

FOCAL Chronicle on Cuba

December 2003

Domestic Affairs

December 1: At least seven of the 75 dissidents sent to jail last March are on a hunger strike in a prison in the province of Pinar del Rio, in protest of the "inhumane" conditions of their incarceration, according to relatives and human rights activists in Havana. (El País, 2/12/03)

December 1: Cubans authorities have reported progress in the prevention, control and treatment of AIDS on the island. During World AIDS Day celebrations authorities indicated there are 3,969 persons living with HIV/AIDS in Cuba. (Notimex, 1/12/03)

December 1: A three-story high building in Havana's Luyanó neighbourhood collapsed injuring three people. Around 40 people lived in the five-apartment building which dates from the 1940's. (Cubanet, 1/12/03)

December 1: According to a recent article, Christmas shopping isn't for the fainthearted in Cuba. Holiday bargains are tough to find. Some stores seem intent on discouraging sales rather than boosting them. And clerks and cashiers are often rude or indifferent, shoppers complain. The government pays much more attention to New Year's Day - which marks the triumph of the 1959 communist revolution. Christmas is a decidedly low-key, noncommercial affair. (The Dallas Morning News, 1/12/03)

December 1: Opposition activist Oswaldo Payá asked the European Union for "moral support" in a national campaign in favour of "a peaceful transition led and designed by Cubans themselves." Payá, the main promoter of the Varela project, said "Cuba wants and needs peaceful changes." "Every one is invited to take part," he added in a "Message from Cuba to the European Union." (La Jornada, El Nuevo Herald, 2/12/03)

December 1: Oswaldo Payá accused the government of Fidel Castro of preventing him from travelling to Brussels after an invitation by the European parliament. "Traveling is not a recognized right" by authorities on the island. (Europa Press, 1/12/03)

December 2: The Argentinean film "Today and Tomorrow" ("Hoy y Mañana"), by filmmaker Alejandro Chomski, inaugurated the International Festival of New Latin American Film of Havana, which celebrates its 25th anniversary with a broad sampling of 200 films, more than 100 of them competing for Coral prizes. Smiling and in high spirits, Nobel literature prizewinner Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez attended the opening of the 25th International Festival of New Latin American Cinema at Havana Karl Marx Theater Tuesday evening, accompanied by his wife, Mercedes Barcha. Cuba's entries include feature-length films such as "Suite Habana" by Fernando Perez, "Roble de olor" (Scented oak) by Rigoberto Lopez, "Entre ciclones" (Between cyclones) by Enrique Colina and "Aunque estes lejos" (Even though you're far away) by Juan Carlos Tabio, as well as four shorts. For 10 days, Havana will host one of the most important and popular cultural activities held annually on the Caribbean island. Festival organizers said that Puerto Rican-born actor Benicio del Toro is attending the event. (EFE, 3/12/03)

December 2: The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) commemorated the 47th anniversary of the Granma yacht landing of which Fidel Castro and his rebels returned to the island (on December 2, 1956). Celebrations took place all through the island, with the two main events being headed by Commander Guillermo García Frías and the Minister of the Armed Forces, Raul Castro. (AP, 3/12/03)

December 2: "Cultura y Neofascismo: Disidencias" (Culture and Neofascism: Dissidences), a

new book by the Cuban publishing house, Ciencias Sociales (Social Sciences), was presented at the Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry. At the presentation, Cuban Book Institute (ICL) director, Iroel Sánchez, said it comprises reflections about the US aggression on Iraq and the hostile policy against Cuba. Also attending the launching of the book were Cuban Communist Party (PCC) Political Board members Jose Ramon Balaguer, Ricardo Alarcon, Abel Prieto, Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque, and a number of outstanding Cuban intellectuals and artists. (AIN, 2/12/03)

December 3: Two-thirds of all Cubans with AIDS are homosexual men. Cubans who work with AIDS patients have expressed concern that this still homophobic society is not doing enough to educate the people who are affected most by AIDS. Alberto Rosabal works at the Los Cocos Sanatorium, where many of those from Havana who have tested HIV-positive live. Eighty percent of the residents are gay men. "I think that our society is not prepared to speak freely about gays, about gay activity, about the gay risk of having HIV," Rosabal says. It is noticeable that in the lobby of Cuba's national Aids prevention office, there are several posters on display portraying attractive heterosexual couples. None showing gay men. It is Havana's homosexuals themselves who are taking charge of informing their own community of the dangers of AIDS. (BBC, 3/12/03)

December 3: The first biography of Celia Sánchez -- a legendary guerrilla fighter and close collaborator of Fidel Castro -- was launched in eastern Granma province. Written by historian Pedro Alvarez Tabio, "Celia" was presented at a museum in her hometown of Media Luna. Celia Sánchez organized a network to collaborate with the Rebel Army and was the first woman to join the revolutionaries in the mountains. She worked closely with Fidel Castro until her death in 1980 at the age of 60. (Radio Habana Cuba, 3/12/03)

December 4: It was reported that Cuba is considering the inclusion of its coral reefs in the National System of Protected Areas in light of the need to preserve this natural resource of great economic and environmental importance. Pedro M. Alcolado, a researcher from the Cuban Oceanology Institute, said that measures would be adopted to protect Cuba's coral reef barrier from contamination and uncontrolled fishing, as well as other damage or risk factors. One of the most extensive in the Caribbean, together with Bahamas, Cuba's coral reef barrier is located on nearly 2,000 miles around its underwater platform, which almost surrounds the Cuban archipelago. (Prensa Latina, 4/12/03)

December 5: Fidel Castro insisted his socialist system will survive him, characterizing as "idiots" those who believe otherwise as he feted shipwreck survivor Elian Gonzalez on his 10th birthday. "This revolution does not depend on one individual, or two, or three," Castro declared in a speech of more than two hours at a birthday celebration in the courtyard of Elian's school in the child's hometown of Cardenas. (CNN, 5/12/03)

December 5: A total of 78 computer software programs are used within Cuba's education system with 37 used in secondary education programs and the rest in primary levels, announced Luis Ignacio Gómez Gutiérrez, minister of education. (Granma, 6/12/03)

December 6: One of the main and most influential Cuban commanders, Juan Almeida Bosque, suffers from heart problems which keep him away from some of his regular activities, said Defence Minister Raúl Castro. Castro, who presided over the Second National Conference of the Association of Combatants of the Cuban Revolution (ACRC), which Almeida presides, read a letter from the latter. (AP, 6/12/03)

December 7: Cuba's No. 2 man, Defense Minister Raúl Castro, joked with reporters about recent widespread rumors that he was suffering from a life-threatening illness. "I have cancer, you know," the 72-year-old Castro told journalists ironically. "In the colon, I think." Castro recalled similar rumors about his health in the early 1990s, including some that said he had died. "Now I am half-dead again," he joked. Rumors about the health of Cuba's defense minister and his older brother, 77-year-old Fidel Castro, have always been common. They have grown more frequent as

the brothers have grown older. (The Miami Herald, 8/12/03)

December 8: Pianist Rubén González, one of Cuba's best known musicians because of his role in the internationally acclaimed Buena Vista Social Club, died in Havana of a heart attack after a prolonged illness. He was 84. González had stopped performing more than a year ago, prey to the ravages of degenerative osteoarthritis. Gonzalez rose to international fame as a result of the Wim Wenders-Ry Cooder project "Buena Vista Social Club." Known in music circles as "the Piano Man," González was a star in the orchestra at Havana's Tropicana Cabaret and played in several popular groups in the 1940s and 1950s. In one of his last interviews, Gonzalez said he would have liked to achieve fame in his youth, but "better late than never." "I belong to a generation of musicians who laid the foundations for the music of subsequent decades. In my time, the pianist was not merely an accompanist, but the leader, the instrument that set the orchestra's beat, the highest paid after the director," González told the press. (EFE, 8/12/03)

December 9: Cuban political prisoner Jorge Luis García Pérez, "Antúnez", who is in solitary confinement in Ariza's prison, in Cienfuegos province, has been on a hunger strike since late November. Antúnez is demanding that all political prisoners be transferred to prisons closer to their homes. He demands from multilateral institutions that Cuba's government be expelled from their meetings. The prisoner is also demanding better food, medical assistance, and an end to cruel treatment in jail. (Cubanet, 9/12/03)

December 10: Cuban opposition leaders and relatives of jailed activists say Havana has made no moves to improve its human rights record, and in fact, the communist island's treatment of dissidents was getting worse every day. Despite their complaints and condemnations, the situation for the jailed activists "continues to be deplorable," Gisela Delgado, the wife of dissident Hector Palacios - who was sentenced to 25 years, told the press. Neither Delgado nor Miriam Leyva, the wife of jailed economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, who received a 20-year sentence, said the situation was likely to improve over the next few months. Both of the jailed activists' wives took part in a day of fasting and prayer on International Human Rights Day that was organized to demand the release of all political prisoners on the island. (EFE, 10/12/03)

December 10: A Cuban study on eliminating any transgenic risk was at the center of attention by participants at the Science, Technology and Sustainability, underway at Havana's Capitol building. Carlos Borroto, Vice-Director of the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center (CIGB) explained that Cuba is promoting research on genetically-manipulated products and plants with emphasis on guaranteeing the elimination of any harm to human health, the environment and technology. For that reason, we have been doing research for 15 years without having yet released any product for its commercialization, said the Cuban specialist during the event, which is being attended by experts from eight countries. Meanwhile, Nephrology Institute delegate Sergio Arce said that the country's position as to cloning is that it should only be aimed at creating tissues to save lives, but not at human reproduction. (AIN, 12/12/03)

December 11: Elsa Morejon, wife of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet Gonzalez, was informed by the head Official of Kilo 8 Prison where this physician is confined, that her husband is punished once more in a cell for refusing to stand up to acknowledge the presence of prison guards and officials during the recount of prisoners. Mrs. Morejon hasn't seen her husband since August 2003. (Coalition of Cuban American Women, 11/12/03)

December 11: An infant mortality rate of 5.5 per thousand live births from January to the present was reported for Cuban mountainous regions. The rate was made known during the International Mountain Day, celebrated in San Cristóbal, a community in Pinar del Rio province. (Juventud Rebelde, 12/12/03)

December 11: The Federation of University Students (FEU) will have a new structure which includes municipal and provincial councils. The decision was taken in light of an increase of registered students from all regions of the country. (Juventud Rebelde, 12/12/03)

December 12: The disquieting Cuban film "Suite Habana" swept the awards at Havana's New Latin American Film Festival, an important regional film showcase. "Suite Habana" documents a day in the life of a dozen Cubans who struggle with the harsher side of life in revolutionary Cuba. The characters do not smile or speak a word. The film by Fernando Perez -- an 80-minute rapid sequence of images, sounds and music -- won best picture, director, music and soundtrack. "It is the most important prize I could receive and it belongs to the public which viewed the film with such emotion," Perez told the press. (Reuters, 12/12/03)

December 12: Cuban dissident leader Oswaldo Payá released a 72-page manifesto in Havana that seeks political reform and a transition to democratic rule. Mr. Payá, head of the opposition Christian Liberation Movement, called on all Cubans - including Cuban exiles - to participate in a national dialogue calling for democracy. "The final goal is to achieve a democratic government elected by the people and with a program defined by the people," Mr. Paya said in a statement. The document foresees a democratic government being installed under a presidential college composed of three members. Its members, who would have to reside in Cuba, would be charged with overseeing a transition to democracy, according to the document. "Cubans not only want their rights, but want to know what the transition and their lives will look like," states the introduction to the manifesto, distributed to foreign correspondents. Payá intends to distribute the manifesto through dissident-led committees across the island. (AFP, Reuters, 14/12/03)

