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## Research Forum on Cuba

# Chronicle on Cuba

## December 2004

### Highlights

**Domestic Affairs:** The Cuban Young Communist League (UJC) holds its 8th Congress in Havana. Dissident Jorge Olivera Castillo is released, the seventh political prisoner been released in a week. The Council of State appoints Otto Rivero Torres as vice president of the Council of Ministers to oversee investments of the Battle of Ideas. Moderate dissidents launch the magazine "Consensus".

**Economy:** Cuba's sugar harvest begins with the drought-ravaged crop estimated at no more than 1.8 million tons. Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez sign major economic agreements in Havana. Cuban government reports the economy grew 5 percent in 2004. Cuban government assigns \$1.469 billion for defence, out of a total budget of \$22.704 billion. Fidel Castro announces the discovery of oil deposits. Cuba moves to a further centralized economy.

**Exile Community:** Cuba increases to \$350 the cost of issuing a passport to Cubans living abroad. Representatives of the platform Cuba Democracy Now presents to the Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos a document comprised of 15 points on the EU position toward Cuba.

**Foreign Affairs:** The Argentine government tries to find a solution to the case of Cuban doctor Hilda Molina who has been denied permission by Cuban authorities to visit her family in Buenos Aires. The European Union's Committee on Latin America (COLAT) reaches a consensus to recommend the suspension of diplomatic sanctions imposed by the EU on Cuba. Cuba's National Assembly issues a statement calling Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez "founders of a new era for Latin America and the Caribbean".

**Security:** Cuba's armed forces holds their biggest military exercises in almost 20 years.

**US-Cuba Relations:** The Cuban government responds to a Christmas display in support of imprisoned Cuban dissident at Havana's US Interest Section. Cuba agrees to buy about \$125 million in farm goods from US companies. Fidel Castro says that the risks of attack by the US are real. The number of passengers flying to Cuba from the US plummets in 2004.



## **Domestic Affairs**

**December 1:** At least 18 jailed Cuban dissidents have been transferred to a prison hospital in Havana amid speculation they may be released. Relatives say activist physician Oscar Elias Biscet and opposition politician Hector Palacios were among those transferred. The move comes after authorities this week released five of 75 pro-democracy activists jailed last year in a crackdown on dissidents. (*AFP, VOA, 2/12/04*)

**December 1:** World AIDS Day was commemorated throughout Cuba with special media attention given to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Educational programs as well as radio and television announcements openly discussed AIDS and ways to prevent and combat the disease that is sweeping many countries around the world. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 1/12/04*)

**December 2:** The Cuban authorities have released a journalist who was serving a 15-year term for anti-government activities. Edel Jose Garcia Diaz, 60, was freed following a medical checkup at a Havana prison hospital, his sister, Esperanza Garcia, told the press. She said he suffered from emotional problems and a cyst on his kidney. "Now I have to recover my health," Garcia said after showing up at the home of the wife of another dissident still behind bars. Garcia said he was granted an immigrant visa by the US government years ago and would now try to get permission from the Cuban government to leave. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said it was heartened and relieved at the release, but spokesman Carlos Lauria said it was vital to remember that 24 independent journalists are still behind bars in Cuba "simply for doing their jobs." (*BBC, AP, 2/12/04*)

**December 2:** Cuban Parliament President, Ricardo Alarcón, has summoned over 600 deputies to participate in the 4th Period of Sessions scheduled for December 23rd in Havana's International Convention Center. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 2/12/04*)

**December 2:** The Karl Marx Theater served as the venue for a political-cultural gala that opened the 8th Congress of the Young Communist League (UJC). The cultural gala was also a tribute to the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) on its 48th anniversary. It was attended by Raúl Castro, minister of the FAR; Ricardo Alarcón, president of the Cuban Parliament; Felipe Pérez Roque, foreign minister; and Esteban Lazo, vice president, and 1, 200 delegates and invited guests attending the Congress. (*Granma Internacional, 2/12/04*)

**December 3:** The 8th Congress of the Cuban Young Communist League (UJC) began its debates with the participation of 1,200 people in six working commissions on issues related to the work of the political organization. The meeting, being held at Havana's Conference Center, gives delegates the opportunity to analyze topics such as the "Battle of Ideas", social workers' work and its impact on the population, role of youth in the current educational revolution, improvement of health care services, economic activity and defense, among others. (*Prensa Latina, 3/12/04*)

**December 3:** Migdalia Hernández Enamorado, a 35 year old forgotten activist and member of the group of the 75 was released from the prison Combinado de Guantánamo for women on November 12, 2004, said Ada Kaly Márquez Abascal, acting national delegate of the Democratic Party November 30 "Frank País". Agents of the State Security arrested Hernández Enamorado and her husband Rafael Benitez Chui on March 19, 2003, when they protested the regime's 2003 crackdown against the Cuban internal opposition in front of the local police headquarters in Guantanamo. Immediately thereafter, they were both sent to the prison Combinado de Guantánamo. On September 18, 2003, Hernández Enamorado and Benitez Chui were tried for the supposed crime of contempt and were sentenced to 2 and 4 years in prison respectively. (*Puente Informativo, 3/12/04*)

**December 3:** Oppositionist leader Bertha Antúnez Pernet initiated a protest in front of the penitentiary La Pendiente, in the city of Santa Clara. Berta has been protesting a 21-day-punishment imposed on her brother, the imprisoned dissident Jorge Luis García Pérez "Antúnez". Luis Pozo, the prison's director, told Berta that Jorge Luis was sent to a

punishment cell for disrespecting Fidel Castro. Over 15 oppositionists have joined Berta in her protest, despite the deployment of police forces in front of La Pendiente. (*Grupo Decoro*, 3/12/04)

**December 5:** Fidel Castro pronounced the closing speech of the VIII Congress of the Young Communists Union (UJC), in a session at Havana's Palacio de Convenciones that was attended by 1200 delegates and guests. Ideas will decide this universal struggle, stressed the Cuban leader when he referred to the vital role of Cuban youth in facing the US government attempts to destroy the island's economic and social project. [[Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 6/12/04)

**December 6:** The Cuban government released independent journalist Jorge Olivera Castillo, the seventh dissident to be released in the past week. His release brings to 14 the number of prisoners let out this year for health reasons from among the "Group of 75" democracy advocates, including rights activists, independent journalists and non-official librarians, sentenced to long prison terms in the repressive wave of the spring of 2003. Speaking to journalists at his home, Olivera defended his opposition to Castro. "Dissent shouldn't be seen as a criminal act," he said. Olivera said he planned to leave Cuba for the United States on a visa he was granted before his arrest. The former television editor worked for an independent news agency, Havana Press, which is coordinated by a Cuban exile in Miami. He also contributed to the country's first dissident magazine, *De Cuba*, which was closed down after publishing two issues last year. (*EFE, CNN, Los Angeles Times*, 6/12/04)

**December 6:** Cuba plans to release more dissidents from jail and expects a thaw in the European Union relations with the communist government of the island, said Ricardo Alarcón, President of Cuba's National Assembly. Alarcón indicated that the release of prisoners was not done for political reasons but on the grounds of health, age and good behaviour. During an interview in Caracas, Alarcón confirmed more would be freed. He also added that "maybe the entire group" could eventually be granted an early release from prison. (*Reuters*, 6/12/04)

**December 6:** Vicente Campanioni, a human rights activist and member of the Democratic Party November 30 "Frank País" was fired from his job at a health care center in Centro Habana. According to the report given to the press, the dissident was fired after refusing to participate in political activities organized by regime authorities during working hours, and for refusing to join the National Health Workers Union, under the control of the official Cuban Workers Union (CTC). According to data provided, more than three thousand human rights activists, independent workers and members of the opposition have been fired from state posts for political reasons. (*Reuters*, 6/12/04)

**December 7:** Daybreak found the walls of several streets of Santiago de Cuba plastered with anti-government posters and slogans like "Down with Fidel". Anti-government posters and graffiti appeared on some of the main streets, on walls and facades of homes. (*Cubamet*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuban dissidents, seeking to regain the initiative after a wave of arrests last year, announced plans to hold a national meeting of opponents of Fidel Castro's Communist government in May. Economist Martha Beatriz Roque, who was freed in July after 16 months in jail, said the umbrella organization she leads, called the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, will meet on May 20, 2005. The coalition of 343 groups includes small political groupings, human-rights activists and independent libraries. It was unlikely the Cuban government would authorize the meeting. "This is a demonstration that the dissident movement is not fragmented, because it is not easy to bring so many people together," Ms. Roque said at a news conference at her home. "There is enormous interest in attending," she said. (*The Globe and Mail, Reuters*, 8/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuban movie-goers are ready to enjoy 11 days of constant screening of some 400 films from different parts of the world in the 26th Havana International Film Festival. Cuban film "Tres veces dos" (Three times two) by Giroud, Lester Hamlet and Esteban Insausti was selected to open the festival at Karl Marx Theater. The opening

ceremony included the performance of musicians of the National Symphony and Cuba's National Choir. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuban dissident Marta Beatriz Roque said that the recent release of several imprisoned opponents is a public-relations gambit by the Fidel Castro regime and demanded the unconditional release of all other political detainees. Roque, 60, said those releases are "just another way in which the Cuban government tries to clean up its image." "They are 'convertible' prisoners, prisoners with a price tag," she said, comparing them to Cuba's 'convertible peso,' worth a US dollar, "but what we want is for them to be freed without conditions or any type of restriction." "I don't think that (the releases) are going to improve the situation of the (other) prisoners or of human rights" in Cuba, she noted. The recently released dissidents "are exchangeable currency, and the government needs to improve its image in exchange," she added. She said that she, as well as the other recently released dissidents "are out on the street, we're out of jail, but we're not free." (*EFE*, 7/12/04)

**December 8:** The Cuban government denied permission to the President of the Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, Elizardo Sánchez, to attend a ceremony at the Élysée Palace, said the spokesperson of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hervé Ladsous. Sánchez had been invited by the French government to attend the presentation of the Human Rights Award of the French Republic, which he himself had received in 1996. (*Europa Press*, 8/12/04)

**December 8:** Cuban authorities confirmed the prison sentences recently imposed on two opponents of the Communist regime. The sentences against two militants of the opposition Cuban Liberal Movement (CLM), considered illegal by the Cuban government, were handed down during an appellate hearing in Havana's provincial court. Last month, Alexis Triana Montesinos, 25, was sentenced to three months in prison and Jose Lorenzo Perez Fidalgo, 49, to four months on charges of damaging state property. Both were arrested July 5 and accused of throwing rocks at the windows of two buildings. Leon Padron Azcuy, the leader of the CLM, said there was no convincing evidence against the pair. Triana Montesinos and Perez Fidalgo "have been sentenced simply for being members of the Liberal Cuban Movement and opponents of the government," said Padron. (*EFE*, 8/12/04)

