good to resume dialogue and to thaw political relations with Cuba". "We believe that Canadian values –like democracy, human rights, good governance- have to be pushed in different ways and one of them is trade because trade means having a dialogue", said Paradis. (El Nuevo Herald, 4/12/02)

December 5: Cuba-related political clashes continued at the 17th Guadalajara International Book when a group of eminent intellectuals accused the Cuban official delegation of imposing "totalitarian practices" and violating freedom of expression at the event. Mario Vargas Llosa, Fernando Savater y Enrique Krause are at the top of a list of 27 renown intellectuals who signed a letter titled "Censura castrista en México" (Castroist Censorship in Mexico), blaming Cuban officials for organizing a demonstration against the presentation of an issue of the Letras Libres magazine devoted to Cuba. (El Nuevo Herald, 6/12/02)

December 5: A Cuban couple seeking political asylum in Namibia might be deported back to Cuba. Global human rights watch body, Amnesty International, requested the United Nations's refugee body to solicit political asylum for the Cubans from Namibian authorities. Pedro Osvaldo Ortigas Suarez and his wife, Jeny Magalis Hernández Heredia, were detained in Namibia on suspicion that they were illegal immigrants. Amnesty said it was concerned the couple's safety "may be at risk" should they be deported to Cuba. (All Africa Global Media, 6/12/02)

December 8: Fidel Castro received the leaders of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), who arrived in Havana to celebrate 30 years of relations between Cuba and this group of Caribbean countries, the majority of which are English-speaking. Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the prime ministers of Belize, Said Musa, and Antigua and Barbuda, Lester B. Bird, as well as the vice president of Suriname, Jules Rattakoemar, also attended the reception with Castro. Playing host to most of the Caribbean's leaders, Fidel Castro said that Cuba will renew its request to join the Cotonou Agreement. He also promised 1,000 medical workers to help fight AIDS in Caribbean countries. Cuba withdrew its request to join the Cotonou Agreement between Europe and 77 developing nations in 2000, accusing European officials of imposing discriminatory conditions involving human rights in the communist nation. "The situation has changed in part," Castro told the visitors. Though he didn't elaborate, he said that "some humiliating conditions have tempered in some form." (EFE, 8/12/02)

December 8: The 14 heads of state and government of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) agreed to support the swift inclusion of Cuba in the Cotonou Agreement, a partnership agreement between the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) group of countries and the European Union (EU). (Prensa Latina, 9/12/02)

December 8: A new contract binding Cuban doctors working in South Africa stipulates that children of 15 years and older must return to Cuba. As a result, Cuban doctors have resorted to telling lies about the age of their children in order to keep them in South Africa. The doctors are also "not allowed" to become pregnant, nor can they apply for permanent South African residence. The contract is accompanied by a cover letter from Cuban co-ordinator Jamie Davis on a letterhead of the South African department of health. These issues were covered on the South African TV programme Special Assignment. "Attempts to separate Cuban children over the age of 15 from their parents in South Africa will be fiercely resisted in South African courts," says Ishana Hassim. She is one of the attorneys who will be representing about 20 Cuban doctors in their battle against alleged human rights violations in the Cuban/South African contract. (News 24, 8/12/02)

December 8: Canadian immigration officials have taken custody of a Cuban man who took refuge underneath a plane that took off in Havana four hours before landing at Montreal's Dorval Airport. The man was treated for hypothermia, but Immigration spokesman Robert Gervais said he was lucky to survive the flight. The man, who said he worked at the Havana airport, would like to work in Canada in order to bring his wife, daughter and parents from Cuba. The man is in custody at an immigration department holding facility in Laval, Quebec, just north of Montreal, and has applied for refugee status. (Canadian Press, 8/12/02)

December 8: Cuban Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, evaluated in Guadalajara the results of Cuba's participation in the International Book Fair. In several panels and meetings Cuban institutions presented "clearly and with rigor the creative work of Cuban émigrés intellectuals, regardless of their political views, which are short-lived and will pass", said Prieto. (La Jornada, 8/12/02)