December 14: Opposition leaders reacted with cautious skepticism to a plan being promoted by noted dissident Oswaldo Paya calling on Cubans to help draw up a program for a transitional government and a new constitution for the post-Castro era. "Nobody knows who is really behind this. It appears to deal with matters that are the competence of a state," said Eloy Gutierrez, who recently returned to Cuba after spending 20 years in Miami, where he headed the "Cambio Cubano" exile group. But Manuel Cuesta Morua of the moderate but illegal "Progressive Arch" group said that with government repression at unparalleled levels, the on-the-ground situation in Cuba was hardly propitious to the sort of "dialogue" Paya says he wants to foment. "As ever, we respect all proposals for a political dialogue but once again repeat our stance that the priority should be dialogue concerning human rights in Cuba, which is what we are working to achieve". "Later," he added, "there will be time to draw up an agenda for the transition" though he wished Paya well "and all those who want to give him their support, but we are not going to take part because the constitutional matters are too involved". (EFE, 14/12/03)

December 15: The International Fair of Craftsmanship FIART 2003, taking place at Havana's PABEXPO Fairgrounds, includes participants from 37 countries, including some coming for the first time, such as Costa Rica, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Serbia. The contribution of Mexico, Peru, Colombia and Argentina to the 9th edition consolidates these nations as permanent fixtures of the event held this year under the slogan Craftwork, Design and Everyday Life. The Cuban exhibition included 93 artists and 37 state companies that represent Cuban craftwork and semi-industrial production. (Prensa Latina, 15/12/03)

December 16: Beatriz del Carmen Pedroso, wife of Julio César Gálvez, a dissident journalist detained last March and sentenced to 15 years in prison, said she's having difficulty receiving correspondence from her husband. "The delays mean months; I have not as of yet received letters my husband sent me in July," indicated Beatriz. (Noticias Pro Cuba Libre, 16/12/03)

December 16: Carlos Alberto Domínguez, arrested in February for paying tribute in public to the four Brothers to the Rescue pilots who were shot down by the Castro regime, has been declared a prisoner of conscience. Amnesty International has declared Dominguez Gonzalez a prisoner of conscience detained for the non-violent exercise of his rights to freedom of expression and association, and has called for his immediate and unconditional release. Dominguez Gonzalez and his family have been granted visas to enter the United States but the Cuban government has categorically denied their exit permits. (Puente Informativo, 17/12/03)

December 16: Several internal dissident leaders refrained from commenting on the platform for a peaceful transition, presented by opposition activist Oswaldo Payá. "I have no opinion as I have not seen the plan. I want to see it first. I have neither received it nor did I know of its presentation," said the representative of the 'All United' movement, Vladimiro Roca. The wife of economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, serving a 20-year prison sentence, Miriam Leiva, said she "knew only a few lines" she heard on the radio. Lawyer René Gómez Manzano made similar comments. (Europa Press, 16/12/03)

December 17: Thousands of Cubans gathered outside the church in El Rincón, near Havana, to venerate San Lazaro, known as "the miracle worker," in one of the communist island's most popular religious traditions, a seamless amalgamation of Christian beliefs and African practices. Believers from all around Cuba began to congregate outside the church and packed into the building, ready to spend the pre-dawn hours together awaiting the morning Mass celebrated by Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Havana's Catholic archbishop. Although the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize San Lazaro - the crippled Lazarus mentioned in one of Jesus' New Testament parables - he is Cuba's unofficial patron saint of beggars and among the island's most venerated. In his homily, Cardinal Ortega warned believers against superstitions and spells, alluding to Santería, whose practices are similar to Voodoo. "Nobody knows the future but God (...) our hope is in God," said Ortega, blasting those who try "to distort" religion with feelings of vengeance or violence and those who expect to gain favor from it. (EFE, 17/12/03)

December 17: Several people were injured in attacks against the pilgrims who every year make the trip to the St Lazarus sanctuary in the town of El Rincón. Among the victims is 29-year old Maikel Brito, who was taken to hospital after being stabbed twice in the abdomen. The victim, a regular of these pilgrimages and a devout of St Lazarus, is the son of independent journalist Manuel Antonio Brito, member of the Decoro Group. (Cubanet, 23/12/03)

December 17: José Ramón Balaguer, member of the Politburo, awarded the Calixto García Íñiguez medal of valour, granted by the Council of State, to those who stayed in the Cuban mission during the Iraqi invasion. (Granma, 18/12/03)

December 18: Cuban political prisoners have spoken out against the "brutal beating" one of their colleagues received at a jail east of Havana, and are asking international rights groups and foreign governments to intervene on their behalf. In a note sent to their relatives, the jailed dissidents said: "Inmate Aldo Fernández was given a brutal beating by a trustee in charge of 'discipline' named Fidel" at the Holguin provincial prison "This is how the prison guards make good on their threats" against the prisoners, said the note, which was forwarded to international news media by Cuba's outlawed Christian Liberation Movement (CLM) headed by activist Oswaldo Paya. Jailed dissidents Ivan Hernández Carrillo, Arnaldo Ramos Lauzerique and Alfredo Domínguez Batista "have suffered similar reprisals," the note added. (EFE, 18/12/03)

December 18: The Cuban National Assembly of more than 600 deputies is coordinating information from three ministries before beginning its second period of sessions this year. The Cuban Parliament is meeting to discuss important economic issues. Among the topics on the agenda include urban agriculture, transformations in the sugar sector and problems detected by the Ministry of Audit and Control. Debates are taking place based on reports and information offered by working groups in different economic areas. Ten permanent commissions will meet and work on a draft economic plan for the coming year. Budgets for national programs and projections for 2004 will be developed during the two-day session. (Prensa Latina, Radio Habana Cuba, 18/12/03)

December 20: FEU (University Student Federation), celebrating the anniversary of its founding 81 years ago, is engaged in a sweeping transformation in order to reach out more strongly to all its members, FEU leader Joan Carlos Mijares has said. In an interview published by Granma daily, Mijares said these changes will enable FEU to take its work beyond university facilities. As FEU's membership and municipality headquarters have grown, we need to widen its scope.

Mijares added that the new changes includes the creation of student brigades, brigade and faculty leaders and FEU presidents of universities grouped within a National Council under a General Secretariat. (Prensa Latina, 20/12/03)

December 20: The 10th permanent committees of the Cuban parliament are in session, prior to the 2nd local legislative body's general session this year. According to the agenda, committees on economic affairs, constitutional and judiciary affairs, assistance to youth, childhood and equality of women, and national defense, are meeting yesterday in the Havana Conference Center and Palco Hotel. There are also committees on international relations, health and sports, attention to services, education, culture, science, technology and environment and attention to productive activity. Sugar Industry Minister Ulises Rosales established strategies at the Peoples' Power National Assembly (ANPP unicameral congress) to lower sugar production costs to three cents per pound, in response to the international drop in sugar prices. The unicameral Cuban congress also agreed that most surplus workers receive technical updating courses or different studies, while continue to receive their salaries. (Prensa Latina, 20/12/03)

December 21: The Cuban Catholic Church has proclaimed 2004 the "Year of the Family," Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino said in a pastoral letter. "How much families want to enjoy a full and happy life over Christmas!" the archbishop of Havana said. "But it turns out, we're always missing something: health, better economic prospects, that our wishes come true." "Something is almost always missing," he said. "Loved ones who have left to meet the Lord; loved ones far away, living outside Cuba, and Cuban families feel this absence." Ortega Alamino called on parishioners to endure their hardships with faith. (EFE, 22/12/03)

December 21: The Cuban government declared January 2 and January 3 public holidays to enable residents to participate in celebrations of the 45th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. A Labor and Social Security Ministry communique, published in the Juventud Rebelde newspaper, said that to celebrate the January 1 anniversary, work would be suspended those two days. (EFE, 21/12/03)

December 21: Prominent Cuban athlete Zoila Barro was awarded as best attacker of the Pre-Olympic Women's Volleyball Tournament of the Americas, where Cuba won the event. The three-time Olympic champion team beat the Dominican Republic at the Juan Pablo Duarte Sports Center in Santo Domingo, for the only qualification for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. A modest ceremony at the end of the game included awards to Canada (third place), Dominican Republic (second) and Cuba (first). (Prensa Latina, 21/12/03)

December 22: Without the dedication of our educators, without their infinite love, it would be impossible to speak of the achievements that astonish the world today, Fidel Castro wrote in a message of congratulations to teachers and professors, published in Granma on Cuban National Teachers' Day. The message expressed great satisfaction in contemplating the selfless women and men engaged in "the noble effort of preserving the work created with the sacrifice, readiness, and patriotism of the best Cubans". (Prensa Latina, 22/12/03)

December 22: The children songs festival "Singing to the Sun" came to a close at the Karl Marx theatre in Havana. The festival, organized by the Children and Young Programs division of Cuba's television, paid tribute to all teachers on their day. (Juventud Rebelde, 22/10/03)

December 22: Cuba's fragmented internal opposition movement is attempting to recover from harsh blows received this year, while continuing to call for the release of the 75 activists sentenced to lengthy prison terms in April. "We're alive and kicking," Vladimiro Roca told the press. The activist is a spokesman for Todos Unidos (All United), a coalition that emerged in 1999, bringing together groups working for change and democratization in this Caribbean island nation. As proof that the opposition movement is still alive, Roca pointed to a recent proposal launched by Oswaldo Payá, the head of the Christian Liberation Movement, for a "National Dialogue" in which Cubans would design their own blueprint for a transition to democracy.

Another sign that the movement is getting back on its feet, according to Roca, was the submission to parliament in October of new signatures in support of the Varela Project, which is seeking to hold a public referendum on changes to Cuba's socialist system. (IPS, 22/12/03)

December 22: The social democratic groups that joined together in the Mesa para la Reflexión de la Oposición Moderada (Moderate Opposition Reflection Panel) or the Arco Progresista (Progressive Arc) received a copy of the National Dialogue document and a formal invitation to participate in this initiative. Arco Progresista spokesman Manuel Cuesta Morúa argued that proposing a new constitution was overly ambitious. In a conversation with the press, he said it was best to start out with small steps that gradually create a climate of confidence. In Cuesta Morúa's opinion, both of Payá's initiatives -- the Varela Project and the National Dialogue -- are lacking in political realism. "I'm not saying we don't need constitutional changes, just that this is not the time to demand them," he underlined. The Mesa para la Reflexión de la Oposición Moderada and Arco Progresista presented a "Charter of Fundamental Rights and Duties of Cubans" this year, after consulting more than 30,000 citizens. "We will continue to dedicate ourselves to our work aimed at creating the foundations of a human rights culture through citizen dialogue on the issue," said Cuesta Morúa. (IPS, 22/12/03)

December 22: Cuban writer Reynaldo Gonzalez won the 2003 National Literature Award, the island's highest literary honor. Gonzalez, 63, won unanimously from among 11 candidates nominated by 34 of the island's cultural institutions, said jury spokesman Lisandro Otero, a novelist, essayist and journalist who won last year's award. Gonzalez - also a novelist, essayist and journalist - was born in the central province of Ciego de Avila and is no stranger to awards, having captured the Italo Calvino prize, along with the Juan Rulfo Award for best short story, presented by Radio France International. He has also won the National Literary Criticism Award four times, as well as the National Journalism Award. (EFE, 22/12/03)

December 23: The second regular session of the Cuban People's National Assembly (Congress) sixth legislature began in the Havana Convention Center. In the last two days, congress people from the 10 congressional Permanent Committees reviewed the country's performance in all areas this year and gave their opinions about the 2004 State budget, which will be published. The congressional plenary is expected to call for intensification of the people's actions demanding freedom for the Five, a group of Cubans who were sentenced for spying in the US for the Cuban government. (Prensa Latina, 23/12/03)

December 23: Cuba has reduced the impact of illicit drugs with the participation of local institutions and the support of the population, Attorney General Juan Escalona asserted in an interview with Granma newspaper. Escalona recalled that Cuba began 2003 with Operation Shield against the use and trafficking of prohibited substances, "under which we managed to reduce the phenomenon but continue fighting it." However, he noted, it is easier to combat drugs than to fight corruption, which is not detected rapidly, but gradually. (Prensa Latina, 23/12/03)