**December 8:** Cuban political prisoner Héctor Palacios Ruiz, one of the 75 dissidents sent to prison in the spring of 2003, visited his mother in Havana for nearly four hours, according to family sources. This is the first time that authorities have allowed Palacios to leave prison to visit a relative. On November 30, Palacios, together with other jailed dissidents, was transferred to the hospital of Combinado del Este Prison in Havana, but was not released. (*EFE*, 9/12/04)

**December 9:** Cuba's Higher Education Ministry announced that there is one university graduate for every 17 inhabitants. According to Granma newspaper, the report also notes that one out of every seven workers on the island is a university graduate. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 9/12/04)

**December 10:** Some 20 white-clad Cuban women - wives and mothers of political prisoners - marked International Human Rights Day with a public fast to demand the release of those jailed for peacefully opposing the 45-year-old Communist regime. "We have come together because we aspire to free our men, reunite our families and denounce the human rights violations existing in our country," the women said in a communique. The fast was held at the home of Laura Pollan, wife of Hector Maseda Gutierrez, one of 75 dissidents sentenced in the spring of 2003 to up to 28 years in prison. On the 56th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the women said "we are alone, but not for having chosen the path of retreat and solitude. Our fate has been truncated because they have taken away our men, our youth, and destroyed our families." They said that for almost two years they have "suffered the locking up, the ill treatment and the lack of human rights that our relatives endure in Cuban jails." "We, the 'Women in White,' on this day ask that justice be done and that they unconditionally release our husbands and relatives, and we pledge to continue struggling as long as a single one remains in prison," they said. Surrounded by other wives and relatives, Pollan read

the communique in her home against the backdrop of a Cuban flag inscribed with the names of the 75 imprisoned opponents of the regime who were sentenced in March and April of last year. (*EFE*, 10/12/04)

**December 13:** The Council of State of the Republic of Cuba has appointed Otto Rivero Torres vice president of the Council of Ministers to oversee investments of the Battle of Ideas and other tasks of the Revolution, "Granma" newspaper published. Rivero Torres has recently wound up his responsibility heading the Young Communist League. The so-called Battle of Ideas comprises 170 programs being implemented by the Cuban government in social, economic and political fields. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Three Cuban dissidents say they have found tiny listening devices in their homes, underlining and to some degree embarrassing the communist government's efforts to monitor the affairs of its critics. Prominent activist Oswaldo Payá showed foreign reporters in Havana two small microphones he said he found inside the telephone junction boxes in the walls of his bedroom and dining room. "We are indignant that such a low method was used against a family's home," Payá, leader of a signature drive for a referendum on democratic reforms, told the reporters. Laura Pollán, wife of jailed independent journalist Héctor Maseda, said that she had found a listening device hidden in the telephone box in her dining room -- a frequent gathering spot for visitors. "It's a tiny rectangular chip," Pollán told the press. "It's not a complete surprise because I've always suspected they listened to my conversations. But when I actually found [the device], I was somewhat stunned. All I could do was laugh." (*The Miami Herald*, 13/12/04)

**December 15:** The leader of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, Marta Beatriz Roque, said that the Spanish government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has been invited to attend that organization's general meeting in Havana on May 20. The meeting will gather some 300 dissident organizations on the island. "The meeting is open to all wishing to attend (...) we have invited other organizations which are not members of the Assembly such as those led by Vladimiro Roca and the Lawton Foundation— founded by Oscar Elías Biscet", added Roque. Likewise, "we have invited heads of state and governments from around the world, including Jacques Chirac, of France (...) and Zapatero, of Spain; but we have not received a reply as of yet." (*Europa Press*, 15/12/04)

**December 17:** Thousands of Cubans walked, crawled or literally dragged themselves to the St. Lazarus shrine in one of the most public outpourings of religious faith in Cuba. Many devout pilgrims were dressed in clothing fashioned out of burlap sacks, a sign of respect and act of penance for the humble saint who seems to have a special following among the poor. The pilgrimage is a raucous affair, blending elements of a street party with stunning displays of devotion in a communist nation that has become more tolerant of religion. Along the road to the shrine, teenagers drank rum and danced to hip-hop, rock and salsa music while couples pushed baby strollers and quietly held candles and flowers as offerings to St. Lazarus and his Afro-Cuban counterpart, Babalu Aye. (*Chicago Tribune*, 17/12/04)

**December 18:** "Whisky", a film by Juan Pablo Rebella and Pablo Stoll, won the First Coral Prize for Uruguay at the 26 th International Film Festival of New Latin American Cinema held in Havana, while "Punto y raya", by Elia Schneider, won the Jury's Special Prize and the Coral for Best Actor for Venezuela. Cuban films only managed to win the Third Coral Prize in the documentaries category and the Third Coral Prize for animation. (*Granma*, 18/12/04)

**December 18:** Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, Thoraya Obaid, praised Cuba for advances made in sexual and reproductive health. "What I have seen in the island in terms of sanitary conditions, reproductive and sexual health, as well as education is something I have not observed in any other country I visited in the past," said Obaid, of Saudi Arabia, who is on a three-day visit to the island. She noted that nearly all Cuban children are in school, the health services have a universal character, and the dangerous pandemic of HIV/AIDS is kept at a low rate of incidence, thanks to a correct government strategy. (*Xinhua*, 18/12/04)

**December 20:** Three youths, Alexis Pérez Ricardo, Yordanis Hernández and Angel Millan, were brutally attacked and beaten by combined forces of the police and the so-called "Brigadas de Respuesta Rápida" (*Rapid Response Brigades*)

after attending a patriotic ceremony organized by the Christian Democratic Party. They were intercepted on the street by over 20 people chanting pro-government slogans, who threw rocks at them and beat them with sticks. (*Cubamet*, 20/12/04)

**December 21:** Custom officers at the Havana José Martí airport seized a chess set whose pieces were made of cocaine, reported the daily *Granma*. Since the beginning of 2000 until July this year, Cuban custom officers have uncovered 92 drug-trafficking operations, mainly cocaine. (*AFP*, 21/12/04)

**December 21:** Moderate dissidents launched a new magazine called "Consensus," saying it was necessary to expand the spectrum of opinions presented in Cuba's state-run media. The idea is to create a space "where people with positive projects for our country can be published," said activist Reinaldo Escobar, in charge of news for the magazine. "We think that a better Cuba is possible," he added. Escobar was joined by other opponents of Fidel Castro's government, including Manuel Cuesta Morua, and Eloy Gutierrez-Menoyo, a former exile. "Consensus" was presented in the headquarters of a state-owned construction company, which is unusual for a dissident activity. Government opponents generally don't hold public gatherings, especially not in state-controlled offices. (*AP*, 21/12/04)

**December 21:** With support from other dissident organizations, members of the Liberal Democratic Party of Cuba (PLDC) went on a fast in solidarity with Héctor Maseda, president of the PLDC, who is in the La Pendiente Prison, in Santa Clara. The protesters demanded his release. (*Cubamet*, 21/12/04)

**December 22:** Delegates to the Cuban Parliament, meeting in 10 permanent commissions, discussed different topics, as a prior step to the 4th session period of the current legislative body. The agenda included a discussion on international affairs, as well as other issues on services, health and sports, education, culture, constitutional and legal affairs, national defense, science, technology and the environment. Parallel to this, the economic affairs commission will debate behind closed doors the budget plan for 2005, which will be discussed and approved by legislators. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** The need for youngsters to have access to sexual and reproductive health services and information has been a subject of heated debate in the workshop "Cuba, Ten Years After Cairo", organized by the United Nations Population Fund, among other institutions. Juan Carlos Alfonso, a National Statistics Office (ONE) official who coordinated the meeting, said a number of the goals set in Cairo for 2015 had already been met in Cuba even before the 1994 conference. According to ONE, Cuba already had a life expectancy of 72.9 years for men and 76.9 for women in 1994, while maternal mortality stood at 42.8 per 100,000 live births, and dropped to 33.9 per 100,000 by 2001. But even more difficult than preventing maternal deaths is the challenge of getting Cuban women to stop regarding abortion as a birth control method, or to overcome the widespread resistance to using condoms, a reluctance that cuts across gender and sexual orientation lines. The case of Cuba shows that guaranteeing services, rights and resources is only part of the long road towards full sexual and reproductive health and rights. The challenge now in this country of 11.2 million is to bring about cultural changes that would make it possible to maintain the gains achieved so far and to continue making progress. (*IPS*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** The Cuban Parliament's ten working commissions continued in Havana with discussions on Cuba's economic development and government's response to difficulties during 2004. Participating in the parliamentary session were Ministers, Deputy Ministers, Directors and representatives of different institutions of the State's Central Administration responsible for evaluating the performance of the different sectors. The Economic and Social guidelines and the State's Budget Law for 2005 were also debated at Havana's International Convention Center. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** State Security agents seized several documents from activist Fredesvinda Hernández, coordinator of the Varela Project campaign in San Cristóbal, Pinar del Río. Among the documents seized were several issues of the

“Revista Hispano Cubana” (Spanish-Cuban Magazine) and a draft list of the signatories of the copy of the Varela Project which was submitted to the National Assembly in 2002. (*Cubanet*, 22/12/04)

**December 23:** Cheered by hundreds of lawmakers, a smiling Fidel Castro walked in public for the first time since shattering his kneecap in a fall two months ago. Legislators looked stunned, then smiled and applauded, when Cuba's 78-year-old president entered the main auditorium of the Convention Palace on the arm of a schoolgirl to attend a year-end National Assembly meeting. "Long live Fidel!" a lone deputy shouted as Castro took his seat, followed by a shout of "Long live a free Cuba!" (*The Boston Globe*, 24/12/04)

**December 23:** Shortly after dissidents launched a new magazine, the Cuban government retaliated by confiscating various books and written documents, a political activist said. Manuel Cuesta Morua, a well-known dissident who helped present the magazine "Consensus", said authorities entered the house of his former partner that night and took all of the books, writings and computer discs he had left there. "It's a clear and direct message of intolerance," Cuesta Morua said in a statement. According to the activist, authorities presented a search warrant and said they took the belongings "to look for counterrevolutionary literature." They said they believed there were documents connected to US institutions, he said. (*AP*, 24/12/04)