December 9: The European Union Council of Foreign Ministers approved a six-month continuance of the EU's cautious policy towards Cuba, insisting on basic political freedoms as a prerequisite for co-operation. "Although recognising some positive signs in the field of greater religious freedom, the non-application of death penalty for three years and more economic opportunities for individuals", ministers at the General Affairs Council in Brussels confirmed that "no progress is observed in the implementation of reforms leading to a political system that respects civil and political freedom". The Ministers "acknowledged the continuation of an open and constructive dialogue with Cuba on all issues of common interest". But they reiterated that the EU's aims "remain the encouragement of a process of transition to pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedom, a lasting economic recovery and an improvement in the living standards for the population". The ministers encouraged civil initiatives, including political freedom and respect for civil rights and aiming at a political system based on democratic values, such as the Varela Project. (European Report, 10/12/02)

December 11: The president of Cuba's National Assembly rejected a call from the European Union for democratic reforms on the communist island. Ricardo Alarcon, a former foreign minister and UN ambassador and one of the most influential politicians in Cuba, said that the demands were incompatible with international law. (DPA, 11/12/02)

December 11: The Dominican government expressed its satisfaction for the Cuban decision to enter the Cotonou Agreement between the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific group and the European Union as announced by Fidel Castro. The Secretary of State and National Coordinator of European Development Funds, Manuel Caceres, indicated that the Dominican Republic supports Cuba's full integration into the ACP and its main reason of existing as a group: to foment cooperation agreements. (Prensa Latina 11/12/02)

December 11: A delegation from the European Parliament, made up of members of the Group of Friendship and Solidarity with Cuba, criticized the common position of the Group of 15 against the island that demands political openness in Cuba. The group referred to such position as useless

and anachronistic. The delegation will meet with Cuban Non Governmental Organization (NGOs) representatives that develop projects financed by the European Union (EU). During its stay in Cuba, the delegation will also meet with Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and Cuban Parliament President Ricardo Alarcon. (Prensa Latina, 11/12/02)

December 12: Namibian Foreign Affairs Minister Hidipo Hamutenya concluded a four day visit to Cuba, visiting some centers of social interests and meeting local officials. (Prensa Latina, 12/12/02)

December 13: Visiting European parliamentarians said they were happy with Cuba's decision to renew its application for a European aid program but skeptical that agreement would be reached. "The situation has changed in part," Castro said. But Martinez said, "I hope that (European) position is reformed, that there is a necessary revision. I am not optimistic in that respect." (AP, 11/12/02)

December 13: Eight Cubans who landed in Mexico on an unsuccessful attempt to reach the United States have been sent back to the island by Mexico, a Cuban newspaper reported. It was at least the second time this year that Mexico has sent would-be refugees back to Cuba. (AP, 13/12/02)

December 13: The president of the European Parliament, Pat Cox, condemned the attacks against Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya in his own home in Havana, and asked again Cuban authorities to issue an exit permit so that Payá may receive in Europe the Sakharov Prize. [For more on this, see section Domestic Affairs.] (AFP, 13/12/02)

December 13: A Cuba's Communist Party (PC) team is arriving in Luanda for a three-day official visit to Angola, Angop has learnt from a ruling MPLA party source. According to the source, the Cuban delegation will be audienced by the Angolan Head of State, Jose Eduardo dos Santos, Parliament Speaker Roberto de Almeida, and Prime-Minister Fernando da Piedade Dias dos Santos "Nando". (Angola Press Agency, 13/12/02)

December 15: Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya thanked Spain's Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar for urging Fidel Castro to let him travel to Europe to receive the European Union's top human rights award. Aznar met with Paya for an hour at the Moncloa Palace near Madrid hours after the Cuban dissident arrived. (AP, 15/12/02)