December 23: In a note released in Havana, Alida Viso, the wife of jailed dissident Ricardo González Alfonso, asked governments, important figures and non-governmental organizations to intercede for the well-being of her husband with Cuban authorities. González is on a hunger strike. (El Nuevo Herald, 24/12/03)

December 23: Seventy-five opponents of Fidel Castro's government will spend a bleak Christmas behind bars after being imprisoned in March, their relatives and supporters say. "Cuban political prisoners are confined in punishment cells and are living in conditions even animals should not be subjected to," Oswaldo Paya, leader of Cuba's Christian Liberation Movement, said in a statement calling attention to the dissidents' plight. Cuban authorities have provided no information on the conditions under which the prisoners are being held. (Reuters, 24/12/03)

December 25: Fidel Castro presented singer-song writer Amaury Perez with the Felix Varela

Order, in recognition of his three-decade artistic works. In a ceremony on occasion of his 50th anniversary, Perez expressed his gratitude for the recognition. In the presence of intellectuals and friends of Amaury, singer-song writer Silvio Rodriguez called Amaury Perez a minstrel and remembered their first contacts. Culture Minister Abel Prieto and Cuban Music Institute Chairman Abel Acosta, who read the resolution of the Council of State granting the Felix Varela Order, participated in the activity. (Prensa Latina, 27/12/03)

December 29: Those seeking information about Cuban National Hero José Martí (1853-1895) on Internet can have free access to educational software created by local Higher Pedagogical Institute experts. Pedagogue Gabriel Garcia, author of the initiative, explained that the computer program contains aspects of Martí's thoughts on the homeland, education, human values, family and friendship. (Prensa Latina, 29/12/03)

December 29: Cuban independent journalist Bernardo Arévalo Padrón, who spent six years behind bars, has been released, news sources announced. Arévalo said he was released from prison on November 13. He thanked the Inter American Press Association for denouncing his imprisonment and applying international pressure for his release. "The IAPA campaign saved my life," he told the press. (The Miami Herald, 30/12/03)

December 29: Mortal remains of ballerina Mirta Plá were buried. The last tribute ceremony was attended by Abel Prieto, Minister of Culture, Loipa Araújo, Director of the National Ballet School, Maitre Aurora Bosch, and Fernando Alonso, founder of the Cuban Ballet Company. (AIN, 29/12/03)

December 30: The Cuban authorities have launched an inquiry into how the official newspaper of the Communist party ran a front page photograph of Fidel Castro which appeared to have been doctored to make him look like Adolf Hitler. When the edition of Granma hit the streets this month party officials began to retrieve as many copies as they could, an operation which appears to have deterred foreign journalists based on the island from reporting the story. The picture appeared above a story which reported Fidel Castro's meeting with North American students. (The Guardian, 30/12/03)

December 30: With his trademark hat on his head, his guitar case at his side and a cigar in his slender fingers, a new life-sized statue of late Cuban musician Compay Segundo was unveiled in the patio of a major Havana hotel. "We welcome Compay Segundo," Cuban musicologist Lino Betancourt said at the presentation of the statue at the historic Hotel Nacional. Diplomats, Cuban officials, relatives and fellow musicians were among about 100 people who gathered for the presentation honouring the guitarist and singer who skyrocketed to international fame with his performance on 1997 Grammy-winning record "The Buena Vista Social Club". (The Globe and Mail, 1/1/04)

December 31: The Milan musician Claudio Abbado, one of the most famous contemporary orchestra directors, arrived in Havana where he is devoted to teaching during his vacation and will lead open rehearsals in the coming days. Students from the Superior Arts Institute Higher, National Music School, Amadeo Roldán Conservatory, the Guillermo Tomas School from Guanabacoa, and other middle level centers in Havana will benefit from the presence of this musician. (Prensa Latina, 31/12/03)

Economy

December 2: When one of the world's largest deep-sea drilling rigs parks off Cuba next March, the island's Communist government will be betting on an oil bonanza. Oil experts say it's a long shot and Cuba would have to discover a major deposit of light crude to make it commercially viable to tap a deep water field in the Gulf of Mexico at a cost of more than \$1 billion. But multinational oil corporations, eager for virgin fields to exploit, will be watching closely as Spain's

Repsol-YPF SA (REP.MC) puts the Norwegian-owned Eirik Raude rig to work at \$195,000 a day drilling for oil in water more than a mile deep. Cuba's current small oil output is drilled from onshore rigs in coastal deposits to the east of Havana. (Reuters, 2/12/03)

December 2: The Russian Finance Ministry plans to hold talks with the Cuban government about the settlement of past-due Cuban debts to Russia, Deputy Finance Minister Sergei Kolotukhin said at a Duma budget committee meeting. Cuba owes Russia about \$150 million. A Russian-Cuban intergovernmental agreement has been in place since 1994, whereby Russia allocates loans to Cuba so it can buy Russian equipment. This agreement expires in 2003 so the debt settlement issue has come up, Kolotukhin said. Russia's 2004 federal budget envisages loans to Cuba of \$21 million for the purchase of Russian equipment. However, this money can only be disbursed if Cuba's past-due debts are settled. (Interfax, 2/12/03)

December 2: Cuba's main rum distillery has announced that it will soon produce a new ready-made cocktail for the domestic market after the drink was successfully marketed in Italy. Havana Club International S.A. executives said the cocktail would be a mixture of white rum and fruit juices and would be called "Havana Club Loco". (EFE, 3/12/03)

December 3: Air Canada has introduced three-times-a-week direct flights to Havana, the company announced. The new flights on 120-passenger capacity A-319 jets will be added to the Montreal-based airline's regular charter offerings. Ruth Zafrany, Cuba supervisor for Air Canada Vacations, the airline's tour operator, said her compatriots had always found the Caribbean island an extremely attractive tourist destination. More Canadians visit Cuba than citizens of any other country. Between January and October, 363,945 Canadians traveled to the communist-ruled island. (EFE, 3/12/03)

December 3: Cuba will commence this month the so called "small harvest", which serves to gauge the potential yield of the sugarcane harvest after a period of decline in the last few years. The 23 sugar refineries that will commence milling this month, out of a total of 70, are meeting their repairs schedule, according to reports by the daily newspaper Granma. (Notimex, 3/12/03)

December 4: Cuba and Japan advocate strengthening bilateral economic and trade ties and agreed on new prospects in this area. During the opening of the 12th joint meeting of the Japan-Cuba Economic Conference, Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas highlighted that bilateral relations have increased since Fidel Castro's visit to that country. (Prensa Latina, 4/12/03)

December 4: Cuban economic growth was reported to be 1.5 in 2003, by the Cuban Government Minister, Ricardo Cabrisas. Cabrisas spoke at a conference between representatives of Cuba and Japan, held in Havana. The economic growth of Cuba is feasible, despite the embargo on the country, the falling prices of sugar and coffee and the rising oil prices, Cabrisas added. The forecast made by Cabrisas was 0.5 percentage points below the forecast of 2.0 made by the president of the economic commission at the Cuban Parliament, Osvaldo Martinez. (Spanish News Digest, 5/12/03)

December 4: Several senior officials in the largest state-run tourism organisation in Cuba Cubanacan have been placed under house arrest on suspicion of corruption. Among those detained is the president of Cubanacan, Juan Jose Vega. Millions of dollars are said to be missing from the hotel, restaurant and travel agency business. The irregularities came to light when the company complied with a government order to all firms holding US dollars to convert them into Cuban pesos. Cuban Minister of Defence Raul Castro is reportedly taking an active involvement in this inquiry. (BBC, 4/12/03)

December 5: Sol Meliá SA said its operations in Cuba are not affected "at all" by the recent house arrest of the chairman and various boardmembers of Cuba's state-owned Cubanacán company. A Sol Melia spokeswoman said: "We're following the story closely as it concerns the

sector in which we operate and a country which is an important destination for us, but this news does not affect our operations there at all." "We operate 20 hotels in Cuba, some of which are owned by Cubanacan, but as this is an internal affair concerning employees of the state-owned company, it will not affect our leasing arrangements for these hotels," she added. (AFX, Europa Press, 5/12/03)

December 8: Four senior executives of Cuba's biggest state-run tourism organisation have been dismissed because of "serious management errors," but "in no case have they participated in theft or embezzlement," the Tourism Ministry said in a communiqué. "It is true that the president of the Cubanacán group, the directors of two of its companies, and the head of one of its branch offices have been removed from their posts," said the statement that appeared in Granma, the ruling Communist Party's official daily newspaper. The errors, according to the Tourism Ministry, were "linked to a lack of discipline, control and other violations" of "the strict standards that govern the conduct of Cuban leaders and officials." The note also stated that some of the errors committed "are normal practices among executives in many other parts of the world." The statement, which was datelined December 6, was the first official information provided on the case. (IPS, 8/12/03)

December 9: Havana province's Habana Libre sugar mill churned out Cuba's first raw sugar of the season, state-run radio said, as the 2003/04 harvest got under way amid hopes of greater output and efficiency. A national ceremony inaugurating the season was scheduled at the Habana Libre. Industry sources told the press the Sugar Ministry had set a harvest target of 2.6 million to 2.7 million tonnes of raw sugar, based on cane estimates. The sources said plans called for production to cost \$.035 to \$.045 per pound, compared with more than \$.05 in 2002/03. Cuba has yet to report 2002/03 output, estimated by Reuters at between 2.1 million and 2.2 million tonnes, a 40 percent decline from the previous harvest's 3.6 million tonnes. (Reuters, 9/12/03)

December 11: Cuban Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro said 2003/04 raw sugar output would increase 19 percent over the previous harvest's production, the official daily Granma said. Cuba has yet to report on the 2002/03 crop, estimated at between 2.1 million and 2.2 million tonnes, a 40 percent decline from the previous harvest's 3.6 million tonnes. A 19 percent increase would put this season's output at around 2.6 million tonnes, 700,000 tonnes for domestic consumption and the remainder for export. Rosales said he expected 6 percent more cane to be milled this year and industrial yields to jump 2 percent to 12 tonnes of raw sugar per hundred tonnes of cane milled, resulting in "a 19 percent increase in sugar production compared with the previous campaign." (Reuters, 12/12/03)

December 11: Tourists visiting Cuba by sea will rise in the forthcoming years and in 2004 their number is expected to stand at 94,000, the director of Cuban-Italian sea transport company, Silares-Cubanco, Gianluca Suprani, said at a press conference. The press conference was given on the arrival of Sundream ship of British cruise transport company Sun Cruises to Havana with 1,200 passengers on board. Cuba has three major ports in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, 967 km east of Havana, and in Playa Punta Frances, on Isla de La Juventud island, southwest of Cuba. According to the director of Silares-Cubanco, a total 60,000 European tourists came to Cuba by sea in 2003 to date. (Latin American News Digest, 12/12/03)

December 12: Argentine motorcycle manufacturer Juki will produce motorcycles of the brand Mondial in Cuba under a joint venture contract with Cuban motorcycle manufacturer Rodar Motociclos, it was reported. Two Italian companies, one Chinese company and two Japanese companies, including Suzuki, participated in the tender for the contract awarded to Juki. The joint venture envisages the reopening of an assembling plant in Cuba, which closed in 2002. With the project Juki aims to cover the demand of public organisations and travel agencies, which operate in Cuba. Juki will also export motorcycles from Cuba and Central America. (Spanish News Digest, 15/12/03)

December 12: Cuba paves the way for a more effective contribution by science and technology

to sustainable development following the adoption of cooperation projects with other nations. América Santos, Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment said that the island and China will do joint research on nanotechnology, a discipline in charge of producing parts at a small scale. Such modern technology is winning space in the fields of pharmaceuticals and in the production of raw material for different industries. (AIN, 12/12/03)

December 14: An official Cuban delegation to Buenos Aires held a meeting with Argentinean businesspeople from different sectors interested in investing or trading with Cuba. Headed by the President of the Cuban Chamber of Commerce, Bertha Delgado, the delegation gave close to 200 businesspeople and diplomats present at the Argentinean foreign ministry headquarters located in the city's Barrio Norte an overview of the business sector in Cuba. (La República, 14/12/03)