**December 25:** The 2004 Social Sciences National Award has been granted to academic and researcher Salvador Bueno Menéndez - also former president of the Cuban Academy of Language. On explaining their decision, the jury mentioned Bueno's studies of Cuban literature and his contribution to the national literary identity. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 25/12/04)

**December 24:** A fire broke out and various explosions occurred at an ammunition warehouse in Coliseo municipality in the western Cuban province of Matanzas. According to a release from the Armed Forces Ministry (MINFAR), there were no casualties in the incident, and investigations are being carried out. MINFAR and the Civil Defense decreed the temporary evacuation of several families. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/12/04)

**December 25:** The Cuban public healthcare system is undergoing profound changes. New ideas and concepts are being implemented with the purpose of bringing medical specialties closer to the community, and providing a service of excellence. A key element of these transformations has been the refurbishing of polyclinics. Over 200 physiotherapy gyms have been opened, and by the end of 2005, all of the polyclinics will have this service available. (*AIN*, 25/12/04)

**December 26:** Cuba has become something of an anomaly in Latin America: a destination for sex tourists where AIDS has yet to become an uncontrollable pandemic. Cuba has the lowest infection rate in the Western Hemisphere, less than 0.1 percent of the population, according to the World Health Organization. That is not to say the disease is not spreading in Cuba, and some outside the government say a thriving sex industry has contributed to its spread. Cuban health officials acknowledge that the number of infections has increased, as in most countries, but they say the overall rate is very low for a population of 11 million. UN officials who track AIDS say Cuba has done a better job than most countries at corralling the disease. "They have a very good medical infrastructure, and people have access to care and prevention," said Paloma Cuchi, who oversees the UN AIDS program in Latin America. (*The New York Times*, 26/12/04)

**December 28:** Fidel Castro and Army General Raúl Castro were awarded Foreign Ministry's diplomas, acknowledging their contributions as founders of this institution, on the occasion of its 45th anniversary. During a special meeting at Havana's Convention Center, Raul Castro, on behalf of Fidel Castro and the Council of Ministers, sent a message of congratulation to the ministry workers, for their outstanding performance in the international arena over the years. Similar diplomas were also granted to a group of leaders, including Parliament President Ricardo Alarcón, while Ernesto Che Guevara, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, and Raúl Roa García were given post mortem recognition. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/12/04)

**December 30:** Shortages of schoolteachers and the need to fill teaching staff vacancies in schools were the central themes of debates during the plenary sessions of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party in Villa Clara. Although 921 schoolteachers have graduated in the last three years, that figure is still insufficient due to the number of teachers who leave the education sector and the shortage of students who enter teacher training, according to a report presented at the Plenary. (*Granma*, 31/12/04)

**December 30:** Celebration for the 46 th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban revolution began through January 2 with a wide range of cultural and recreational activities. Popular musical figures, together with famous foreign performers are participating in concerts, ballet galas, and outdoors dancing. Among the performers will be the Mahler Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Italian, Claudio Abbado, Cuban "trovador", Santiago Feliu, Cuban National Ballet, and renowned dance bands like Los Van Van and Adalberto Alvarez, among others. (*Radio Habana Cuba, Prensa Latina*, 30/12/04)

**December 30:** Two Cuban dissidents who were recently released after being behind bars since March 2003, say they do not feel free and want to leave the island, according to French newspaper Le Monde. "I don't feel free, as no Cuban is free, and parole is fictitious freedom," said Vazquez Portal, who was released in June for health reasons. In Cuba, "we have two options: exile or total silence," Vazquez said, because "the threat of returning to prison is always there." Jorge Olivera, like Vazquez, an independent journalist, was released on December 6. He said the government had been particularly spiteful toward him and his wife, Nancy, who was "constantly harassed" by state security so that she would stop talking to the press and taking part in the protests of the "women in white," as the dissidents' outspoken wives are known. "I have to think of my family, which has already suffered quite a bit. I hope to leave as soon as possible," Olivera said. But because Cuban state security took away his passport when he was arrested and now refuses to give it back, he has to request a new one, which entails a five-to-six month wait and "the need to find \$55 US dollars." (*EFE*, 30/12/04)

**December 31:** Cuba welcomed 2005 and the 46th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph by establishing a new tradition: 21-gun salute which marked the dawn of a new year. A communique was read at 12 midnight by a network of radio and TV stations which termed 2004 as a year of difficulties, efforts, fruitful achievements, the gigantic work of the Cuban population and promising news. It highlights solid collaboration and trade relations with China and deepening friendship with other nations, especially with Venezuela. In 2005, the document adds, Cuba will continue fighting for the idea of a united Latin America and for the liberation of the five Cubans prisoners in the United States, where they carried out anti-terrorist tasks by infiltrating what it considers to be violent emigration groups. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/12/04)

## **Economy**

**December 1:** Cuba has become the second major tourist destination for Canadian vacationers during the second quarter of this year, according to the Canadian Office of Statistics. Tourists from Canada preferred Cuba over Mexico and other vacation destinations. The Office of Statistics reports that from April to June, 143,000 Canadians visited the Caribbean island, where they stayed for an average 8.9 nights. This accounted for an 88.4 percent increase in contrast to the same period last year. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 1/12/04)

**December 1:** The Minister of the Economy of Guatemala, Mario Cuevas Quesada, has wrapped up an official visit to the island. During his three-day stay, the Guatemalan official met with Cuban Foreign Trade Minister Raúl de la Nuez and Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Minister Marta Lomas to review bilateral trade relations. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 1/12/04)

**December 2:** Cuba decided to grant import preferential duties to another 114 Guatemalan products, increasing the list of Guatemalan goods under this category to 502, according to an official source. Guatemalan Vice-Minister of Trade, Enrique Lacs, said the agreement was reached during a visit to Cuba by Economy Minister Marcio Cuevas. (*EFE*, 2/12/04)

**December 2:** Cuba and Bolivia signed five cooperation agreements on health and education during an official visit to Havana by Bolivian Foreign Minister Juan Ignacio Siles. The Cuban Foreign Minister confirmed that his Bolivian counterpart delivered a message to Fidel Castro from Bolivia's President Carlos Mesa. No further details were released. (*Europa Press*, 3/12/04)

**December 3:** Havana recently inaugurated a series of modern facilities to obtain biotechnological elements with which to produce more vaccines. The new centers are another example of the scientific possibilities and talent the island has developed in the sector over the past 45 years. The new high-tech labs are part of an extensive investment process backing the island's national Biotechnology Program to produce medicines. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 3/12/04)

**December 5:** Cuba is hoping that Bulgarian tour operators will begin generating tourist flows to their country. The news was known upon the return of Rumén Petkov, representative of the Bulgarian Socialists Party, from Cuba. Petkov pointed out that the Cuban authorities are also expecting that Bulgarian businessmen will join the management of Cuban tourism spots. Cuba's Tourism Ministry has declared special interest in ship construction and sea trade. Interest has also been shown in the field of energy and construction. (*Sofia News Agency*, 5/12/04)

**December 6:** Sandals Resorts International will manage the brand new five-star Princesa Del Mar hotel in Varadero, Cuba, bringing to three the number of resorts now being run by the all-inclusive chain in the Caribbean island. The 434-suite hotel came under Sandals management after Sandals and Gaviota, one of Cuba's largest and well-respected hotel companies, signed the management contract. "We are excited about this new development," said Sandals director Dr Jeffrey Pyne. "Our travel partners, particularly in Europe, the UK and Canada, have given tremendous support to our business in Cuba and we are thrilled to be able to include such a spectacular resort in our Cuban operations. We are looking forward with great enthusiasm to welcoming our guests to this special world-class facility." (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 6/12/04)

**December 7:** Venezuela has reached a preliminary agreement with Cuba to supply the Communist-ruled island with 500,000 tons of coal a year which will fuel a thermo-electric plant to be built by a Chinese company, a senior Venezuelan official said. China also was interested in building a plant to produce stainless steel on the Caribbean island which would use Cuban nickel and Venezuelan coal, Deputy Minister of Mines Orlando Ortega told the press. "We had a recent meeting in which we committed ourselves to providing 500,000 tons of coal a year for this Cuban-Chinese deal," Ortega said in an interview. He added the three parties had reached what he called a "pre-agreement" but could not say when the Venezuelan coal shipments could start. "The Cubans are interested because it will solve an energy problem in the south (of the island)," Ortega said. "Cuba has the nickel and we have the coal and the Chinese have the capital and are interested in a stainless steel plant," he added. (*Reuters*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuba and the Dominican Republic expressed their wish to increase bilateral relations, including those on trade, during a meeting in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic. At the headquarters of the Center for the Promotion of Imports and Exports, officials of the two countries expressed their interest in increasing trade, according to the reports received in Havana. Diplomatic sources said the value of the commercial exchange between Havana and Santo Domingo amounts to nearly 50 million US dollars, which should double as a consequence of the results of the Bilateral Commission which convened in Santo Domingo last November. (*Xinhuanet*, 7/12/04)

**December 10:** Cuba's sugar harvest began with the drought-ravaged crop estimated at no more than 1.8 million tonnes, compared with 2.52 million tonnes a year ago, industry sources said. The last time Cuba, one of the world's largest

sugar exporters, produced less than 1.8 million tonnes of sugar was in 1909. Just four of 65 mills were scheduled to open this month, with the rest coming on line in January and February, a top sugar reporter, Juan Varela Perez, said in a daily radio spot. (*Reuters*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** Iranian Minister of labor and Social Affairs Nasser Khaleqi met with Cuban Minister of Sugar Industry Rosales Toro Ulises, discussing ways to bolster sugar industry cooperation. According to a report released by the Iranian Embassy in Havana, the Cuban and Iranian officials reached consensus to expand research cooperation and share experiences in the field of sugar cane industry. (*IRNA*, 10/12/04)