December 16: Cuba has been warmly praised by the prime minister of St Kitts and Nevis, Dr Denzil Douglas, for what he described as its "generous and timely" health aid package for the 15-member Caribbean Community (Caricom). The package, to come on stream in 2003, will have a concentration of Cuban expertise, including 1,000 health workers, supply of tools and equipment, as well as affordable medication to battle the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It will largely be funded by the Castro government. (Jamaica Observer, 16/12/02)

December 16: Antigua & Barbuda will receive additional technical aid from Cuba. The announcement was made after Prime Minister Lester Bird attended a summit hosted by Fidel Castro. Antigua & Barbuda's non-resident ambassador to Cuba, Colin Murdoch, told the press that the decision was taken at a meeting of the Antigua & Barbuda and Cuba joint commission. Castro promised to contribute 1,000 Cuban paid health workers to help the regional fight against AIDS. (Antigua Sun, 16/12/02)

December 17: The European Union awarded Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya its top human rights prize and pledged to support his efforts to bring democracy to his home country. The 2002 Sakharov Award honored his human rights activism, which dates back to the 1960s when he was condemned to forced labor by the regime of President Fidel Castro. Paya thanked the 15-nation

European Union for supporting the cause of human rights in Cuba. "This prize is for all Cubans because I believe that, in awarding it, Europe wishes to say to them, you too are entitled to rights," he told the packed 626-seat legislature. "There are thousands of men and women who are fighting in the teeth of persecution for the rights of all Cubans. Hundreds of them have been imprisoned solely for having proclaimed and stood up for those rights." (AP, 17/12/02)

December 18: Cuba abstained during the vote on the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture. In a General Assembly session the Protocol was approved by 127 votes in favour, 42 abstentions and 4 against. (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 18/12/02)

December 18: Infomed, Cuba's health information network, which celebrates its tenth anniversary, has won one of the Stockholm Challenge 2002 awards for pioneering use of information technology benefiting people and society. The annual awards are an initiative of Sweden's capital city, supported by the European Union. Nearly 600 projects from 78 countries were considered for this year's awards, with eight awardees chosen in six categories. Infomed has grown into a full-fledged information network over the past decade, including e-mail and web and wireless applications. UNDP provided US\$355,600 towards its launch. (UNDP Press Release, 18/12/02)

December 19: Cuba has been selected as the focal theme and partner country for the 28th Kolkata Book Fair which will be held in 2003. (The Times of India, 19/12/02)

December 20: Solomon Islands has established diplomatic relations with Cuba. In a brief ceremony held at the permanent mission of Cuba to the United Nations, the charge d'affaires of the permanent mission of Solomon Islands to the UN, Beraki Jino, and the permanent representative of the Cuban mission to the UN, Ambassador Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, exchanged notes between them to formalize the establishment of relations between the two countries. (BBC News, 21/12/02)

December 21: Cuba rejected charges from the Venezuelan opposition that its agents were involved in the Chavez administration's takeover of a striking oil tanker. A Cuban foreign ministry communique said "not a single Cuban crewmember" was aboard the Pilin Leon, a Venezuelan tanker that government forces wrested from striking workers. The vessel had been anchored and idle in Venezuela's Lake Maracaibo for two weeks as part of the strike crippling the Venezuelan oil industry. Havana said none of its sailors were on that vessel or any other in Venezuela. It said the Venezuelan opposition, which is seeking the ouster of leftist-populist President Hugo Chavez, "lies." (EFE, 23/12/02)

December 22: Venezuela's opposition, leading a three-week-old strike, told Cuba's ambassador in Caracas, Germán Sánchez Otero, to keep his nose out of the South American country's internal affairs. "We'd like to tell the citizen ambassador of Cuba that we resolve our problems ourselves," said strike leader Carlos Ortega. The right-wing opposition has claimed that Cubans have replaced striking crews removed by military troops from oil tankers, suggesting the diplomat organized the recruiting of the Cuban sailors and saying that Cuban officials were advising Chavez on military operations to seize the vessels. (AFP, 23/12/02)