December 15: Production by Cuba's Central Oil Drilling and Extraction Enterprise (EPEPC) is expected to grow by six per cent this year compared to last year, an official source reported in Matanzas province. Director Reynaldo Ruiz said that EPEPC would fulfill its extraction plan of 1.735m tonnes of oil. The amount is 100,000 tonnes over last year's production, with Ruiz attributing the increase to several factors, including the introduction of state-of-the-art technology and new techniques for extracting crude oil. (BBC, 15/12/03)

December 15: The Cuban-Spanish Havana Financial Corporation (CFH) has chalked up pre-tax net earnings of \$9.35 million since it was created in 1998 through a joint venture by Spain's Caja Madrid savings bank and Cuba's Banco Popular de Ahorro. Caja Madrid announced that in just the first 10 months of 2003, CFH's pre-tax earnings totaled \$2.69 million. Since 1998, the entity has carried out some 2,180 financing operations on the island worth more than \$283 million. The Spanish-Cuban financial corporation, the only one of its kind in the country, provides special loans for Cuban-based companies. It also finances production activities, foreign trade operations and promotional and real estate projects. (EFE, 15/12/03)

December 16: Mexican Undersecretary of Economic Relations and Cooperation, Lourdes Dieck, is leading several meetings on cooperation mechanisms between her country and Cuba, informed the Mexican Embassy in Havana. Dieck is meeting with Cuban government officials as part of 12 Session of the Intergovernmental Working Group for Economic Cooperation, which for two days convened on the island. (Notimex, 16/12/03)

December 16: India and Cuba signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of standardisation and certification of products. The MoU marks the renewal of understanding between the two countries on fixation of standards for various items in consumer interest. The memorandum was signed by the Director General of the Bureau for Indian Standards (BIS), Nirmal Singh, and Cuba's Director of International Relations and Minister of Science, Technology and Environment, Jorge Fernandez. (The Press Trust of India Limited, 16/12/03)

December 17: Victoria de Giron Citrus Corporation, the Cuban sector leader, will produce 350,000 tons of citrus by the end of 2003, an official source informed. Roger Delgado, company director, told the press that a total of 420,000 tons are expected to be harvested by the end of the July-June campaign. This figure will recover the historic records, hindered the last two years since Hurricane Michelle affected seven Cuban provinces in November 2001. (Prensa Latina, 17/12/03)

December 17: In an increasingly difficult domestic environment for alluring and retaining foreign investors, Cuba's Ministry for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC) is now promoting Cuban investments overseas in an effort to offset a diminishing flow of foreign capital entering the island in recent years. In 2003 MINVEC published a new guide on opportunities abroad for Cuban state-owned enterprises which "encourages Cuban industries to analyze their prospects for working in other lands." Targeting neighboring markets in Latin America and the

Caribbean as well as the developing world at large, Cuba's new global investment strategy seeks to "establish companies in [developing] countries [employing] Cuban high technology, specialists, and know-how with native manpower." From MINVEC's perspective, the new emphasis on 'working in other lands' will "facilitate the internationalization of Cuban enterprises and increase exports." (Focus on Cuba, 17/12/03)

December 17: Cuban Basic Industry Ministry projects closing 2003 with a 17.9 percent growth in production compared to last year, Minister Marcos Portal told Granma newspaper. Portal said the generation of electric power will increase by 3.2 percent, and extraction of gas will reach 644 million cubic meters, up 10.2 percent over last year. Oil extraction, he said, will reach 3.72 million tons, and refining 2.524 million tons, representing growth of 2.5 and 42.2 respectively. Granma said profits are expected to be 20 percent more than planned and will exceed 507 million dollars. Productivity is up 14.7, as well as exports and consumption of national crude oil in the generation of electric energy. Likewise the production of nickel, cement, acetylene and glass bottles or containers will also grow. (Prensa Latina, 17/12/03)

December 19: Japanese small and midsize companies are set to step up business with Cuba, the only socialist country in the Western Hemisphere, aiming to boost their combined imports from the country in 2004 by five times this year's total of about 20 billion yen on a contract basis. The companies are also showing growing interest in bioscience technology developed in Cuba. Food Discovery, a small Tokyo-based trading company, is watching with keen interest a Cuban technique for improving food strains, and is seriously considering outsourcing research to the island nation. The company, together with two other Japanese firms, set up a conference to promote food imports from Cuba earlier this year. Eiji Fukui, president of Food Discovery, is interested in Cuban bioscience technology. As the US has imposed economic sanctions against Cuba, "their best scientists haven't left the country to go to the US, which means we can outsource high-grade research to Cubans at low cost," said Fukui. (Nikkei, 19/12/03)

December 20: Cuban Sugar Minister General Ulises Rosales del Toro said that the reorganization of the sugar industry conducted two years ago has yielded "satisfactory" results, though less than expected. "We are following the plans we developed and our personnel is motivated by the changes we are implementing," Rosales del Toro told Cuba's General Assembly. The minister said the last sugar harvest - the first since the reorganization effort 20 months ago - did not meet expectations, but that changes have been adopted to improve the next one. "For this sugar harvest, we started with 100 percent of the manpower we needed, and we are receiving more logistic support for our workers. Furthermore, we have eliminated most of the deficiencies we pinpointed," the general asserted. Rosales del Toro said seven sugar refineries are in operation, and 10 more will start working next month. (EFE, 20/12/03)

December 20: The company Tikal Jets has started the first direct air travel between Cuba and Guatemala. The first flight, a DC-9 aircraft, took off for the island with 80 passengers on board. (Siglo Veintiuno, 20/12/03)

December 22: Jonathan Watts, president of the Canada-Cuba Sports & Culture Festivals, says his organization's idea of tourism has nothing to do with "selling a destination". "What we do -he says- is to promote Cuban culture". The organization, which organizes travels and exchanges, closed 2003 with positive results. Aside from the interest of Canadian groups, more than a few Americans have requested the organization's services to attend cultural events on the island. (Granma, 22/12/03)

December 22: Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas is in Beijing where he is meeting with Chinese government officials, as well as business and financial executives. He is also heading the Cuban delegation to the 26th Session of the Cuba-China Economic and Trade Relations Inter-Governmental Committee. Over the weekend, Cabrisas presided over a business seminar during which businesspeople from Cuba and China discussed opportunities to increase bilateral economic relations. The meeting was organized by the Promotion of Cuban-Chinese

Economic and Trade Relations Business Committee and more than 50 business executives attended from Dalián, a major northern Chinese port city in Liaoning province. They met with business managers and representatives from Cuban government institutions related to economics and trade. (Radio Habana Cuba, 22/12/03)

December 23: Cuba's economy grew 2.6 percent this year despite a severe foreign exchange shortage and a 40 percent decline in sugar production, Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said. Rodriguez, delivering a year-end economic report to parliament, said the growth stemmed from a 12.7 percent increase in tourism arrivals, a recovery in the non-sugar portion of the agricultural sector from three hurricanes in 2001/02, and increased oil, gas and electricity production, among other factors. Cuban economists said increased government spending also helped fuel demand. Rodriguez said the budget deficit rose to 3.5 percent of Cuba's GDP, or around 1 billion pesos, compared with 3.2 percent in 2002 and less than 3 percent in 2001. "We have moved from a sugar-based economy to one based on tourism and other services," Rodriguez said, forecasting similar results in 2004. "Our economy continues to recover." (Reuters, 23/12/03)

December 23: Cuba's 2002/03 raw sugar production was 2.2 million tonnes, Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodríguez said in the first official admission that output fell 40 percent from 2001/2002. "The harvest was unsatisfactory and weighed in at 2.205 million tonnes," Rodríguez told a year-end session of the Cuban parliament during a report on the economy. Cuba reported the 2001/02 harvest produced 3.6 million tonnes of sugar. (Reuters, 23/12/03)

December 23: Cuba's 2003 unrefined nickel plus cobalt production fell 4.7 percent, from 75,116 tonnes in 2002, Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodríguez said, though revenues rose sharply due to higher prices. That would put output at around 71,600 tonnes in 2003. Rodríguez, during a report on the economy to a year-end session of parliament, said production would rebound 7.7 percent in 2004. (Reuters, 23/12/03)

December 26: A Venezuelan institute is investigating ways of increasing the production and improving the quality of Cuban oil, Caracas' envoy to Havana said. If the research of the Venezuelan Institute of Chemical and Petrochemical Research leads to an increase in the output and quality of Cuban oil, Venezuela will reduce its oil exports to the island, Ambassador Julio Montes said. (EFE, 26/12/03)

December 29: Jardines del Rey, located in central Cuba, will set a record number of visitors with 170,000 tourists this year. According to officials from the island's Tourism Ministry, Jardines del Rey has earned more than 100 million dollars in 2003, after only ten years of operation. (Radio Habana Cuba, 29/12/03)

December 29: Army General Raúl Castro sent his congratulations to mine workers at the René Ramos Latour nickel plant on the occasion of that entity's 60th anniversary. (AIN, 29/12/03)

December 30: A Singapore company linked to a fraud investigation at Italian food conglomerate Parmalat has no knowledge of selling millions of dollars of the group's powdered milk, a key official said. Parmalat, one of Italy's most important companies, has been rocked by scandal since the discovery of a multi-billion-euro hole in its accounts. One case under investigation involves tens of millions of dollars worth of powdered milk that Parmalat subsidiary Bonlat claims to have sold Cuba through Singapore-based Camfield Pte Ltd. Camfield's company secretary, Lawrence Kwan, said he had never heard of that deal. "We don't know about that powdered milk," he told the press. Cuba's only bulk food importer said Parmalat's claim that the nation owes it tens of millions of dollars for powdered milk was false. The press obtained part of a transcript of an interrogation by Milan prosecutors of a Parmalat accountant, Gianfranco Bocchi, in which he admitted the milk sales to Cuba were phoney. (Reuters, 30/12/03)

December 30: The guayabera --the boxy, pleated shirt known for comfort and coolness-- is experiencing a revival in the tattered workshops of Cuban fashion designers and state-run clothiers. Cuban designers are dreaming of going global, first targeting the growing number of tourists to the island, with the eventual goal of penetrating markets abroad. Linen and cotton guayaberas ranging from US \$25 to \$100 hang for sale at hotel gift shops alongside portraits of revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara and compact discs of salsa. (Bangkok Post, 30/12/03)

Exile Community

December 2: Miami's Cuban and Haitian communities are up in arms over a top-selling computer game that exhorts players to "kill the Haitians" and "kill the Cubans." Haitian and Cuban representatives said "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" incited hate crimes and they were considering taking action, whether legal or in the form of a boycott, against creators Rockstar Games and its retailers. Cuban American National Foundation spokeswoman Mariela Ferretti said Cubans felt unnerved at being singled out. "The saddest part of the commentary is that there seems to be a market for these kinds of violent games, regardless of who they're aiming those guns at," Ferretti said. (CNN, 3/12/03)

December 10: The Florida-based relatives of shipwrecked Cuban boy Elián González, who washed up on Florida's shores in 1999, have filed a lawsuit against US agents for using excessive force in uniting the boy with his father. The suit contends the six immigration agents used "extreme and unnecessary force" to break into the house where Elián was held. The relatives harbored Elián inside the house in defiance of an order to turn the six-year-old over to his father. The conservative Judicial Watch organization that brought the suit did not reveal the indemnification sought nor the names of the Immigration and Naturalization Service agents involved. (ABC Online, 10/12/03)

December 11: In Madrid, Fabio Murrieta, vice-president of the Cultural Association "Con Cuba en la Distancia", demanded that Fidel Castro allows Cubans to return to their country "when they wish to." This is a right that should be recognized immediately, he added. In the context of a round table on "Democracy, Development and Civil Society in Cuba," Murrieta indicated that "we must demand the right of all Cubans to be able to return to their country now and not wait for Castro to pass away. There are hundreds of prisoners in Cuba and the right to return any time should be a conquest of the present not for the future, and if we decide to return or not it's every individual's choice", he added. (Europa Press, 12/12/03)