**December 13:** Cuban sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro announced 23 mills would remain closed during harvest just getting underway, confirming reports that drought had hurt this year's crop, the official daily *Granma* said. Rosales, opening the harvest over the weekend, urged increased industrial efficiency to maintain output at the previous harvest's 2.52 million tonnes of raw sugar, despite the unanimous opinion of local experts that production will not exceed 1.8 million tonnes, the lowest since 1909. "The minister insisted efficiency was a determining factor to counter possible low yields that the intense drought has caused sugar plantations," *Granma* said. The harvest usually begins in November or December and runs into May, but Cuba is in the grip of the worst drought in 40 years, according to the government. Rosales said just three mills would open this month, 46 in January and six in February. There were 85 mills opened during the previous harvest, 79 of which produced raw sugar and the remainder derivatives. (*Reuters*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Cuban Government Minister, Ricardo Cabrisas is in Moscow with the purpose of expanding bilateral exchange. The agenda of the also President of the Cuba-Russia Intergovernmental Commission for Economic and Commercial Cooperation will be extended for a further five days and will include meetings with official government authorities. Cabrisas will also meet with Russian Foreign Minister, Serguei Lavrov and with the official in charge of Russia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Evgueni Primakov. The Cuban official will also meet Russian deputies and representatives of the Ministry of Economy and Trade as well as the Association of Industrial and Financial Groups. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/12/04)

**December 14:** Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez have deepened their strategic alliance with a range of new agreements that guarantee a price floor for Venezuelan oil at \$27 a barrel, open wide doors to Venezuelan capital and exports, provide Venezuela with more than 15,000 Cuban doctors and health specialists, and set out the mutual opening of state bank subsidiaries, among other important political and economic provisions. The agreements also provide that Venezuelan investments on the island will retain 100% of property rights, as well as complete elimination of tariffs and import duties for imports from Venezuela, tax exemption for all Venezuelan capital in Cuba while investments costs are recovered, and 2,000 higher education scholarships in Cuba for Venezuelan students in any field annually. The 15,000 Cuban doctors in Venezuela will also be training specialists in that country. (*La Jornada*, 16/12/04)

**December 14:** Cuba has reopened its border to Canadian beef and beef products of any age, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has confirmed. Canadian officials hope the agreement, which also includes the importation of certain Canadian pet food, will lead to the reopening of the border to live Canadian cattle. "This is a very important gain for Canada," Agriculture and Agri-Food Minister Andy Mitchell said in a statement. "We continue to make progress internationally, and this agreement further demonstrates the level of confidence that our trading partners have in Canada's human and animal health safeguards." The Cuban border will remain closed to mechanically separated meat, vertebral column, trimmings, and tissues derived from the head, the CFIA said in a news release. (*CTV.Ca*, 15/12/04)

**December 15:** Over 1,000 people have been evacuated in the eastern Cuban province of Holguín due to floods caused by the Sagua de Tanamo river, swelled by 300-mm rainfalls. Castro and Santa Teresa, two of Sagua de Tanamo river's tributaries, forced neighbors to seek refuge with friends and relatives or resort to government shelters. Damages to

agriculture have not been yet assessed in coffee-producing areas. Holguín has been suffering the worst drought in 50 years, forcing authorities to adopt measures to guarantee water supply to the population, and secure productions and services. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/12/04)

**December 15:** Cuba's economy grew by 3.0 pct in 2004, according to the preliminary annual report of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). The country managed to post the economic growth in 2004 despite the continuous drought and damages caused by the hurricanes. Another adverse impact on the Cuban economy in 2004 was caused by the energy crisis, ECLAC added. One of the main problems of Cuba in 2004 was the currency deficit caused by the higher crude oil prices and lower foreign investments to Cuba, said ECLAC. The fiscal deficit of the country totaled 3.5 pct in 2004, almost unchanged from 3.4 pct in 2003. The current revenue expanded 9.6 pct year-on-year in 2004. The current account deficit dropped to 0.3 pct of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2004. [[Balance Preliminar de las Economías de América Latina y el Caribe.pfd](#)] (*Latin America News Digest*, 16/12/04)

**December 20:** Cuba hosted the Thomas Cook World Tour "Cuba's 2004", aimed at promoting the Caribbean island's attractions in the German market. The event, sponsored by the tour operator Thomas Cook, contributed to the effort to turn Cuba into one of the main destinations for German vacationers. Sources from the tourism sector said that during their stay in Cuba, the German tour operators visited resorts and tourist facilities in various parts of the Caribbean island. (*CubaXP*, 20/12/04)

**December 21:** Cuba's exports were up 37 percent as of October 2004 compared with the same period last year, according to state media reports citing figures from the communist government's Foreign Trade Ministry. About 74 % of those exports were comprised of products traditionally sold abroad, such as nickel, sugar, tobacco and rum, the Communist Youth's Juventud Rebelde newspaper said. According to the Juventud Rebelde report, nickel was the main export, totaling 61 % of all Cuban exports. The remaining exports were nontraditional products such as generic medicines, steel and even bee's honey. Primary destinations for Cuban exports are Netherlands, receiving 28 percent of the island's exports, followed by Canada, Venezuela, Russia, Spain and China. There are 239 Cuban firms that export products abroad, 137 of them fully government owned and operated and another 102 run by the government in conjunction with foreign capital and management. (*AFP, AP*, 21/12/04)

**December 22:** Cuban parliamentarians expressed concern over soil degradation, which affects 70% of farmland on the island, indicated the official press. The National Assembly's Commission on Education, Culture, Science, Technology and the Environment heard a report by Abilio Cárdenas, director of the Ministry of Agriculture's Soil Institute, who said those soils suffer from the effects of erosion, acidity, salinisation, low organic matter, reduced fertility and poor drainage. (*AFP*, 22/12/04)

**December 23:** Cuban tourism and the economy overall continued the steady growth of recent years in 2004 despite a pair of devastating hurricanes, increased US sanctions and higher oil prices, the island's top economic planner said. In his annual year-end report, Economics Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez told Cuba's National Assembly that 2004 had been "extraordinarily difficult" in part because of more than US\$2 billion (\$A2.61 billion) in damage caused by Hurricanes Charley and Ivan. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, using traditional criteria for calculating gross national product, reported that Cuba's economy grew 3 per cent in 2004. Growth was 2.6 per cent the year before. Rodriguez, using a different formula Cuban planners devised to take into consideration the communist nation's broad social safety net and heavily subsidized services, said the economy grew 5 per cent this year. Rodriguez said the government's expectations for 2005 were low for the sugar industry. The news was brighter for nickel. Rodriguez projected production would reach 77,000 metric tons next year to be sold at favourable prices on the international market. (*AP*, 23/12/04)

**December 23:** For 2005, Cuban authorities have earmarked \$1.469 billion for defence, out of a total budget of 22.704 billion. The Cuban government also announced further centralization of the economy. The Minister of Economy, José Luis Rodríguez, said that proper functioning of the economy requires "increased centralization of important economic decisions". Similarly, the President of the Parliamentary Economic Commission, Osvaldo Martínez, indicated that in a centralized regime "business efficiency, rather than diminish, would increase". "Among the main objectives for 2005 is increasing the country's defence capabilities", added Rodríguez. (*AFP*, 23/12/04)

**December 24:** A Swiss company in the business of information technology solutions for Latin America launched a website dedicated to money transfers to Cuba. The new service is provided by AWS Technologies SA through its web page and will be marked by its personalized attention, speed and efficiency, said the company. Any user having a credit card can use the new service to send money to family or friends in Cuba, where the money can be withdrawn in US dollars or in Cuban convertible currency in offices available throughout the island. (*AIN*, 24/12/04)

**December 25:** The budget and development guidelines for 2005 were approved in the last ordinary session of the Cuban Parliament. Fidel Castro attended the session to pass the 2005 budget, which assigned over two-thirds of the earmarked sum to social programs. Allocations for education, health and social assistance, culture, sports, sciences and technology amount to 10.5 billion pesos (same as US dollars in the current official exchange), and account for 68 percent of expenditures included in the budget. Education (4.1 billion pesos), health and new programs to improve medical and assistance services (2.3 billion pesos) and payments for social security pensions (2.3 billion pesos) registered the highest increases compared to 2003. Allocations for these three sectors rose by 11.3 percent, 9.4 percent and 5 percent, respectively. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/12/04)

**December 25:** Fidel Castro told his country's National Assembly that he had "good news" regarding the beleaguered economy, including announcements of unprecedented investments in nickel mining, the discovery of oil deposits and Venezuela and China's pledges to extend major loans as well as donate funds to the island. Castro made the announcements at the closing session of the 2004 Congress, at which the government budget and other economic and social plans were adopted, according to a summary published in the local press next day. China will be extending close to \$2 billion in loans for joint nickel and nickel-iron mining ventures, he said. In addition, China has donated \$6.1 million for the purchase of fabrics for school uniforms and a similar amount for hospital and medical equipment, and extended unspecified credit toward the purchase of television sets. Cuba's own resources plus an oil agreement in the works with Venezuela, Cuba's principal ally in Latin America, should ensure that the island's fuel needs are fully met in 2005, he said. In return, Cuba will provide a range of services - including medical care - to the South American country on "substantially preferential terms." Venezuela's state-owned PDVSA oil company is negotiating the partial purchase of Cuba's oil refinery at Cienfuegos and the possibility of forming a three-way partnership with China to produce stainless steel in Venezuela, among other projects. (*EFE*, 26/12/04)

**December 25:** An oil deposit with an estimated 100-million-barrel reserve has been discovered off Cuba's coast by Canadian companies Sherritt International Corp. and Pebercan Inc., Fidel Castro said. "We have a new oil discovery (...) the first since 1999," Castro said during a closed-door speech to parliament deputies, parts of which were carried by official media next day. "The oil has a density of 18 API (...) and contains less than 5 percent sulfur," he said, pointing out it was of better quality than the heavy crude associated with the area, which averages 16 API and 8 percent sulfur. The new Santa Cruz field, 33 miles east of the capital, will go into production in 2006, Castro said, while the Canadian firms will drill two new test wells, and explore three other potential deposits nearby in 2005. (*Reuters, The Globe and Mail*, 26/12/04)

**December 25:** Cuba and Yemen have signed a protocol to strengthen cooperation in sectors such as health, agriculture, sports, higher education and radio and television as part of the 17th session of the Inter- governmental Joint Commission that concluded in Havana. (*AIN, Radio Habana Cuba*, 25/12/04)

**December 26:** Cuba's tourism minister said that 2 million people visited the Caribbean island so far this year, achieving a long sought after goal despite US efforts to undermine the country's main foreign exchange earner. "This year the US government increased the unjust blockade imposed on our country and pledged to affect the unstoppable development of our industry," Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero said. "These 2 million visitors represent an 8 percent increase over last year and are one more demonstration that Cuba is not alone," he added. Tourism and related activities earned revenues of \$2.1 billion in 2003 and those earnings increased 15 percent this year, Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said earlier in the week. "The tourism industry accounted for 4 percent of foreign exchange earnings in 1990 and 41 percent this year," Marrero said. Last year, about 1.9 million foreigners visited Cuba. Canadians top the list of tourists, followed by Europeans, primarily from Italy, France, Germany and Spain. (*Reuters, AP, 26/12/04*)