December 26: Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Lafer defended the independent character of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's foreign policy in relation to the US, and used relations with Cuba as an example. Lafer noted Brazil's position toward Cuba and Brazil's permanent effort against its isolation as a good example. "We maintained our traditional position of abstention at the UN Human Rights Commission", said the Foreign Affairs Minister. "Fernando Henrique Cardoso" - emphasized Lafer- "was the first Brazilian President who visited Cuba, and I think that the current foreign policy is compatible with the aspirations of Fidel Castro's government." (Prensa Latina, 26/12/02)

December 26: José Ramón Fernández, Cuba's vice-president and head of the National Olympic Committee, said he will pay a visit to Tehran to sign a memorandum of understanding on expansion of bilateral sports cooperation. In a meeting with Iranian Ambassador to Havana Ahmad Edrissian, Fernández said he will take a trip to Tehran in early 2003 at the invitation of Iran's Physical Education Organization President Mohsen Mehralizadeh. (IRNA, 28/12/02)

December 26: From 1979 to date 4,826 Cuban have uninterruptedly collaborated with the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health, the Cuban doctor Alvarez Villanueva said to the press. Dr. Alvarez thanked the National Assembly of Nicaragua for publicly acknowledging their work. (Nuevo Diario, 27/12/02)

December 28: Fidel Castro met an envoy of Brazil President-elect, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in Havana. In a brief communiqué on the encounter the Cuban government says that Castro "received comrade Marco Aurelio García, foreign affairs advisor of Brazil President-elect, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva". The 'comrade' treatment of an official foreign visitor is not common in Cuban diplomatic notes and reflects relations are highly regarded. (World Data Service, 28/12/02)

December 29: As part of the program of activities organised by the British embassy during its Islands and Ideas convention, the eight-strong fleet of Clipper Venture yachts made its first stopover in Havana, following its departure from Liverpool. The main objectives of this nautical event are to prepare young people for ocean navigation, to establish relationships with cities involved in the regatta and with those ports that provide stopovers along the route. (Granma, 29/12/02)

December 29: The Frigates anti-submarine vessel Georges Leygues, of the French navy, docked at Havana Port for an official visit. (Granma, 29/12/02)

December 29: South Africa Foreign Minister, Nkosazana C. Dlamini-Zuma, arrived in Havana to take part in the II Session of the Joint Inter-Governmental Commission between the two countries. (EFE, 29/12/02)

December 30: Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has appointed Vadzim Lamkow as Belarusian ambassador to Cuba. (BBC News, 30/12/02)

December 31: Fidel Castro arrives in Brazil to attend the inauguration of Luiz Inacio da Silva, the country's first leftist president in 40 years. "I am happy to be in Brazil, and happy to say that January 1 is no longer a Cuban monopoly," Castro told reporters. January 1 is the anniversary of the Cuban revolution that brought Castro to power in 1959. (AP, 31/12/02)

Terrorism

December 5: A court suspended a pretrial hearing for four men accused in connection with an alleged plot to kill Fidel Castro while it considers a complaint from the prosecution against the presiding judge. The court gave no indication of how long it would take to review the appeal. Luis Posada Carriles, Guillermo Novo, Gaspar Jiménez and Pedro Remón, all Cuban exiles, have been held in Panama for two years on charges of possession of explosives and criminal association. They were detained after Castro publicly accused them of planning his assassination during an Ibero-American summit held in Panama City in November 2000. (AP, 5/12/02)

December 24: Cuban Ambassador to Tehran Jose Ramon Rodriguez said that the Islamic Republic of Iran and Cuba strongly condemn any act of terrorism. Speaking to reporters, he said the agreement reached between President Mohammad Khatami and his Cuban counterpart Fidel