December 18: A Spanish-language television station has stopped broadcasting the program of an Argentine actor because he met with Fidel Castro, channel officials said. WDLP-TV took Guillermo Francella's comedy show off the air until he describes his stance on the Castro government, station officials said. The program is recorded in Francella's native Argentina, where it is still broadcast. The majority of South Florida's Spanish speakers are Cuban-American, and most of them oppose Castro's communist government. (AP, 18/12/03)

December 18: Fidel Castro offered Argentinean actor Guillermo Franchella "every support" to make a movie in Cuba, reported the Argentinean Embassy in Havana. (El Universal, 18/12/03)

Foreign Affairs

December 1: The Armenian Parliament ratified the Armenian-Cuban Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Health Care and Medicine. According to Armenia's Health Care Minister Norayr Davidyan, the agreement provides both sides with a legal basis for effective cooperation. It envisages mutual visits by expert delegations, exchange of statistical information, the establishment of a bilateral coordinating commission, medical care for Armenians in Cuba and vice versa and for both Armenians and Cubans during their stays in third countries. (ARMINFO, 1/12/03)

December 1: A privately held Mexican institution and a Cuban entity signed an agreement to exchange information, courses and practices on workplace medicine. The Mexican Instituto de Salud de los Trabajadores (Insat) based in the state of Coahuila, announced that it would launch a master's program on that specialty with Cuban instructors. (Notimex, 1/12/03)

December 2: José Ribeiro, Portuguese member of the European Parliament, called "outrageous" Cuban authorities' refusal to allow dissident Oswaldo Payá to travel to Brussels to attend a session of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the European Parliament. (AFP, 2/12/03)

December 2: South Africa and Cuba hailed what was described as the fruits of their friendship, vowing to cement their cooperation in a host of areas. "I think we are reaching a stage where we can say our relations have a firm base," said South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma in Pretoria. "We need, in the coming years, to build on that foundation." The minister was speaking at the conclusion of the third session of the South African-Cuban joint bilateral commission. (BBC, 2/12/03)

December 5: Cuban folk singer Silvio Rodríguez is helping Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez celebrate his fifth anniversary in power by performing at a concert dubbed, "A Song of Love for the Revolution." Rodríguez was expected to join other Cuban and Venezuelan musicians for the event, which coincides with a large street rally marking Chavez's 1998 presidential win. "I'm here because I believe in revolutionary processes," said Rodríguez, whose songs of love and social justice have won over fans throughout Latin America. "There have been difficulties, but it must be given a vote of confidence," Rodríguez said at a news conference. (AP, 6/12/03)

December 7: Greek-French filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras expressed his satisfaction for the acknowledgment that Havana's Latin American Film Festival dedicated to his work. Costa Gavras arrived in Havana for the exhibition of his controversial film "Amen". Answering questions from the press about the crackdown on dissidents and the execution of three hijackers in late April, the filmmaker said that he expressed his "concerns about the death penalty" to his Cubans friends. "As a European, I am against the death penalty, and against any violation of human rights and freedom", he said. "That is not something easy to accept." "I tried to search for answers and received some". "Others were not acceptable," he added. (Reuters, 7/12/03)

December 7: Former Spanish president Felipe González said that the US embargo against Cuba will be lifted in 2005, after the presidential elections. During a videoconference in Argentina, González said that he would welcome that gesture by the US government if it finally takes place. "I have always been against that policy". "I do not think that the US responds to a political strategy, but to domestic interests, and I respect it. But, I am worried that the Cuban officials will get it right". "If the US policy towards Cuba changes, we will have a very interesting scenario in 2005," González added. (Europa Press, 7/12/03)

December 8: Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson described 31 years of diplomatic relations between Cuba and four CARICOM states as "more than just an historical milestone in the evolution of intra-Caribbean relations". The occasion is being observed across the region as 'CARICOM-Cuba Day'. According to Patterson, "it commemorates the importance of cordial and productive relations with one's neighbours and of the benefits of working towards the goals of peace, security, prosperity and unity within our Caribbean family and beyond." It was Patterson who last December had proposed to his CARICOM colleagues that December 8 each year should be celebrated as "CARICOM-Cuba Day", also urging the group to formalise a CARICOM-Cuba summit to be held every three years. (IPS, 8/12/03)

December 8: The 10th Session of the Inter-Governmental Joint Commission for Economic and Scientific-Technical Collaboration has come to a close in Havana. The meeting was designed to strengthen economic links between Cuba and the Republic of Laos. Cuba's representative at the talks, Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas, said that both countries are very interested in

increasing and deepening relations. The Laotian delegation was headed by First Deputy Minister Somsavat Lengsavad. Among the topics of discussion were bilateral relations in the areas of medicine, biotechnology, the pharmaceutical industry, sugar production, agriculture and education. (Radio Habana Cuba, 8/12/03)

December 8: A large Cuban delegation has arrived in Geneva, Switzerland to take part in the World Summit on Information Society, which is sponsored by the United Nations. The delegation is headed by Cuban Parliament President Ricardo Alarcón, and is made up of representatives from different social sectors, including university students, the Cuban Association of United Nations (ACNU), the Cuban Union of Journalists (UPEC) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). (Radio Habana Cuba, 8/12/03)

December 10: Reporters Without Borders has condemned the harsh jail conditions of Cuban journalists and dissidents and accused the authorities of setting them up for attack by fellow prisoners, after journalist Adolfo Fernández Saínz was beaten unconscious by a cell mate. The protest came as journalists and dissidents went on a one-day hunger strike to mark International Human Rights day, to draw attention to their plight. [For more on this, see Journalist Adolfo Fernandez Sainz attacked by a fellow prisoner.] (El Nuevo Herald, 12/12/03)

December 10: The Bolivian edition of the book "Los Disidentes" (The Dissidents), a compilation of testimonies of "Cuban agents infiltrated in US-financed groups", was presented at the headquarters of the Association (College) of Journalists of La Paz. The presentation of the book, written by the Cuban journalists Luis Báez and Rosa Miriam Elizalde, was held on the 55th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Prensa Latina, 11/12/03)

December 10: Cuban Vice-President José Ramón Fernández welcomed Asturias' Justice, Public Security and Foreign Affairs Advisor Francisco García Valledor, in Havana. (AIN, 10/12/03)

December 10: Cuba expressed its pleasure for the Declaration of Principles draft at the first World Summit on the Information Society to reduce the computer information gap between rich and poor. "The main document has advanced considerably, and I think an important, balanced text has emerged," Cuban Information Technology and Communications Minister Ignacio Gonzalez told the press. (Prensa Latina, 10/12/03)

December 10: Benicio del Toro, Hollywood's favorite male Latin American star of the moment, is in Cuba. "Why not?" he answers. "I like Cuban cinema and the Havana Film Festival. Besides which, I'm a friend of some actors here, like Luis Alberto Garcia or Jorge Perugorria, and since they don't show their films over there, I've come to see them here." De Toro is not one to make erudite political assessments of the country and its ruler, but he does think Cuba has been harshly treated in the media. "They remove the human factor, leaving only the political issues. If they talk about anyone, they talk about Fidel, but not about the other Cubans." (El País, 10/12/03)

December 10: Carmen Delia Llano Ochoa, a Cuban mother resident in Canada, is protesting outside the Cuban Consulate in Montreal against Cuban officials' refusal to grant an exit permit to her son. According to Carmen Delia, the Canadian Embassy in Havana granted her son a resident visa to join her. The visa expires in February. Other supporters sensitive to the case have joined Carmen Delia. (Cuban Canadian Foundation, 11/12/03)

December 11: Cuban Congress President Ricardo Alarcon affirmed that to seriously talk about a society of information, world leaders should first win a world free of hunger, ignorance and exclusion. Only in a truly humane and context of solidarity can access to new technologies of information and communication be more than a deceitful slogan, noted Alarcon in the First World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at the Exhibition Palace in Geneva. (Prensa Latina, 11/12/03)

December 11: At least 60 members of the French National Assembly, from different political

tendencies, have sponsored an equal number of jailed Cuban dissidents following an initiative launched by the Paris based Colectivo Solidaridad Cuba Libre. The information was made known by President and Founder of the Asociación por la Tercera República Cubana (ATREC), the Cuban-born William Navarrete. (Europa Press, 11/12/03)

December 12: Cuba and the Principality of Asturias ratified their decision to continue strengthening people-to-people contacts despite the political differences between the governments of Spain and the Caribbean island. "Cuba does not have any difficulty in its relations either with Spain, Asturias, or the Spanish people. Cuba has differences with the Spanish government," affirmed Cuban minister of Foreign Relations Felipe Perez Roque, after welcoming Francisco Garcia, advisor to the Asturias Executive. (Prensa Latina, 12/12/03)

December 12: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva proposed the creation of a free trade agreement among members of the Group of 20 developing nations (G-20). Lula presented the proposal to delegates of the G-20 meeting, underway in Brazil, to develop a common position for the coming round of negotiations of the World Trade Organization (WTO). G-20 countries include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Paraguay, South Africa, Tanzania, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. (The People's Daily, 13/12/03)

December 14: Chatting with Fidel Castro during his weekly television show, President Hugo Chavez thanked the Cuban leader for sending more than 10,000 doctors to work in poor communities across Venezuela. Chavez and Castro bantered for about 10 minutes on Venezuelan television and radio after Chavez aides telephoned the Cuban president in Havana. Chavez spoke to Castro on a speakerphone live on air. Castro, who sounded hesitant and complained about the phone connection, said Chavez had established himself as a leader of the Third World. "You are leaving an example not only for Latin America but for all of the Third World," Castro said. "I must express the admiration of all our people for you." (AP, 14/12/03)

December 14: Fidel Castro received the official delegation from the government of the Principality of Asturias, headed by Justice, Security and Foreign Affairs Advisor Francisco García Villedor. (AIN, 14/12/03)

December 14: Within the framework of his trip to Latin America Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov has made a short stop in Cuba. He had a meeting with Cuban First Deputy Foreign Minister Fernando Remírez. The ministers have discussed various international issues during their talk. (Itar-Tass, 14/12/03)

December 14: Cuba's Foreign Ministry has told some European diplomats there's no need for Christmas gift-giving this year. The most recent rebuke is yet another sign of how badly relations have deteriorated between the island and the EU, Cuba's top trading partner. In diplomatic circles it's widely known as the "cocktail war," where some European diplomats are routinely frozen out of official Cuban functions. "They communicated to us that given the circumstances we should abstain from sending Christmas gifts to Cuban officials," a European diplomat said. "Anything we send will be returned," a diplomat from another embassy added. (Sun Sentinel, 14/15/03)

December 15: The recent trip by the Justice Minister of the Principality of Asturias, Francisco Javier García Villedor, to Washington and Cuba ended in a three-and-a-half hour long meeting with Fidel Castro on the last day of his visit to the island. According to the Minister, the Cuban leader showed "appreciation" for the cooperation programs that the Asturian government conducts in Cuba. (La Voz de Asturias, 15/12/03)

December 15: Cuba says the recent G-20 meeting held in Brasilia was excellent and offered positive and constructive suggestions in preparation for the upcoming General Council of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Ricardo Cabrisas, Cuban government minister and head of the island's delegation to the meeting, told reporters in Rio de Janeiro that the Brazilian initiative to

call the group before the WTO meeting in Geneva was "magnificent." He said that "the G-20 is committed to discuss the multilateral process of commercial negotiations interrupted in Cancun." (Radio Habana Cuba, 15/12/03)

December 15: It is reported that Cuba and the European Union had contacts aimed at reestablishing normal relations. The sources say that Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque had a meeting with ambassadors from Belgium, Portugal and Greece. These countries have not officially invited Cuban dissidents to their national celebrations. Sources say that the minister proposed to the EU ambassadors a number of changes on Cuba's position towards human rights, if dissidents are not invited to official activities in European embassies. The changes that Cuba might initiate include the signing of a UN convention on economic and social rights, an indefinite moratorium of the death penalty, and allowing European diplomats to visit the jails where political prisoners are been kept. (Europa Press, 15/12/03)