**December 28:** Cuba has informed that the metallurgical and mechanical industry increased its exports by 16% in 2004. The Vice-Minister of the industry, Vicente De la O Levi, said that exports of that sector – heavy machinery – amounted to \$90 million in the year coming to a close, which is an "all-time record". (*Granma, 28/12/04*)

**December 29:** Despite having achieved full-employment category three years ago, Cuba is developing new policies to tackle remnants of unemployment in 2005, according to its Labor and Social Security Minister, Alfredo Morales. "Without losing this category in any way, we admit there is still 2 percent of unemployed people, though the entire population has access to jobs or education," assured Morales. (*Prensa Latina, 29/12/04*)

**December 30:** Moving to further centralize the communist state's control over the economy, the government's Central Bank announced that individual state companies would no longer handle foreign exchange. Beginning January 1 st, a single government account will be established for foreign currency and for convertible Cuban pesos, an exchangeable currency that trades 1-1 to the US dollar and that is now used as the primary form of legal tender on the island. Under a series of steps to be introduced in the coming months, state enterprises will relinquish control over foreign exchange and convertible Cuban peso accounts. Any profits from sales or services will have to be deposited into that single government account. Also, a state company that now wishes to buy any goods or services available only in foreign currency will need special approval from a new Foreign Exchange Approval Committee. A note signed by bank chief Francisco Soberon and published in daily official Granma said that, "next year, there will be a considerable increase in financial in-flows from abroad," thanks to deals with China, Venezuela and an oil exploration and production deal with Canada's Sherritt International Corp. (*AP, AFP, The Globe and Mail, National Post, 30/12/04*)

**December 30:** Cubans are bidding farewell to 2004 with a mixture of anxiety over the difficulty of making ends meet under the current economic conditions and hope that the economic growth reflected in official statistics will translate into improved quality of life. Insufficient income and nutrition are among the most serious problems affecting daily life in Cuba, according to a study conducted in 2003 by the National Institute for Economic Research. But in his year-end report to the Cuban national assembly (parliament), Economy Minister José Luis Rodríguez said that the average daily nutritional consumption in 2004 was 3,305 calories and 85.5 grams of protein. According to Rodríguez, these rates are above the minimum required levels established by experts at the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). For the second consecutive year, the government used a methodology that factors in social services like health care and education that are provided free of charge to the country's 11.2 million inhabitants when calculating this past year's economic growth. According to the government's estimate, Cuba experienced a five percent increase in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2004 - two percentage points higher than the growth predicted by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). (*IPS, 30/12/04*)

**December 31:** Sherritt International Corp. has confirmed "promising" exploration results from an offshore oil prospect in Cuba, but made no predictions as to when or if the prospect could be brought into production. Shares of Sherritt and exploration partner Calgary-based Pebercan Inc. soared following reports of a joint oil discovery in Cuba. The discovery is in Block 7, an area off the northwest coast of Cuba. Sherritt, the largest foreign oil producer in Cuba, holds

a 45-per-cent working interest in Block 7. Pebercan holds the remaining 55-per-cent stake and is the operator. (*The Globe and Mail*, 31/12/04)

**December 31:** Iran's ambassador to Havana Ahmad Edrisian, meeting with Cuban Minister of Government Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz conferred on the establishment of the 10th Iran-Cuba Joint Economic Commission slated for January 2005. Cabrisas who is also the chairman of the Iran-Cuba Joint Economic Commission welcomed the expansion of relations between the two countries particularly in areas such as commerce, waterworks and transportation, and referred to the joint commission as an opportune and important chance for exchanging views and paving the grounds for the implementation of joint venture projects as well as signing banking agreements. (*MNA*, 31/12/04)

### **Exile Community**

**December 15:** A granddaughter of Fidel Castro pledged allegiance to the United States at a giant citizenship ceremony in Miami Beach. Alina "Mumin" Salgado, 26, daughter of Alina Fernández, one of Castro's daughters in exile, was among the 6,000 people who became US citizens at one of two mass naturalization ceremonies at the Miami Beach Convention Center. The new American declined to comment. (*The Miami Herald*, 17/12/04)

**December 16:** South Florida's prominent sugar-producing Fanjul family is seeking "trading with the enemy" sanctions against Sotheby's, claiming the famed auction house knows -- but won't tell -- the whereabouts of a family painting expropriated by Fidel Castro's government. The "Malaga Port" seaside rendition by Spanish impressionist Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida is believed to have been smuggled out of Havana within the past 16 years and obtained by an art dealer in Italy. The Fanjuls, who left behind most of their possessions when they fled Cuba following Castro's rise to power in 1959, would like to recover the artwork that hung on the second floor of their Havana home. (*The Miami Herald*, 16/12/04)

**December 19:** After four years of planning, work is set to begin on an airport memorial for the anti-Castro aviators who died in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Cuban Pilots Association president Amado Cantillo, who fought with the invasion force on the beach, said the idea came when he realized that the Liberation Air Force was the only group from Brigade 2506 that didn't have its own memorial. "We came back and there were monuments for the infantries and monuments for the Navy," Cantillo said, "and no monuments for the pilots." When construction begins, likely by next spring, a four-column monument made of white Carrara marble will be erected. It will stand 20 feet tall and 30 feet long and wide. Inscribed on the columns will be the names of the fourteen men who died fighting Cuban forces -- along with the other pilots from Brigade 2506. (*The Miami Herald*, 19/12/04)

**December 28:** Beginning in 2005, Cuba will increase to \$350 the cost of issuing a passport to Cubans living abroad -- a three-fold increase compared to current rates. The new rates will enter into force on January 1 st and will affect all Cuban residents outside the island. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 28/12/04)

**December 29:** Time's up, it seems, for the Che Guevara watch at the New York Public Library. The week before Christmas, the library stopped selling the watch, which had infuriated many Cuban-Americans and others who complained of what they called the continuing transformation of the murderous Guevara into a pop-culture icon. A spokeswoman for the library, Tina Hoerenz, said, "Once an item is out of stock, we take it off the Web site, and in this case we don't have any plans to reorder it at this time." The library would not provide further comment, and neither apologized for having sold the watch nor acknowledged the outrage of Cuban-Americans and others who sent letters to the library protesting the watch's sale. (*The New York Times*, 29/12/04)

**December 30:** Representatives of the platform Cuba Democracy Now presented a document comprised of 15 points to the Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos during an hour meeting to discuss human rights under Fidel Castro's regime. It was the second such meeting following one in October with the opposition platform, which links groups of dissidents and Cuban exiles. On that occasion, Moratinos urged the opposition to have confidence in the new policy of detente with Castro conducted by the government of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. But members of the opposition group presented the Spanish foreign minister with a major programme of support for Cuban dissidents. (*AFP, Europa Press, 28/12/04*)

## Foreign Affairs

**December 1:** Former President Vaclav Havel welcomed the release of Cuban author Raul Rivero and four other dissidents, his secretary said. Havel's secretary, Jakub Hladik, said Havel, himself a former dissident, called the Cuban's release good news. "Rivero's release is a very good news," he quoted Havel as saying. "It's also a good sign that something is happening in Cuba." (*AP, 1/12/04*)

**December 1:** France hailed the recent release from prison of Cuban dissident journalist and poet Raúl Rivero and called for the release of "all prisoners of conscience" on the island. "We welcome the recent releases of the last few days, particularly Raúl Rivero's", said the deputy spokesperson of the French Foreign Ministry, Cecile Pozzo di Borgo. "We continue to hope for the release of all prisoners of conscience in Cuba", she added. (*AFP, 1/12/04*)

**December 1:** The heads of European Union diplomatic missions posted in Havana agreed on a document containing policy options to be examined during the revision of the community's common position on Cuba. Ambassadors and heads of diplomatic mission from the EU met to discuss the document requested from Brussels. The result of several meetings, the document will feed the debate on the issue on January 14. (*EFE, 1/12/04*)

**December 1:** Relations between Mexico and Cuba have improved and a positive atmosphere has set in after a diplomatic scuffle between the two governments last May, said Mexico's Ambassador to Cuba, Roberta Lajous. "(Relations) have improved ... and we are now looking into the future", said Lajous to the press. (*AP, 1/12/04*)

**December 2:** "The new South African Experiences, Ten Years After the End of Apartheid" was the title of a seminar held in Havana. Sponsored by the South African embassy in Havana and the Cuban Friendship Institute, the meeting was held at Havana's elegant Hotel Nacional. Among the participants was former South African freedom fighter, Ruth Segomotsi Mompati. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 2/12/04*)

**December 2:** Spain's Socialist government defended the soundness of its efforts to renew dialogue with Cuba's Communist regime and denied that the new tack is "conditioned" by demands from Fidel Castro. "The effort to renew dialogue (with Cuba) should not be the object of scorn or disdain," Francisco Javier Sandomingo, who is in charge of Spain's Latin American policy, said during a round table discussion on EU policy and human rights in Cuba. Sandomingo insisted that "our policy is not conditioned by Cuban gestures," and emphasized that the path taken by the administration of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero toward dialogue with Cuba had led to the recent release of imprisoned dissidents. "Let anyone ask these 12 dissidents (...) if they're better off than they were 15 days ago," Sandomingo said, referring to the release of poet-journalist Raul Rivero and other opponents of the Castro regime. (*EFE, 2/12/04*)

**December 3:** The German government is expecting further gestures from Cuba before supporting further dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Havana, according to government sources. (*EFE, 3/12/04*)

**December 3:** Slovakia and Cuba are embroiled in a diplomatic squabble following the Cuban ambassador's describing as a "miserable manipulation" a note the president of the European nation's parliament, Pavol Hrusovsky, sent her government requesting information on a political prisoner, Luis Ferrer, a prisoner of conscience of the Communist regime. The Cuban ambassador to Slovakia, Caridad Yamiri Cueto Milian, replied to Hrusovsky saying, "the reservations expressed in your letter have no legitimacy or value whatsoever in the eyes of Cuba and its government." "We are convinced Slovak citizens will, at the proper time, judge the way you have employed the parliamentary mandate entrusted to you in a miserable manipulation," she added. (*EFE*, 3/12/04)