Castro on the campaign against terrorism indicated the two countries' common stance on the fight against terrorism, he said. (IRNA, 24/12/02)

December 26: Colombia's rebel force, National Liberation Army (ELN), said it had broken off preliminary peace talks in Cuba with the Colombian government, accusing officials of preparing for war. The government of President Alvaro Uribe has acknowledged that it has met representatives of the ELN, believed to be 5,000 strong, in Cuba, in the hope of paving the way for formal peace talks. (The Washington Post, 26/12/02)

US-Cuba Relations

December 3: Three doctors who left the island in a group of 35 that was intercepted at sea by U.S. authorities remained in detention by the Coastguard under the fear of being sent back. (El Nuevo Herald, 4/12/02)

December 4: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People says it has not discussed opening a chapter in Cuba with Fidel Castro's government. NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, who led a delegation that visited the island, said in a statement that "we had no discussions with the Cuban government officials or citizens regarding a possible NAACP branch in that country during our recent goodwill and trade mission to that nation. Our four-day trip was part of the NAACP's historical mission to establish people-to-people contacts both inside and outside the United States." (The Washington Times, 4/12/02)

December 5: Cuba would like to import more farm products and U.S. farmers would like to get a bigger share of Cuba's business, said the President of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, Terry McClure. To achieve that, the Bush administration would have to allow expanded trade and travel opportunities for Americans there, McClure said. He was among a delegation of American Farm Bureau Federation officials and leaders of state farm bureaus in Ohio, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Wisconsin who visited the island and met with Fidel Castro two weeks ago. (El Nuevo Herald, 6/12/02)

December 5 : The US government will ship children's books to Cuba, hoping stories like "A Chair for My Mother" and "The Absent-Minded Toad" may bring a wider world to the communist-ruled island, US officials said. The State Department will pay to ship the Spanish-language books to Cuba and will distribute them there, a step that may annoy the Cuban government, which condemned as "subversive" an earlier US effort to hand out short-wave radios to what Havana called anti-Castro "counter-revolutionaries." The books have been vetted to ensure that there is no inappropriate content but they have not been chosen to convey any particular political message, although officials clearly hope they may promote the values of tolerance and freedom. (Reuters, 5/12/02)

December 6: Fidel Castro told visiting US students that he never considered retaliating against US presidents for attempts to assassinate him. Comparing the small nation of Cuba to an ant living alongside the elephant of the United States, he said that "if the ant starts to do foolish things (...) the ant disappears." Castro spoke for several hours to about 600 US university students taking part in a Semester at Sea program sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh. (AP, 7/12/02)

December 9: Political and farm officials from Kansas met with Fidel Castro after calling for the United States to normalize relations with the communist nation. A Cuban official said his country will have purchased about \$175 million in goods from US producers by the year's end. Lt. Gov. Gary Sherrer, a Republican, told a news conference there should be a "normal political relationship" between the United States and Cuba. John Moore, the Democrat who will replace Sherrer as lieutenant governor, said he also supports "normalization of relations." No deals were

signed during the five-day trip, but Sherrer said he believed the trip "will be very meaningful in terms of dollars of trade for Kansas." (AP, 10/12/02)

December 13: Rumors are circulating in foreign policy circles in Washington that Anne W. Patterson, the US ambassador to Colombia, will be named to the post lost by Otto J. Reich, the anti-Castro diplomat who is a popular target of the left. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a virulent critic of Mr. Reich, said that Mrs. Patterson could become the first woman to hold the post of assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. (Washington Times, 13/12/02)

December 14: Supporters of improved US relations with Cuba may be able to muster a "veto-proof" majority to lift a ban on American tourism to the communist-run island in the next session of Congress, a Democratic legislator visiting Havana said. Massachusetts Rep. William Delahunt, a Democrat, said it was "absurd" that Americans could travel freely to Iraq and Iran and North Korea, countries listed by the Bush administration as part of an "axis of evil," but not Cuba. (Reuters, 14/12/02)