December 15: The Cuban Ambassador to Kenya, Mr. Pedro Luis, says his country is committed to building and strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries. Speaking when he paid a courtesy call on the Taita Taveta district commissioner Mr. Chege Mwangi, the ambassador said the two countries shared many things in common citing Kenya's freedom fighters who he lauded for inspiring Cubans' struggle for their independence. (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, 15/12/03)

December 16: Over 20 workers from Nicaraguan communities are training in Sancti Spiritus on use of renewable energy sources in a project at the Sancti Spíritus graduate center, center promoter Naybi Salas told the press. Salas said this will signify improvement of living conditions for the districts of León, Corinto, Chinandega, Jinotega and Matagalpa in Nicaragua. Training includes lectures and visits demonstrating Cuban development in the use of solar, water, wind power and biomass, which have been used to satisfy social needs, mainly in rural areas where there is no electricity. The Nicaraguan professionals are also studying the use of hydraulic ram and small hydroelectric plants, two alternatives that have achieved increased productivity of sown fields and electrification of isolated communities in Cuba. (AIN, 16/12/03)

December 18: The wives of Cuban dissidents released in Havana an open letter to international figures and organizations expressing gratitude for their solidarity with the 75 sentenced dissidents. Miriam Leiva, wife of economist Oscar Espinosa who is serving a 20-year sentence, said the letter intends to "thank all those who have supported us for the tokens of solidarity received during the past several months." (EFE, 19/12/03)

December 18: Cuba and China will enlarge collaboration in medical fields, biotechnology and the exchange of professionals, Chinese Vice-minister for Health, Zhu Quinsheng, confirmed after concluding a visit to the island. (AIN, 18/12/03)

December 19: Reporters Without Borders voiced concern about its correspondent in Cuba, Ricardo González Alfonso, who began a hunger strike in prison on 8 to press his demand not to be held in a cell with non-political detainees. "We hold the Cuban government responsible for our correspondent's health," the organisation said, noting that several journalists have recently been transferred to cells with non-political detainees where they risk being the victims of violence from their cell mates, sometimes instigated by the authorities. (Europa Press, 19/12/03)

December 21: In an interview with an Iranian press source, Cuba's Ambassador to Tehran Jose Ramon Rodriguez said that "the silence of the United States towards Israel's crimes in Palestine is a clear violation of human rights." He added that, "the United States is using human rights as a political justification." Referring to those countries branded as the axis of evil by the United States, the ambassador commented, "Due to its independent policies after the revolution, Cuba is considered a danger and has been accused of supporting terrorism time after time." (Mehr News Agency, 22/12/03)

December 22: Fidel Castro met revolutionary ally President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela at a Caribbean island retreat in a morale-boosting visit to the leftist Venezuelan leader, who faces a campaign to vote him out of office. "We talked about everything," Chavez told reporters after returning from the talks on Orchila island, a military base and presidential retreat 110 miles north of Caracas. Government officials had earlier refused to disclose the site of the meeting. This had shrouded in secrecy the brief visit by the 77-year-old Castro to Venezuela, Communist Cuba's biggest political ally and trade partner in Latin America. Chavez said he and Castro had discussed growing medical and energy cooperation between their nations. They also reviewed the political situation in Venezuela, where the populist president is resisting a determined opposition bid to trigger a referendum next year on whether he should stay in power. State television showed the two leaders embracing. It also broadcast a long, rambling interview with Castro in which he praised Chavez as an influential leader spearheading the fight in Latin America against U.S.-style global capitalism. "I challenge the world to produce a more generous man," the Cuban leader, who spoke slowly and haltingly, said. (Reuters, 12/03)

December 23: Mexico and Cuba, whose historic ties suffered a war of words in 2002, would like a meeting between President Vicente Fox and Fidel Castro to usher in renewed relations, a top official said. "We both have decided to work from top to bottom," Mexican vice minister of foreign relations Miguel Hakim told Formato 21 radio. "When we see improvement and the level has risen, we will think about a meeting between the leaders." Hakim said that Mexican foreign minister Luis Derbez and his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque would meet in the first half of next year. After evaluating those meetings, they would determine whether Fox and Castro should meet. (AFP, 23/12/03)

December 23: Educational agreements signed between Cuba and Argentina are a plus for Latin American integration, moving forward for real human development. "We are convinced that achieving real human development can only happen through Latin American unity," said Argentine Education, Science and Technology Minister Daniel Filmus after signing a memorandum of understanding with the Cuban Education Ministry. (Prensa Latina, 23/12/03)

December 25: The Cuban National Assembly of People's Power issued a statement declaring its "total solidarity with the centennial struggle of the Bolivian people to recover their access to the sea". (Prensa Latina, 25/12/03)

December 25: Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas decorated Japanese politician Hiroshi Mitsuzuka, a former member of the Japanese House of Representatives, with the Order of Solidarity granted by the Cuban Council of State. (Granma International, 26/12/03)

December 26: Fidel Castro has warned that any foreign military intervention in Venezuela would "ignite a powder keg throughout South America." Castro's warning came during a televised eight-hour speech to lawmakers in reference to statements made recently by White House Special Envoy Otto Reich over reports that Cuban agents were operating in Venezuela under the guise of volunteer workers. (EFE, 28/12/03)

December 26: Fidel Castro sent a message of commiseration to the Chinese government for the serious accident in a natural gas field that caused 191 deaths and several hundred injuries. (Prensa Latina, 26/12/03)

December 29: The Argentinean government is studying the possibility of interceding with the Cuban government on behalf of renown Cuban doctor Hilda Molina so that she's authorized to visit Argentina where her two grandchildren live. The Special Representative for Human Rights at the Argentinean Foreign Ministry, Alicia Oliveira, met with Molina's son and promised to "help as much as possible" in the reunification of the family, reported the daily La Nación. "The system does not allow me to meet with my only child or hold my grandchildren - who only know me from photos and phone conversations" she complained in talks with the media. (El Nuevo Herald, 30/12/03)

December 29: The President of the Colombian Senate, Germán Vargas, has ended a successful visit to Cuba. Speaking with reporters in Havana, Vargas said he felt his visit had been very productive. (Radio Habana Cuba, 29/12/03)

December 31: Fidel Castro will not join a January summit of Western Hemisphere leaders. Rebeca Céspedes, a summit organizer, said Castro was not invited because he was not a member of the summit group. "Fidel Castro is not going. We do not want anything to do with this summit," said Gustavo Vélez, a spokesman for the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City. "I am telling you this in the nicest words possible." (San Antonio Express, 31/12/03)

Security

December 14: During National Defense Day, military activities carried out in Cienfuegos were attended by Raúl Castro, Minister of the Armed Forces. Antiaircraft alarms were sounded in Cuba as part of a national exercise to test military readiness. (World Data Service, 14/12/03)

December 16: A technical and military cooperation protocol between the Defense Ministries of Angola and Cuba, signed in Havana, in the year 2002, has been approved by the Angolan Cabinet Council, as stated in a recent edition of the state's Gazette. The protocol aims at increasing and strengthening cooperation relations in the military sector between both countries. The document explains that the current protocol is valid for five years, and renewable for equal successive periods of time, except if one of the parties rescinds it. The terms in the document outlines the exchange of military delegations, through official and working visits, for the strengthening of mutual trust, the training and preparation of Angolan army officers in Cuban military training centres, the training of soldiers in exploring, conserving and repairing of artillery and military equipment, as well as the consultation and exchange of technical and scientific information about subjects of military bilateral interest. (Angola Press Agency, 16/12/03)

Terrorism

December 2: Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton said the United States intends to prevent delivery of sensitive nuclear and ballistic missile technology to Iran "from whatever source." Like Iran, Bolton said that North Korea, Syria, Libya and Cuba are "rogue states" pursuing weapons of mass destruction. He said the United States would seek diplomatic solutions whenever possible, but that America and its allies "are also willing to deploy more robust techniques such as the interdiction and seizure of illicit goods." "The lesson that emerges from Iraq is that the United States is determined to go after those countries that intend to develop weapons of mass destruction programs," he added. (AP, DPA, 2/12/03)

December 14: Fidel Castro's government kept silent on the recent capture of Saddam Hussein and Cuban television only mentioned it briefly in its international news segment. Cuba remains in the list of countries the U.S. deems "sponsors of terrorism", but the case of Cuba is quite different from the Iraqi case. (La Jornada, 15/12/03)

December 14: The lawyer for Luis Posada Carriles and his accomplices has forced the withdrawal from his clients' trial of Judge Enrique Paniza Morales. Five weeks before the court case, the Panamanian press reported that Paniza, the fifth penal judge, had declared himself unable to follow through with the trial after Rogelio Cruz, lawyer for the four accused by Cuba to be international terrorists, lodged an complaint of "partiality" against him in the Second Higher Court of Justice. The trial is scheduled for January. The sixth penal judge Rubén Royo received Cruz' complaint and subsequently accepted Paniza's withdrawal. (Granma International, 16/12/03)

December 18: A federal appeals court has concluded that terrorist suspects held in secret US

custody on foreign soil deserve access to lawyers and the American legal system. The US Supreme Court has already agreed to decide whether US courts have jurisdiction over the "detention of foreign nationals captured abroad (...) and incarcerated at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba." But the latest ruling by the San Francisco-based 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals adds more legal ammunition to criticism over the constitutionality of the White House's war on terror, stemming from September 11, 2001, attacks. The Supreme Court will have the final word on the detention policy when it hears two similar cases and issues a ruling by June. (CNN, 18/12/03)

December 23: Cuba has charged the United States with running a concentration camp at the Guantanamo base on the eastern tip of the island, in the government's first attack on use of the facility to hold terror suspects. "In the territory illegally occupied by the Guantanamo naval base, hundreds of foreign prisoners are subjected to indescribable abuses," said a statement passed by parliament and broadcast by the state-run media. Communist-run Cuba's National Assembly said prisoners were isolated and denied the right to communicate with their families or to prepare an adequate defense. [For more on this, see Official Statements by the Cuban National Assembly.] (Reuters, 26/12/03)

December 29: A leading Spanish anti-terrorism judge has called for the extradition of four prisoners held at the US base at Guantanamo in Cuba because they are suspected of links to an al-Qaida cell, court sources said. Judge Baltazar Garzón of Spain's highest criminal tribunal has applied to the Spanish government to seek the extradition of Hamid Abd al-Rahman, --the only Spanish national held at Guantanamo--, Lahcen Ikassrien, alias Chej Hasan, Khamiel Abd al-Latif al-Banna, alias Abu Anas, and Umar Deghayes. (Al Jazeera Net, 30/12/03)

US-Cuba Relations

December 1: As his leading rivals for president hone positions on Cuba policy that appease South Florida's powerful exile bloc, retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark is gaining notice for a divergent approach: a willingness to discuss easing the decades-long trade embargo against the island and its dictator. Clark stops short of saying he would lift sanctions, but his nuanced responses to reporters, exile leaders and even a questioner at a nationally televised debate last month in Boston leave little doubt that a Clark administration could well do more than any other in 40 years to build ties with Fidel Castro's government. "In general embargoes normally, usually, they don't work, and they certainly haven't worked in the case of Cuba as far as ending the Castro regime," Clark told reporters during a visit to South Florida. "We don't want to give a gift to Fidel Castro. But we do want to help the Cuban people achieve the same rights as everybody else in this hemisphere." (The Miami Herald, 3/12/03)

December 1: Around 600 US college students arrived in Havana aboard the cruise ship "Universe Explorer" to see Cuba firsthand. The members of the group, who hail from 239 US universities, are traveling around the world as part of "Semester at Sea," a program aimed at giving the students a closer look at the culture, traditions and politics of several countries around the world, according to organizers. Hassan Pérez, head of Cuba's University Students Federation (FEU), welcomed the visitors, hailing the efforts at solidarity made by the organizers, who have docked in Havana with eight previous student groups. (EFE, 1/12/03)