**December 3:** Cuban doctor Hilda Molina, who for over a decade has not been able to visit her son and grandchildren who reside in Buenos Aires, has stated that she does not want "any problems to exist between Cuba and Argentina" and reaffirmed her desire to continue living on the island even if her travel abroad is authorized. The doctor, during a dialogue with the press, preferred to somewhat downplay the problem that arose over the statements made by Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa, who said he had "hope and reasonable belief that Molina would be able to spend this Christmas with her grandchildren and with her son". "I thank the foreign minister very much; he has expressed himself in such a way, with extreme compassion, a form of support that my son had never received in Argentina," she said sitting in an armchair in her modest apartment located in downtown Havana. (*Telam*, 5/12/04)

**December 4:** The organization Solidarity Without Borders (SSF) revealed that some 500 Cuban doctors have defected in Venezuela and presented two doctors who claimed to have left that country two weeks earlier. The government of President Hugo Chavez promotes the so-called 'Plan Barrio Adentro'. "We promote 'Plan Barrio Afuera' to help these doctors escape the working slavery which has been imposed on them", said Dr. Julio Cesar Alfonso, president of SSF. (*DPA*, 4/12/04)

**December 5:** Diego Maradona left Cuba, interrupting his cocaine-addiction therapy to spend Christmas at home with his family in defiance of his doctor's advice. The 44-year-old Argentinean soccer great was whisked into the airport by security personnel and avoided the press before boarding a flight to Panama, where he was expected to transfer for Argentina. His doctor, Alfredo Cahe, told the press that he opposed Maradona's decision to disrupt his treatment at the Havana clinic. Cuban authorities and those treating him had no comment. (*Reuters*, 5/12/04)

**December 6:** Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and Guinea's Mamady Conde held official talks, as part of the African diplomat's visit to Havana. Conde told the press that the purpose of his visit is to boost bilateral cooperation links, especially in public health, construction and higher education. He also thanked Cuba for its support, which has allowed dozens of Guineans to study on the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/12/04)

**December 6:** Cuba opened its Panama consulate some three months after breaking off diplomatic relations with that country to protest the Mireya Moscoso government's pardoning of four Cubans previously convicted of plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro, the Panamanian Foreign Ministry said. Panama will reopen its consulate in Havana on December 13, the ministry added. (*EFE*, 6/12/04)

**December 6:** Luis Conde Morales, a member of the Democratic Party November 30 "Frank País" retained at the Center for Refugees in the Bahamas, said that all the Cubans at the camp (58 in total) began a hunger strike -- with the exception of the two children also retained in the camp. They are protesting that Bahaman authorities are not providing them with sufficient food. Conde Morales said that the food Cubans receive at the camp has been progressively reduced, to the point of having a piece of bread and some tea for breakfast, and another piece of bread, on this occasion with fish, for lunch. These actions forced the Cubans to start a hunger strike because he said that, "not eating anything is similar to eating very little". (*Netfor Cuba*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuba's well-known dissident, the Christian Democrat Oswaldo Paya, warned the European Union (EU) not to change its common position and give concessions to the communist government in regard to human rights. "The

political dialogue must have the goals of the release of political prisoners in the short term and then democratic reforms," the 2002 laureate of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize told the press in Havana. Paya called the European Union measures "symbolic actions of moral worth", but are not by any means tough. "It was the Cuban government, that broke off contacts to the European Union embassies, because they invited us," Paya said referring to a symbolic move to invite dissidents to national festivities at EU embassies. He hailed Germany's withdrawal from the Havana book fair earlier this year as being appropriate "in a country where people sit in prison because they write what they think". (*DPA*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** French President Jacques Chirac used a bilateral summit meeting with Spain to describe the recent freeing of several Cuban political prisoners as a "positive effect" arising from Spanish attempts to soften the EU line on relations with Havana. Although Washington continues to support a tough line on Cuba, Chirac praised Spain for its attempts to restore dialogue with Havana. "Truth does not always necessarily come from the mouth of some (US) State Department official," said a smiling Chirac when asked to comment on a recent accusation by US Undersecretary of State for Latin American affairs Roger Noriega that Madrid was making "concessions" to Cuba. Chirac, speaking after wide-ranging talks with his host, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, said that France "perfectly approved" a policy designed to establish a dialogue with Havana. "I note that this policy has had positive effects with the freeing of several personalities," said Chirac. (*EUObserver*, *AFP*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** A Cuban neurosurgeon who has been trying for 10 years to get permission from the island's Communist regime to visit her son in Argentina issued an appeal to the Spanish government to join Buenos Aires in lobbying Havana on her behalf. Hilda Molina's case has gained notoriety thanks to Argentine President Nestor Kirchner's efforts to persuade Cuban authorities to allow the physician to visit her son, Roberto Quiñones, in Buenos Aires and meet her daughter-in-law and grandchildren. In an interview with the press at her Havana home, Molina said she felt "hopeful" about finally being granted permission to visit her son in Argentina. Molina thanked Kirchner and Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa for their efforts in her behalf. "Now I have hope, because the Cuban government responded to the Spanish request to release the sick political dissidents. In this case, it's not a European government making the request but a Latin American one," she said. (*EFE*, 7/12/04)

**December 7:** Current chairman of the Caribbean Community, Grenada Prime Minister Keith Mitchell, said that Caricom "will continue to demonstrate solidarity with the people of Cuba". The pledge came in a statement on the eve of the second anniversary of "Caricom-Cuba Day", as determined at the December 8, 2003 special summit of Caricom and Cuban government leaders in Havana. This special annual calendar event is to commemorate the joint diplomatic relations first established with Cuba by four Caricom states on December 8, 1972-Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Guyana and Jamaica. (*Trinidad and Tobago Express*, 8/12/04)

**December 8:** Activities for the 32nd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and CARICOM continued with cultural galas in different Cuban universities. A delegation of the Caribbean Community is scheduled to visit higher education centers in Cuba, where youth from the region are studying different specialties. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 9/12/04)

**December 8:** In a Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement Cuba has condemned a campaign against the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. "This hysterical campaign against the United Nations has reached the point where voices in the US Congress are demanding the resignation of the secretary general, suspiciously echoed by certain mainstream media," the text reads. [[Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)] (*Granma International*, 8/12/04)

**December 9:** At least 20 people were injured, including 5 Cubans who were hospitalized, during a riot at the Carmichael Detention Centre in Nassau, Bahamas, where a group of detainees set a dormitory on fire and clashed with prison officers. A total of 48 Cubans, including two children, have been held at Carmichael since September, after being intercepted at sea en route to the United States. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** Cuba questioned that the UN Special Program on Education will teach the world infant population its rights when more than 140 million destitute children have never been to school. This was highlighted by Cuban alternate representative Rodney Lopez at a UN General Assembly special plenary meeting on human rights. (*Prensa Latina*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** The celebrations for the 32nd anniversary of Cuba- Caribbean Community (CARICOM) relations concluded with the creation of the Caribbean Professorship at the University of Havana. CARICOM delegates left the Cuban capital to travel to the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba where they will participate in a cultural gala. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** During a visit to London, the President of the Cuban Academy of Science, Dr. Ismael Clark, said that Great Britain and Cuba are strengthening their relations in the scientific-technical field. Clark's visit responds to an invitation by London's Royal Society, allowing him to visit scientific research centers and meetings with important figures. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** Reports of possible use of excessive force by law enforcement officials during a fire and confrontation at the Carmichael Detention Centre, in which 9 detainees and 11 soldiers were injured, underline the need for the Government of the Bahamas to establish an independent commission of inquiry into conditions at the Carmichael Detention Centre, said Amnesty International. Amnesty International has received reports that some detainees are alleging that several people, including women and children, were severely beaten with batons and that police prevented detainees from leaving the facility once the fire started. The authorities have stated that soldiers fired rubber rounds to restore order after detainees tried to secure and subsequently set fire to a room. A newspaper also published an unconfirmed report that one man sustained a gunshot wound. The action reportedly followed what appeared to be attempts by immigration staff and soldiers to remove Cuban detainees for deportation. (*AI Press Release*, 10/12/04)

**December 12:** The official visit Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was to pay to Cuba has been delayed one day due to unexpected work reasons, the local press reported. The Venezuelan Head of State will carry out an official, friendly visit to Cuba on December 13, at an invitation by his Cuban counterpart Fidel Castro, according to Juventud Rebelde newspaper. (*EFE, Prensa Latina*, 12/12/04)

**December 13:** A Cuban couple who have been granted political asylum in the Czech Republic, demonstrated in front of the Cuban Embassy in Prague in an effort to make communist Cuba allow their two small children to join them in the Czech Republic. Liuver Saborit and Mayda Arguelles arrived in the Czech Republic about 1.5 years ago and were granted Czech asylum last December. They say their children were left behind in Cuba, but the Cuban authorities do not want them to leave. "We haven't seen the children for 17 months," Saborit told the press. The couple were not received by authorities at the Cuban Embassy and they said are ready to launch a hunger strike if their efforts fail. (*CTK, El Nuevo Herald*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Fidel Castro welcomed his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chávez Frías at his arrival in Cuba on a friendly and official visit, the Granma newspaper reported. The Venezuelan president's trip comes 10 years after his first stay in Cuba, on December 13 and 14, 1994, the paper adds. Chavez' agenda includes an official welcoming ceremony at the Revolution Square where both governments' delegations will hold official talks. To mark the 10th anniversary of Chavez's first time in Cuba, a cultural gala will take place at Havana's Karl Marx Theater. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Panama reopened its consulate in Cuba, a measure President Martin Torrijos touted as a new step toward normalization of diplomatic relations with Havana, which were ruptured more than three months ago when the previous administration pardoned four Cuban-exile extremists. The Panamanian Foreign Ministry issued a statement

announcing the reopening of the consulate in Havana with Roberto Barrow in charge. The move comes a week-and-a-half after Cuba reopened its consulate in Panama with Consul Iraidá Guerrero at the helm. (*EFE*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Guatemala's Ministry of Health thanked the Cuban medical brigade working in that Central American nation for having saved over 64,000 dollars in repairs and maintenance of hospital equipment, according to Cuban AIN News Agency. This recognition was made by a health official to a group of Cuban specialists that participated in the 6th Scientific event organized by the 531 Cuban medical personnel offering their services in Guatemala, reported the Granma newspaper. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Neither the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky nor Speaker of the Czech Senate Petr Pithart support softening the European Union's stance towards Cuba. "We stated jointly that there is no reason to make such a change as in the area of respecting human rights, political and religious freedoms, virtually nothing has changed in Cuba," said the Speaker of Slovak Parliament. (*SITA*, 13/12/04)