December 15: Bush administration officials are considering new restrictions on travel to Cuba that would significantly reduce the number of US residents authorized to visit the island and could further hurt that country's tourism income. Under the proposal, which officials describe as one of many ideas being discussed by the administration's policy planners, only Cubans with US citizenship would be allowed to travel to Cuba. Accordingly, tens of thousands of Cuban immigrants who are not US citizens but are currently allowed to travel to the island every year on humanitarian grounds would be denied permission to return to Cuba to visit. (The Miami Herald, 15/12/02)

December 16: The Head of the US Mission in Havana, James Cason, said in Miami that after the first six months of his contact with the Cuban reality what has struck him the most is the economic deterioration. He also added that many in influential circles have their sights set on the transition toward democracy, according to leaders of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), whose Board of Directors met with the diplomat. (El Nuevo Herald, 17/12/02)

December 17: During migration talks in Havana, US officials gave Cuba a list of nearly 500 people they say have been refused permission to leave the island despite having been cleared for emigration to the United States. "We once again ask the Cuban government to grant these individuals exit permits," Kevin Whitaker of the US State Department's Office of Cuban Affairs told reporters after a day of talks. Cuban officials, meanwhile, used the latest round of talks to demand the return of a crop-duster plane seized by migrants who flew to Key West, Florida, last month. The Cuban side was emphatic in establishing the need for the immediate return of the kidnapper (of the aircraft), the migrants and the plane," said Rafael Dausa, North America Director in Cuba's Foreign Ministry. Dausa said his team also demanded that the US government grant visas to relatives of five convicted spies serving time in the United States. Along with demanding exit permits for those cleared for legal US immigration, American authorities "expressed our continuing concern about the harassment (...) of some returned migrants," said Whitaker, who headed his country's team at the talks. The talks, alternatively held in Havana and New York every six months, were set up by 1994 and 1995 accords governing migration between the two countries. (ABCNews, 17/12/02)

December 17: Fidel Castro invited to dinner a delegation of U.S. business people visiting Havana to celebrate the anniversary of the first U.S. agri-food sales to the island after 40 years of economic embargo. (EFE, 17/12/02)

December 17: Fidel Castro told representatives of US agribusiness during a meeting that Cuba wants to buy wood and other non-edible agricultural items on a US-government approved list of farm products. Castro also promised farm representatives during the 6 1/2-hour meeting that

Cuba would always promptly pay for its American agricultural imports, said Kirby Jones, an American consultant. Among companies represented at this meeting were agribusiness giants Cargill Inc. (X.CRG), of Minnetonka, Minnesota, and Marsh Supermarkets (MARSA, MARSB) of Indiana, said Jones. (AP, 18/12/02)

December 18: A US official visiting Cuba for routine migration talks said he was asked to leave by the Cuban government after he met with leaders of opposition groups. "I was given to believe that would be all right, but we were informed in a telephone call this afternoon that I would be required to leave," Kevin Whitaker said. Whitaker, who coordinates the State Department's Office of Cuban Affairs, met with two groups of dissidents and the wife of a jailed opponent of Fidel Castro. "The Cuban opposition is growing in strength. I think they have real moral backing for what they do (...) under extremely difficult circumstances," Whitaker said. (Orlando Sentinel, 19/12/02)

December 18: Oswaldo Payá, a leading Cuban dissident, criticized the US economic and travel embargo against Cuba. "We've seen that the embargo isn't an instrument of change. What we as Cubans want to know is how we will benefit if we can't travel or set up businesses," Paya said. Paya also said he objected to the United States holding prisoners from the Afghan war at the US-operated Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. "It's obviously a matter of shame that our land is being used for that purpose, having foreign prisoners brought to Cuba," he said. He believed the prisoners should be treated with dignity regardless of the accusations against them. "Even if they are terrorists they deserve respect. Their human rights should be respected," he said. (CNSNews, 18/12/02)