December 1: During a trial to six Cubans charged with hijacking a plane from the communist island to Key West, the defense isn't getting the witnesses it wants and prosecutors lost half of the confessions from the defendants. From their perspectives, each side is hobbled going into a politically charged trial on charges carrying potential sentences of 20 years to life in federal prison. Fidel Castro, who claims the United States is soft on hijackers, did a national television segment with smiling crew members and passengers after they returned from their interrupted journey. In contrast, defense attorneys say they were locked for hours in a Cuban airport lounge under armed guard on an August trip intended to generate favorable testimony. Cuba is providing

the pilot and a steward as prosecution witnesses, and the United States has asked Cuba to deliver the co-pilot and flight mechanic as defense witnesses. The defense can be expected to challenge the reliability of Cuban airline workers, whose salaries are paid by their government, in a case where Cuba would like to convict anybody the United States puts on trial for hijackings from the island nation to discourage other flights of fancy. The hijacked flight -- which was supposed to fly from the Isle of Youth to Havana -- carried a total of 37 people, including the six defendants and six crew members. Not counting the defendants, 14 opted to stay in the United States. (AP, 1/12/03)

December 3: Fidel Castro attended a meeting with some 570 US students visiting the island on the Semester at Sea program, sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Shipboard Education. The meeting was also attended by Cuban People's Assembly president Ricardo Alarcon and the ministers of Education, Luis Ignacio Gomez, and Higher Education, Fernando Vecino. (EFE, 3/12/03)

December 3: The half-yearly round of talks on migration scheduled to take place in Havana between Cuba and the United States were cancelled. A new date has not been determined yet. The US State Department refused the proposed date of December 4 due to conflicts in the calendar, said a source from the US Interests Section in Havana. In turn, Washington proposed to hold the talks in January. (La Jornada, 4/12/03)

December 4: Cuba said American oil companies were welcome to join off-shore exploration of its Gulf of Mexico waters. Spain's Repsol-YPF SA plans to sink an exploratory well in March in waters one mile (1.6 km) deep off Cuba's northwestern coast in search of light oil deposits. A Canadian company has also signed risk contracts to explore for oil deposits there. "The government of Cuba wishes to say it has no objection whatsoever to the involvement of American oil companies in exploration and drilling in our exclusive economic zone on mutually beneficial terms," said a statement published by the ruling Communist Party newspaper, Granma. It noted that US food and agribusiness companies have traded with Cuba for two years, under an exception to trade sanctions imposed by Washington for four decades on Cuban President Fidel Castro's government. (Reuters, 4/12/03)

December 5: Two U.S. lawmakers are proposing a legislation that would penalize US companies signing agreements with Cuba to lobby against the trade embargo by placing a 100 percent tax on their profits from any Cuba deal. The legislation is being sponsored by democrat representatives Peter Deutsch (Florida) and Robert Menéndez (New Jersey), who plan to take it o the floor during the next congressional period starting in January. (El Nuevo Herald, 6/12/03)

December 5: Over 5 000 women participated in a rally in Cárdenas to demand "justice and freedom" for the five Cubans sentenced in the United States for spying. Mothers, wives and daughters of René González, Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero and Fernando González headed the demonstration. (AIN, 5/12/03)

December 5: A man found clinging to two inner tubes off the coast of Miami is believed to be the only survivor from a group of 11 Cuban migrants whose homemade boat capsized during an attempt to reach the United States illegally, the US Coast Guard said. A Coast Guard cutter crew rescued the man about nine miles off the Miami shore, but the incident was not made public until four days later. The man told rescuers he left Matanzas, Cuba, on November 27 with 10 other people aboard a 14-foot homemade vessel that was destroyed when it ran into bad weather. Weather reports for the days in question confirmed the seas were rough and the air unusually cool. Coast Guard crews conducted an intensive air and sea search and alerted boaters in the area, but had trouble pinpointing the vessel's likely route. The 24-year-old survivor was among 17 Cuban migrants repatriated to Cuba, the Coast Guard said. (Reuters, 6/12/03)

December 5: President Bush's October call for more rigorous enforcement of sanctions against Cuba has led to an increase in searches of people traveling to and from the island, Secretary of

Housing and Urban Development Mel Martinez said. Martinez cochairs President Bush's commission on a transition to democracy in Cuba with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. The group, which also includes representatives from the Treasury Department and other federal agencies, met for the first time. The one-hour meeting of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba included comments by national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. The president's commission is expected to issue its first report by May 1. May is significant for Cuban-Americans who celebrate the 20th of that month as the anniversary of the country's independence from Spain. (The Boston Globe, 6/12/03)

December 5: After a meeting of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, indicated that the United States is serious about planning for a "peaceful" regime change in Cuba. "Our efforts to enforce restrictions on financial transactions that benefit the regime have been stepped up significantly since the president's speech." Noriega said before Bush's Oct. 10 speech that about 5 percent of passengers on one flight to Havana per month were scrutinized or searched. Now, he said, it is 100 percent of passengers on every flight. (The Boston Globe, 6/12/03)

December 5: Fidel Castro said he will outlast any Bush Administration plans to oust him and Cuba's one-party communist state will survive his death. "The group of idiots that met in the White House will die of bitterness and frustration," the 77-year-old Cuban leader said in an address to school children celebrating the 10th birthday of Elián González, the shipwrecked boy at the center of an international custody battle in 2000. "This little meeting does not worry us (...) they would be better off dedicating their time to drinking whiskey and smoking marijuana," Castro said, speaking to hundreds of school children. "They hope that 15 minutes after my death the revolution will collapse. They don't know that this country has thousands of leaders," he added. (Taipei Times, 6/12/03)

December 5: Since October 10, the US government has increased scrutiny of passengers on the roughly 30 charter flights that depart the United States each day for Cuba, said OFAC's Juan Zarate. Fifty-five passengers have been told they could not travel because they did not have proper documents or Treasury approval. Zarate also said the Department of Homeland Security has begun training officers to look for US citizens traveling illegally to Cuba through third countries, including Canada and Mexico. In the 30 days after Bush's speech, the Homeland Security Department searched 8,800 people on 144 aircraft leaving for Havana, Treasury Department spokeswoman Tara Bradshaw said. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control enforces many of the sanctions against Cuba. Bradshaw said 55 people were denied permission to fly to Cuba in that 30-day period. Bradshaw also said there were 188 seizures of cigars, alcohol and other goods from returning passengers during that period. Treasury officials also have for the first time begun judicial proceedings against travelers who have visited Cuba illegally. Bradshaw said that since September 11, 90 cases have been initiated and 27 of those have been referred to administrative law judges. (Sun Sentinel, 9/12/03)

December 5: A Florida judge ruled there won't be a mistrial in the case of six Cubans accused of hijacking a passenger plane, saying the potential harm to their defense caused by a government witness's misstep has been outweighed by other testimony. US District Judge James Lawrence King said that alleged ringleader Alexis Norneilla Morales testified about the role three co-defendants played in the alleged March 19 hijacking, negating the potential harm caused by Border Patrol agent Kerry Heck's previous testimony. She had testified that Morales confessed to recruiting the three men, violating an agreement the men's attorneys had with prosecutors that part of his statement wouldn't be mentioned by the government. (Sun Sentinel, 6/12/03)

December 6: The United States is demanding that Cuba immediately release a dissident who was arrested last year for trying to organize an event marking Human Rights Day. The State Department made the demand as it noted the anniversary of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet's arrest on December 6, 2002. He and nine other opposition activists were arrested at the same time. (VOA, 6/12/03)

December 7: Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro said that should the Communist state's arch-enemy the United States invade Cuba its forces would pay a far heavier price than the US troops occupying Iraq. "Our people will pay a terrible price, but we will exact from the aggressors a high cost, be they the Yankees alone or with their cousins the British or Spanish," Castro told reporters after attending a Veterans Day ceremony. The price they pay will be much higher (than in Iraq) and they are not going to dominate this country," Castro said. "For any invader who sticks a boot here, at the very least the boot with the foot inside will remain," he said, adding there would be "a mine and an ambush awaiting foreign troops every square meter of the country." (Reuters, 7/12/03)

December 7: A poll conducted for The Miami Herald and the St. Petersburg Times found that Florida voters, like those nationwide, overwhelmingly favor lifting the ban on travel to Cuba. The poll done by Democratic pollster Rob Schroth and Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway, shows that only Hispanics are opposed to easing restrictions -- by 55-43 percent. Overall, respondents said they support allowing US citizens to legally travel to Cuba by 64-26 percent. (The Miami Herald, 7/12/03)

December 8: A US commission is expected next year to suggest ways the United States can hasten the removal of Cuban President Fidel Castro without using force. The White House said in a statement the commission will issue recommendations by May 1 for quickly bringing a "peaceful, near-term end" to Mr. Castro's dictatorship in Communist-ruled Cuba. The statement said the commission will also suggest ways to create Democratic institutions and respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as a free market economy. The statement said modernizing infrastructure and meeting basic needs such as health care and education will also be addressed. The recommendations will be made in a report to President Bush. (VOA, 9/12/03)

December 9: Jurors have heard two different characterizations of Alexis Norneilla Morales in a federal courthouse in Key West, as one defense lawyer and the prosecution gave closing arguments in the hijacking trial of six Cuban men: Norneilla, Eduardo Mejia Morales, Yainer Olivares Samon, Neudis Infantes Hernandez, Alvenis Arias Izquierdo and Miakel Guerra Morales. Each man is charged with air piracy, interfering with a flight crew and conspiracy for their alleged roles in redirecting a domestic Cuban flight on March 19 to Key West using knives and packing tape. They could be sent to prison for life if convicted. (The Miami Herald, 10/12/03)

December 10: Cuban Parliament President Ricardo Alarcon denounced that the US blockades his country not only in trade and finance, but also in the field of information. Alarcon, speaking about World Summit about the Information Society (WSIS) beginning in Geneva, discussed the achievements of his country in information technology and communication, despite Washington's unilateral sanctions. Alarcon recalled the harassment, hostility, and constant pressure his country has suffered for over 40 years from the blockade imposed by the most powerful country in the world, and pointed out that the Island does not have the means to counteract the disinformation campaigns against it. (Prensa Latina, 10/12/03)

December 10: The Department of Homeland Security released the results of the first 60 days of heightened enforcement of the US embargo against Cuba. Speaking at the 27th annual Caribbean Latin American Action Conference, Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security, Asa Hutchinson, announced that inspectors had conducted more than 45,000 baggage examinations on the nearly 54,000 passengers who traveled between the United States and Cuba over the past two months. Under Secretary Hutchinson announced that CBP officers had discovered almost 600 violations of the embargo, nearly half of which were for illegally transporting tobacco or alcohol products. In addition, 171 people were denied permission to travel to Cuba, when inspectors discovered that they did not have the proper OFAC licenses. Another 44 people arriving in the United States were discovered to have traveled to Cuba without the proper licenses. Those found in violation of the travel embargo are routinely subject to civil penalties. (DHS Press Release, 11/12/03)

December 11: A jury found six Cuban men guilty of hijacking a passenger flight from their country to South Florida last March, in what federal prosecutors called an unequivocal rebuke of using violence to reach the United States. The six had been accused of using butcher knives and duct tape to commandeer a DC-3 as it flew from the Isle of Youth, off Cuba's southern coast, on its way to Havana on March 19. During the trial, prosecutors said that the leader of the group had pressed a knife to the pilot's throat after charging the cockpit, while other defendants tied up crew members in the rear of the plane. The incident and two others that followed led Fidel Castro to crack down on hijackers and to accuse the United States of encouraging illegal immigration by violent means. Harry C. Wallace, one of the government prosecutors, said that the verdict "sends a clear message that our goal here is sympathetic to people wanting to come to the United States, but that we will not tolerate the use of violence or the threat of violence in order to do it." Defense lawyers had depicted the incident as a "freedom flight" in which the flight crew was complicit. (The New York Times, 12/12/03)