**December 14:** The European Union's Committee on Latin America (COLAT) reached a consensus to recommend to the EU's 25 member states the suspension of the diplomatic sanctions imposed on Cuba in June 2003, Spanish diplomats said. COLAT recommended, as an alternative to the sanctions, that the EU seek a "strong dialogue with the opposition" to Fidel Castro's regime. According to the diplomats, the recommendation calls for the re-establishment of high-level visits to the island "at a regular rate." It also proposes that the EU temporarily suspend, until June 2005, invitations to dissidents to national celebrations organized by member states' embassies in Cuba. The EU also will not invite high-level Cuban government officials to such events. COLAT recommended that the EU end its policy of maintaining a low profile when staging European cultural events in Cuba. (*EFE*, 14/12/04)

**December 14:** Two acclaimed Cuban dissidents criticized the proposal emerging from a European Union committee to consider softening the hard line the bloc adopted against Cuba in mid-2003. Elizardo Sanchez, who heads the outlawed Cuban Human Rights Commission, told the press the recommendation from the EU's Committee on Latin America, or COLAT, "lacks a foundation." "The circumstances that led to the measures adopted by the EU continue to be the same, given that the Cuban government has not released the prisoners of conscience, except for several who were very sick. It keeps in effect the sentence of execution by firing squad and maintains around 50 convicts on death row," Sanchez said. Vladimiro Roca, of the banned opposition group Todos Unidos (All United), said he respects "the sovereignty of the EU and the decisions they reach." "The only thing I feel bad about is that they will again be lost with a distorted vision of the Cuban problem, in a mirage created by the ruler Fidel Castro," he said. According to Roca, the EU panel's recommendations do not reflect "the real Cuban problem". Regarding a return to dialogue between the EU and Cuba, Roca said "it has to be with the entire Cuban society and not just a part of it." (*EFE*, 14/12/04)

**December 14:** Cuba could enter the Kyoto Protocol's carbon market if it is able to keep up the current pace of reforestation, through which a full 30 percent of the island's territory would be covered with forests ten years from now. According to specialists in Cuba, the Caribbean island nation has developed the databases and trained the personnel needed to establish reforestation projects, but has yet to submit any concrete proposals for entering this new market. Some believe that the Kyoto Protocol could generate significant business opportunities involving the development of cleaner, more efficient technologies and the promotion of renewable energy sources. Cuban specialists, however, are less enthusiastic, and believe that the carbon market is not a real solution to environmental problems, but rather a negotiating tool. (*IPS*, 14/12/04)

**December 14:** Argentinean Foreign Minister, Rafael Bielsa, said that his government "expects respect from the United States, but from Cuba as well". "Dignity is not a one-way street, but a multi-lane highway", added Bielsa in the wake of Fidel Castro's refusal to accede to a personal request from President Néstor Kirchner to allow Cuban brain surgeon Hilda Molina to visit her son and grandchildren in Buenos Aires. (*La Nación*, 15/12/04)

**December 15:** Cuba and Venezuela rejected a US-inspired pan-American free trade zone saying that it would only make Latin American countries more dependent on the United States. Cuba's communist leader Fidel Castro instead signed an accord backing a rival trade zone sponsored by his leftist-populist Venezuelan ally, President Hugo Chavez. Cuba has been excluded from talks for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which the United States has strongly promoted. Venezuela has refused to join the process. The FTAA "is the most complete expression of the desire for domination over the region and, if it comes into action, will constitute a deepening of neo-liberalism, creating unprecedented levels of dependence and subordination," Castro and Chavez said in a statement. (*AFP*, 15/12/04)

**December 15:** At a meeting with US permanent representative to the Organisation of American States (OAS), Ambassador John Maisto, Jamaican Foreign Minister, K. D. Knight, urged the Bush administration "not to increase the isolation of Cuba through the Helms-Burton Act", according to a statement from the foreign ministry. "The Helms-Burton Act is an invidious piece of legislation. We got caught up in it through one of our hotel investors," Knight said, noting that the Caribbean Community (Caricom) had also added its voice for an inclusionary approach to Cuba. (*Jamaica Observer*, 16/12/04)

**December 15:** A SATA plane heading to Portugal from Cuba was forced to return to the island after a passenger found a message warning that a bomb was on board, a spokeswoman for the Portuguese airliner said. The message was later determined to be a hoax. The Airbus 310, which can carry up to 280 passengers, returned to the resort of Varadero shortly after takeoff and the passengers disembarked without incident, she said. The plane resumed its journey to Lisbon some five hours later after a police search of the plane found no evidence of a bomb. (*AFP*, 15/12/04)

**December 15:** Jamaica's Foreign Minister KD Knight has urged the United States to reconsider its position on Cuba. According to a Jamaican foreign ministry's statement, in a meeting with US permanent representative to the Organization of American States (OAS), Ambassador John Maisto, Knight called on the Bush administration not to increase the isolation of Cuba through the Helms-Burton Act. "The Helms-Burton Act is an invidious piece of legislation. We got caught up in it through one of our hotel investors," Knight said, noting that the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) had also added its voice for an inclusive approach to Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/12/04)

**December 16:** Russian Foreign Minister Serguei Lavrov welcomed Cuba's Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas who is on an official visit to Moscow aimed at expanding bilateral ties. Both sides will discuss issues for the next Intergovernmental Commission For Economic, Commercial and Scientific-Technical Cooperation to be held in Moscow in 2005. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 16/12/04)

**December 16:** Mr. Ruppert Missick Jr., a senior journalist of the Bahamas Tribune, gave confirmation on the number of Cuban nationals that were returned to the island from a detention center in the Bahamas. He confirmed that Immigration Authorities repatriated 28 of the 62 Cubans detained in the Carmichael Road Detention Center in Nassau. It was also confirmed that 3 of the 6 women were sent back to Cuba, among them was Eida Caballero and her two small children. Yanelys Acosta González, an activist with the Cuban Pro Human Rights Party affiliated to the Andrei Sajarov Foundation is one of the women that remain in the center along with three men, among them her husband Jesús Montes de Oca Martija, an activist with the same organization. (*Puente Informativo*, 16/12/04)

**December 15:** A Cuban doctor, denied permission to travel to Buenos Aires to visit relatives there, sought refuge in the Argentine Embassy in Havana, according to a newspaper report. Embassy officials declined to confirm that the woman, Dr. Hilda Molina, was inside the embassy. While the Argentine government remained silent about the case, the prominent Argentine daily La Nacion reported that Molina, a brain surgeon, entered the embassy with her 84-year-old mother and has yet to come out. (*AP*, 16/12/04)

**December 15:** During a communion held at the San Antonio parish, in Placetas, the Apostolic Nuncio to Cuba, Monsignor Luigi Bonazzi, said the Cuban crisis should be solved by way of the truth, without violence, accusations and

condemnation. Bonazzi made a reference to Cuban political prisoners as “those who without having committed any crime are sent to prison because they make those in power uncomfortable”, in an allusion to the biblical passage where John the Baptist is cast to prison by King Herod. (*Cubanet*, 15/12/04)

**December 16:** A prominent Cuban doctor returned home after an overnight stay at the Argentine Embassy that raised tensions between the two nations amid reports she was seeking political asylum. Dr. Hilda Molina, 61, denied she had sought refuge at the embassy, telling reporters at her home in Havana that she wanted Argentina's help arranging a teleconference with her son, an exile living in the South American country. "I was discussing something that didn't have anything to do with political asylum," said Molina, a brain surgeon who has held top government posts in Cuba. She said she ended up staying overnight because her 84-year-old mother, who had accompanied her to the embassy, fell ill while they were there. (*AP*, 17/12/04)

**December 17:** The Public Prosecutor's Office of Cienfuegos, Cuba, sought a 10-year prison sentence for Mexican citizens Lino Ruiz Delgado and José Carlos Prieto Santiago, charged with human trafficking, according to the Embassy of Mexico in Cuba. Under the same charges were tried three Cuban citizens : Alexis Cepero Lima (resident of Cancún, Mexico) and siblings Nelson and Niurka Hernández Lorenzo (residents of Cienfuegos), added a note. (*Notimex*, 22/12/04)

**December 19:** Six men and two women from Cuba arrived on Honduras' Atlantic coast in a small boat as part of an attempt to reach the United States, authorities said. Police spokesman Porfirio Escobar said the group, originally from Camaguey province, was being held temporarily at a police station in La Ceiba. (*AP*, 20/12/04)

**December 20:** The Under Secretary for Latin-American Affairs at Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Darío Alessandro, has been appointed Ambassador to Cuba, said official sources. Alessandro will replace Raúl Taleb, one of the Argentinean officials criticized over the diplomatic handling of the case of Cuban doctor Hilda Molina. (*EFE*, 20/12/04)

**December 20:** A group of 32 French members of Parliament recommended Spanish authorities to “closely monitor” and put “all pressure” in its relations with Cuba in favour of the release of more political dissidents on the island. The group, led by Vice-President of the National Assembly, Yves Bur, expressed in a communiqué concern for the “lack of news” about the prisoners they sponsor, after the release of 13 of the 75 dissidents sentenced to harsh prison terms in April 2003. (*EFE*, 20/12/04)

**December 22:** At least 90 Cuban rafters have washed up on Honduras' Caribbean coast in the last days, almost one-half the number that have arrived so far this year, a migration official in Tegucigalpa told the press. Eight immigrants arrived on December 19 at the port city of La Ceiba and 82 others came ashore days later at different points along the coast, Population and Migration Policy Office advisor Carlos Sanchez said. (*EFE*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, said that the European Union (EU) should change its policy of imposing diplomatic sanctions against Cuba. The EU has to correct its policy, as it stands as a huge mistake in developing bilateral relations, he told the press. According to Perez Roque, Cuba is “closely following the process currently taking place at the European Community,” referring to discussions the EU 25 foreign ministers are scheduled to hold in January to decide on future links with the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/12/04)

**December 22:** Speaking at the Cuban parliament's ordinary sessions, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque described the main challenges for Cuba's foreign policy in 2005, adding the country will continue strengthening economic relations with countries such as China, Venezuela, Russia and Vietnam. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/12/04)

**December 22:** Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque reiterated in Havana the sense of solidarity that dominates the island's foreign policy towards African nations and the country's commitment to strengthen bilateral ties with that continent. The statements were made during the Cuban official's talks with the Executive Secretary of the Community of West African States, ECOWAS, Mohamed Chambas. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** Argentinean President, Néstor Kirchner, and his Foreign Minister, Rafael Bielsa, met with Spanish Ambassador in Buenos Aires, Carmelo Angulo Barturén, to try and find a solution to the case of Cuban dissident Hilda Molina, who has requested permission from Cuban authorities to travel to Argentina or a third country to get together with her family during the Christmas holiday season. (*Europa Press*, 22/12/04)