December 19: The US Meat Export Federation (USMEF) is seeking to obtain approval for exports to Cuba from all federally-inspected US beef and pork plants. USMEF is putting together funding to bring two Cuban government veterinarians to the United States in the first quarter of 2003. They will tour US packing plants and processing facilities to obtain a system-wide endorsement that will allow exports to Cuba following the relaxation of US restrictions on trade with the Caribbean nation. (Agriculturelaw.News, 19/12/02)

December 20: Representatives of Maine's agriculture industry recently returned from a trade mission to Cuba and are crediting a resolution by the Legislature for providing a base for "excellent opportunities" for agricultural and food product exports. Some of the foods that soon could be headed to Havana are brown eggs, wild blueberries, potatoes, apples and maple syrup. (Bangor Daily News, 20/12/02)

December 20: US Immigration officials began to make preparations to deport an alleged Cuban spy although the Cuban government has not agreed to accept him. "We intend to do that (remove him), and we will use every resource we have and seek any help we need," said Barbara Gonzalez, a spokeswoman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service. An immigration judge has ruled that Juan Emilio Aboy did not admit when he was admitted to the United States that he was a member of the Communist Party and trained as a spy. (UPI, 20/12/02)

December 22: The Cuban government may return the body of an American man executed by Fidel Castro's firing squad four decades ago to his family in the United States, US Representative Marcy Kaptur said. Cuban government workers recently found what appears to be the grave of William Morgan, once known as the "Yankee Commander," in a Havana cemetery, the Toledo Democrat said. Forty-one years after Morgan's execution, his body could be released to his widow, Olga Goodwin, in Toledo, said Kaptur, who met with Castro in April. (The Herald Tribune, 22/12/02)

December 22: The incoming chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee predicted that there are not enough votes in the new Republican-dominated Senate to confirm Otto Reich

as assistant secretary of state for western hemispheric affairs, given the current crisis in Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America. Speaking on "Fox News Sunday," Senator Richard Lugar (Republican-Indiana) said, "We really have to have a big-leaguer in our assistant secretaryship position that can really in a comprehensive way work on not just the Venezuela issue but the overall Latin America issue". Lugar said Secretary of State Colin Powell agrees with his viewpoint. (CNS News, 23/12/02)

December 23: Bloomington residents hoping to see visitors from their sister city in Cuba were upset when the US government for the second time denied visas for the trip. "This really goes against the whole point of the sister-cities idea, which is people-to-people contact," CubAmistad organizer Mike Gasser told the press. (AP, 23/12/02)

December 25: Cuba-bound US flights and reservations reached historic levels during the holiday season this year, according to several travel agencies. "This month of December has been extraordinary," said Armando García, vice president of Marazul Charters. "The number of reservations is almost double those in July and August, when there is also an increase in sales." The spike in reservations for this month is up an estimated 35 percent to 40 percent compared to December 2000, when Miami experienced bookings not seen since 1959, agents said. Additionally, the actual number of flights to Cuba also has increased. C&T Charters, for example, has scheduled at least 27 flights to Cuba this month compared to its average of 16 monthly flights. (The Miami Herald, 25/12/02)

December 25: The US Coast Guard rescued 36 Cubans on a desolate little island in the Bahamas after they were abandoned by immigrant-smugglers, officials said. The 25 men, nine women and two girls were left on Elbow Cay, which is uninhabited and has no food or water, Coast Guard spokesman Luis Diaz said. They were spotted waving for help by a Coast Guard jet as it was assisting a cutter in its pursuit of a suspicious boat. The Coast Guard picked up the Cubans and gave them food and water. They were reported in good health. (AP, 26/12/02)

December 27: Washington's policy of attempting to isolate Cuba is an utter failure, according to Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque. The island's top diplomat spoke at the annual meeting of the Cuban Association of the United Nations, outlining the past year and prospects for the future. (Radio Habana Cuba, 27/12/02)