December 11: In the new fiscal year, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) will give some \$7 million to groups involved with promoting civil society in Cuba in support of a democratic transition on the island. (El Nuevo Herald, 12/12/03)

December 11: Cuba denounced at the United Nations the use by the United States of unfair discriminatory and politically-encouraged actions which violate standards of diplomatic right. In her address at the plenary session of the UN General Assembly, Cuban representative Juana Helena Ramos said that the United States continues to repeatedly disregard its commitment to the UN Convention on Privileges and Immunity. Ramos referred to the arbitrary denial of a travel permit to the Head of the Cuban Interest Section in Washington Dagoberto Rodríguez who was to attend the 58th session of the UN General Assembly as part of the Cuban delegation. (AIN, 12/12/03)

December 12: The Cuban Foreign Ministry issued an official note approving a verdict of guilt issued by a United States court against six Cubans who hijacked a passenger plane from Cuba to the United States. The six Cubans were convicted of hijacking in Florida after their argument that the crew cooperated in the hijacking was rejected. (The People's Daily, 11/12/03)

December 12: A group of seven Cuban dissidents who fled the island in a makeshift raft have not been heard from since and are feared lost at sea, according to the Cuban Liberty Council. "They left in a homemade raft," said Luis Zuñiga, president of the Miami-based Cuban Liberty Council. "The seas are high, so you can only imagine." Among those missing: Bárbaro Antonio Vela Crego, the president of the January 6 Civic Movement, or Movimiento Civico 6 de Enero, who faced 20 years in prison for his opposition to the Castro regime, said Zuñiga. He and six other dissidents slipped away from the city of Alamar, east of Havana Bay. Their vessel was powered only by pieces of cloth patched together to form a sail and had no engine, Vela's wife told the Cuban Liberty Council. The Coast Guard had no information on the group and said no migrants had been repatriated to Cuba this week, said Petty Officer Carleen Drummond, an agency spokeswoman. (The Miami Herald, 13/12/03)

December 13: The door to American trade with Cuba was nudged open a bit more as more than 250 US agribusiness representatives traveled to Havana for sales talks, marking the second anniversary of the first US commercial food shipments to the communist island. Pedro Alvarez, head of Alimport, Cuba's food import company, told the press that he expected at least \$130 million in new sales contracts would be signed during four days of talks. "We've had a really strong response from companies" to the government's invitation to participate in the talks, said Alvarez. He expects 147 companies from 29 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico to attend. Alvarez said the companies include Riceland Foods Inc. of Stuttgart, Arkansas; Cargill Inc., of Minnetonka, Minnesota; Archer Daniels Midland of Decatur, Illinois; FC Stone of Des Moines, Iowa; and Kaehler's Homedale Farms in St. Charles, Minnesota. (AP, 14/12/03)

December 13: After five days in a hospital, US artist Albert Carvajal died. His body was returned to his family in New York. Carvajal was mugged and beaten, about 12 hours after arriving in the Cuban capital. According to his film's tearful producer, Lorraine Rodriguez, Carvajal returned from dinner with some film people and locals he'd met on the veranda of the Hotel Nacional, where he was staying. Then the group went to a party. Sometime next day, Carvajal was beaten and robbed, his body dumped into the middle of Avenida 23, a busy Havana thoroughfare a block from the Hotel Nacional. He had been robbed of \$700, his leather jacket, shoes and shirt. Police took Carvajal to the Calixto García hospital in the Vedado district. Carvajal, who was conscious during the week, could not identify his attackers, friends said. (USA Today, 17/12/03)

December 15: American food producers signed the first contracts in three days of negotiations expected to result in as much as \$130 million in new sales. Scores of farmers, port operators and supermarket representatives from around the United States watched as Pedro Alvarez, head of the Cuban import company Alimport, signed contracts to buy \$4.7 million worth of rice from Riceland Foods Inc. of Stuttgart, Arkansas. Later, Alvarez signed contracts for Cuba to buy \$700,000 in peas and lentils from PS International Ltd., of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and \$600,000 in chicken leg quarters from Gold Kist of Atlanta. (AP, 15/12/03)

December 15: The US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Bureau of Public Affairs released a fact sheet on "the Cuban people's struggle for simple freedoms and human rights". The document states that "almost 44 years after Cuban dictator Fidel Castro assumed power, the Cuban people still dream of free elections, freedom of expression, and economic and political rights". (Washington Files, 16/12/03)

December 16: The President of the United States, George W. Bush, his Spanish counterpart José María Aznar and exiled Cuban leaders wish a Cuban transition to a capitalist "hell", noted a Cuban official publication. "Without doubt, transition is a soft term slyly conceived to silence those who stand against the threats on Cuba from the Lord of War," said an article published by Juventud Rebelde. "Transition is the new word used to conceal an old policy," added the official newspaper. (Notimex, 16/12/03)

December 16: In 1999, Frederick Burks made a cheap flight to Cuba for a visit, an excursion that led to accusations by US authorities that he had illegally traveled to the country. Now, after years of waiting, Burks faces a judicial hearing, though he doesn't know exactly when. "I'm getting tired of all this stuff," said Burks, 45, of Berkeley, California, who contends his trip to Cuba was an honest mistake. "I broke some regulation I didn't know was there." Eleven years after Congress authorized civil hearings for anyone alleged to have violated the Cuba travel ban, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control has installed three administrative law judges to hear the cases. Budget problems and the September 11, 2001 attacks have been cited by officials for the delay in starting the hearings. (AP, 16/12/03)

December 16: Cargill Inc. said it has reached agreement to sell an additional 110,000 tons of farm commodities to Cuba in the first half of 2004, starting the third year of resumed agricultural trade with Cuba. The Minnetonka-based food and agriculture company didn't give specific details on the sales, except to say they involve corn, soybeans, soybean meal and soybean oil. Industry observers said the deal will exceed \$20 million in value. (Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 16/12/03)

December 16: Fidel Castro chatted about nutrition and energy prices during a private meeting with US farm officials who are in Havana for three days of talks on bringing more agricultural goods to Cuba, those at the meeting said. Cuba wants to sign contracts to buy American farm products worth as much as \$130 million during the talks. The discussions -- and Castro's private meeting with about a dozen Americans -- underscore the importance Cuba has put on trade with US companies two years since first exploiting an exception to the US trade embargo allowing direct sales of American farm products. By the end of Tuesday, \$55.5 million in contracts had been announced, including several in prices tied directly to the Chicago Board of Trade -- a first in two years of trade between communist Cuba and American agribusiness. (CNN, 16/12/03)

December 16: A council boss has died in a swimming accident in the Caribbean. John Ball, 47, who worked at Bury council, died after getting into difficulties while swimming in the sea during a boat trip in Cuba. The manager, who worked in environment and development services, was pronounced dead after efforts to resuscitate him failed. Cuban authorities said his death was from asphyxia as a result of drowning. Phil Allen, director of Bury's environment and development services, said Mr Ball was a keen traveler and a popular member of staff. (Manchester Evening News, 16/12/03)

December 16: The US State Department refused a request from the National Council of the Churches of Christ to grant humanitarian visas to the wives of two of the five Cubans jailed in that country for spying against the US. (Antiterroristas.cu, 16/12/03)

December 17: Agricultural chiefs from four US farm states urged an end to the US embargo on Cuba after being feted by Fidel Castro in ceremonies marking two years of resumed bilateral trade. "Ending the embargo is simply the right thing to do," said Iowa Agriculture Commissioner Patty Judge, who joined counterparts from Iowa, North Dakota and Alabama and 250 US agribusiness, farm and shipping representatives at the ceremonies. At a news conference, the commissioners lauded their states' growing trade with the Communist-run island and called for normal relations. (Reuters, 17/12/03)

December 18: The United States unveiled its annual report on International Religious Freedom, indicating that the six most-grievous offenders were Myanmar, China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam and Cuba. The six countries were categorized as totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, which see religions as "enemies of the state." (AFP, 18/12/03)

December 20: A Cuban flight attendant, who came to the United States to testify against six countrymen accused of hijacking a plane to Key West, Florida, has not returned to his homeland. Abilio Hernandez Garcia apparently escaped his guards on December 12, one day after the six Cubans were convicted of hijacking the passenger plane. It was not immediately clear if Mr. Garcia has formally requested political asylum. The six defendants claimed the March 19 hijacking was actually a freedom flight undertaken with the crew's cooperation. Defense lawyers say the flight attendant's apparent defection would help the defendants in their appeals for a new trial. (VOA, 20/12/03)

December 20: After drifting for four days in their wooden boat, with only dry cake and sugar for food, Cuban dissident Barbaro Antonio Vela and eight men were picked up by a "Good Samaritan" 20 miles northeast of Islamorada, Florida, on December 13, according to the US Coast Guard and the Miami-based Cuban Liberty Council. They spent almost a week aboard a Coast Guard cutter before being flown to the Guantánamo Bay Naval Station. It was only then that news of their rescue started to trickle down. The Cuban Liberty Council called an independent journalist in Havana who delivered the news to the dissidents' relatives. (KRT Wire, 21/12/03)

December 21: In a scathing attack on the US trade embargo against his country, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque has described the measure "as useless as it is harmful" to the US economy. Speaking to members of the Cuban Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Perez Roque hailed last month's UN resolution supported by 179 countries which condemned the embargo imposed more than 40 years ago. "If we were speaking in baseball terms, we would say this was a perfect game and it will be very difficult to equal this in the future," Perez Roque said. Another sign that the sanctions were failing was the fact that American businessmen were now clamoring for them to end, the minister said, noting that Cuba was now buying some US food products authorized by Washington. "We don't believe that the embargo will end tomorrow, but it is clear that the American people, as well as some elements of the government, see it as useless as it is harmful to the US economy", Perez Roque told the legislators in his annual report on foreign affairs. (EFE, 21/12/03)

December 22: Fidel Castro said he repeatedly warned Saddam Hussein to leave Kuwait after the 1990 invasion but that the former Iraqi dictator's "mistakes" did not justify the US-led war. Castro, who was in Venezuela to meet with President Hugo Chavez, said he tried on numerous occasions to persuade Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait, warning the Iraqi leader that, not just Western countries, but also Arab nations, would turn against him. Castro called Saddam's invasion of Iran "absolutely unjust," during an interview with Venezuela's state-run television station, Venezolana de Television. The US-led invasion of Iraq was aimed at taking control of the country's oil, Castro told Venezuelan state television. "There is no moral argument, no possible justification to invade a country," said the veteran communist leader. (AP, The News International, 23/12/03)

December 22: The US-led invasion of Iraq was aimed at taking control of the country's oil, Fidel Castro told Venezuelan state television in an interview. "There is no moral argument, no possible justification to invade a country," said the veteran communist leader. "The United Nations did not agree on it; rather the most powerful nation agreed to invade (Iraq): the main objective, let us be totally honest, was to win an essential raw material which is called petroleum," said Castro. (The News International Pakistan, 24/12/03)

December 31: Cuba, which this year became the US cattle industry's newest customer expressed sympathy for American ranchers dealing with their first case of mad cow disease and hopes that the situation is resolved soon. "Our sympathy goes out to U.S. ranchers and the meat industry and we hope the situation is cleared up quickly in their interest, ours and the world's," Pedro Alvarez, chairman of the state company that is Communist Cuba's only importer of US farm products, said in a telephone interview. (Reuters, 31/12/03)

December 31: In a letter, Cuba ratified its verbal offer to help in the investigations on the mad cow disease detected in the United States. "Our research institutions and development in the field of livestock health, as well as the people who work there, are willing to cooperate with their US counterparts," expressed Alimport director Pedro Alvarez in a letter sent to the US Meat Export Federation President and CEO Phillip M. Seng. In the letter, also addressed to the US National Cattlemen's Beef Association President Eric Davis, the executive of the Cuban food import company emphasized that Cuba will not cancel any of its commitments with US suppliers. (Prensa Latina, 31/12/03)