**December 23:** The Council of State of the Republic of Cuba has appointed Raul Roa Kouri as its new ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the Holy See, according to an official note. Before his appointment, Roa Kouri was chairman of the Cuban National Commission for the UN Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO). Cuba and the Vatican City established diplomatic relations on June 7, 1935. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/12/04)

**December 24:** The Argentinean government warned that the likely solution to the case of Cuban doctor Hilda Molina would not be achieved by "putting pressure" on the regime of Fidel Castro. "This case has to be solved through dialogue, respecting each country's idiosyncrasies and without exerting pressure or insulting their governments", said Argentinean Cabinet Chief, Alberto Fernández. (*EFE*, 25/12/04)

**December 24:** Cuba's National Assembly issued a statement that calls the documents signed by Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez "founders of a new era for Latin America and the Caribbean". Since Castro came to power in 1959 every year receives a name. The National Assembly decided to name 2005 as "Year of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas", in support of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution". Cuban parliament also described Hugo Chávez' initiative, ALBA, as an alternative to the US supported Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). A resolution supporting ALBA said the treaty would fulfill "Bolívar's and Martí's dream of an (internally) supportive subregion joined in social justice, the human self-fulfillment of its residents, the defense of its culture and the conquest of an honorable position." (*Prensa Latina, EFE*, 24/12/04)

**December 27:** One reputed Colombian capo is eluding capture being held in Cuba on a charge of using a false passport. Havana has been slow to move on the charge against Hernando Gómez, and Colombian authorities say they have no news on their request for his extradition to Bogotá to face charges. Some of Gómez's associates have told the press that they suspect that Gómez may have bribed his way into an extended stay in Cuba so he could avoid a Colombian prison and later possible extradition to the United States. Cuba's top anti-drug official, Gen. Jesús Becerra, told reporters in October that Gómez was "in transit" when he was captured there in early July and did not intend to use Cuba to ship drugs. Gómez is charged with carrying false documents, a relatively minor crime. There has been no official word on what jail he is being held in, or even whether he has been brought to trial and sentenced. Associates of Gómez say that his wife and top lieutenants have been allowed to visit him in Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 27/12/04)

**December 27:** Fidel Castro has sent messages of condolences to Asian countries affected by deadly tidal waves, and urged the international community to provide swift aid. He expressed "the deep shock of our people and government before these tragic events," and expressed "the deepest condolences to the people of those nations and particularly the relatives" of the thousands of fatal victims. The messages were sent to the leaders of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the official Granma daily said. (*AFP*, 27/12/04)

**December 27:** Two boats carrying 28 Cubans refugees arrived in Honduras, authorities announced. Apparently hoping to use the country as a stepping stone to the United States, the refugees were staying in police offices on the island of Roatan, 400 kilometers north of the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa. "We fled out the country because of the bad economic situation," said Reinaldo Guerrero, 35, of Vertiente, Cuba, in a televised interview. "It was a hard trip, but

worthwhile (...) We just want to work in the United States." The new arrivals were from Camagüey province. (AP, 27/12/04)

**December 28:** Liberal activists from the UCD (Democratic Centre Union) demonstrated in front of the Cuban embassy in Buenos Aires, demanding that neurosurgeon Hilda Molina must be allowed to visit Argentina. Their demonstration also called for the release of the dissidents imprisoned in Cuba. With the slogan "We Argentines mobilize for freedom in Cuba," Buenos Aires Province Liberal Youth, Buenos Aires Province New UCD and Capital UCD Revival assembled in front of the Cuban embassy in the Belgrano sector of Buenos Aires. (BBC, 29/12/04)

**December 29:** France is "watching very closely" the situation of Cuban prisoners of the so-called "Group of 75", says Foreign Minister Michel Barnier in a letter to a group of wives of jailed dissidents. Yolanda Huerga, wife of ex-prisoner Manuel Vázquez Portal, said Barnier's letter is a reply to a message sent by the wives to the European Union foreign ministers last November. (EFE, 30/12/04)

**December 29:** Roberto Quiñones, the son of Cuban doctor Hilda Molina, has described his meeting with Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa as "very productive", since he obtained a commitment from the government that it would "exhaust all diplomatic channels" to reunite him with his mother. "Speaking both for himself and in the name of President Nestor Kirchner, Bielsa confirmed to us that we should remain calm, because they are not going to leave us alone in this," Quiñones said. He was referring to the negotiations with Cuba concerning Molina's request that she be allowed to visit her grandchildren who live in Argentina. (BBC, 29/12/04)

**December 29:** The Cuba in Transition Spanish Association (Asociación Española Cuba en Transición -AECT) criticized that one of its members, Spanish businessman Ricardo Carreras, was detained and interrogated in Santiago de Cuba for more than four hours the morning of December 20 by State Security agents. According to the organization, the agents did not allow Carreras to contact the Spanish Embassy. (Europa Press, 29/12/04)

**December 30:** A Cuban sports delegation has returned from a visit to Caracas where it exchanged experiences with Cubans offering their services in Venezuela. The President of the Cuban Sports Institute, Humberto Rodríguez, headed the delegation which met with Venezuelan Deputy Sports Minister, Eduardo Álvarez. (Radio Habana Cuba, 30/12/04)

**December 31:** The head of the Friends of Cuba Association in Quebec, Michael Walsh, told reporters in Havana that solidarity with Cuba continues to grow in Canada. Walsh explained that the friendship association has among its objectives the distribution of news, books and other information about Cuba. He said his organization also explains the real situation about Washington's blockade against Cuba to those who are uninformed. Michael Walsh said that during the recent Congress of Professional Journalists in Quebec, two new books were launched: "El Dossier" by Robert Menard and "Why Reporters Without Borders" by journalist Jean Guy Allard, with the collaboration of French journalist Marie Dominique Bertuccioli, from Radio Habana Cuba. According to the solidarity activist, the organization Reporters without Borders is financed by the Central Intelligence Agency and right wing Cuban-American organizations in Miami. (Radio Habana Cuba, 31/12/04)

## **Terrorism**

**December 2:** Panamanian authorities said they would investigate whether government officials abused their power while carrying out former President Mireya Moscoso's pardons of four Cubans who had been accused of trying to assassinate Fidel Castro. Special prosecutor Arquímedes Saenz said authorities planned to solicit testimonies from former Interior and Justice Secretary Arnulfo Escalona as well as Carlos Bares, the ex-director of the national police force, as part of the investigation. (AP, 2/12/04)

**December 16:** Britain's highest court ruled against the detention of foreign terrorism suspects without trial, in a major judgment on how far human rights can be restricted in the "war on terror." The Law Lords were deciding the cases of nine Muslim men whose detention under draconian post-Sept. 11 legislation -- some for three years -- is a cause celebre for rights activists. (*Reuters*, 18/12/04)

**December 17:** Within the heavily guarded perimeters of the Defense Department's much-discussed Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, the CIA has maintained a detention facility for valuable Al Qaeda captives that has never been mentioned in public, according to military officials and several current and former intelligence officers. The buildings used by the CIA are shrouded by high fences covered with thick green mesh plastic and ringed with floodlights, officials said. They sit within the larger Camp Echo complex, which was erected to house the Defense Department's high-value detainees and those awaiting military trials on terrorism charges. (*The Boston Globe*, 17/12/04)

**December 17:** "The Bogota Three" -- IRA suspects James Monaghan, 58, Niall Connolly, 38, and Martin McCauley, 41 -- are hiding out in communist Cuba under the protection of Fidel Castro. Republican sources said that the three had fled to the Caribbean island after their release in June. Cuba has a long-standing extradition treaty with Colombia but it's unlikely the communist state will co-operate with the right-wing junta and force the men to leave. Colombian officials admitted they have no idea where the Irishmen are. (*The Mirror*, 18/12/04)

**December 26:** At least ten current and former detainees at the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have alleged that they were abused in custody. The American Civil Liberties Union has released more FBI reports obtained under the Freedom of Information Act on FBI agents' accounts of abuse of prisoners taken from Afghanistan and Iraq. "On a couple of occasions, I entered interview rooms to find a detainee chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water. Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves and had been left there for 18, 24 hours or more," an unidentified FBI agent has written. Brent Mickum, a Washington attorney for one of the detainees, said: "Now there is no question these guys have been tortured. Every allegation that I have heard has now come to pass and been confirmed by the government's own papers." A Pentagon spokesman said that the military had an ongoing probe of torture claims and was taking credible allegations seriously. (*World News*, 26/12/04)

## Security

**December 2:** Faced with escalating hostility from the United States government, Cuba is stepping up its defense preparedness, states an official announcement from the Ministry of the Armed Forces. The communiqué describes the hard-line anti-Cuba policy of the Bush administration as the most aggressive in 45 years of US antagonism towards the island. Such reality —it asserts— imposes the need for Cuba to continue improving its defense readiness under the national defense strategy known as the "Guerra de Todo el Pueblo" or People's War. (*AIN*, 2/12/04)

**December 7:** Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro warned the United States not to repeat its mistakes in Vietnam and Iraq by invading Cuba because its armed forces and civilian population were ready to resist. "The Americans should watch closely, so that they do not commit the mistakes they made in Vietnam and are now making in Iraq, where they are bogged down," Castro told reporters. Like the Vietnam War, Castro said, US troop escalation had already begun in Iraq due to local resistance. Bastion 2004 is the latest annual mass drill involving troop exercises with civilian involvement based on a guerrilla strategy designed to resist an invasion force. This year's operation is more extensive than last year's. "We are holding Bastion 2004 so they observe well and do not underestimate our people who are more united and therefore much stronger than the Iraqis. That is the reason," Castro said. Raul Castro said Cuba was seeking to deter a confrontation. "For us, avoiding the war is equal to winning the war," he said. "To win by deterring war, we have to shed a lot of sweat, which is better than rivers of blood." (*Reuters, Prensa Latina*, 7/12/04)

**December 12:** Cuba's armed forces are gearing up for their biggest military exercises in almost 20 years involving thousands of troops, MiG-29 jets, anti-aircraft batteries and millions of civilians, General Leonardo Andollo told reporters. Senior military and Communist government officials in Havana warned that the administration of US President George W. Bush should take note of the island's war footing. General Andollo, who was the head of the Cuban military mission in Ethiopia, assured "circumstances around wars fought in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, have confirmed how justifiable defensive concepts elaborated by our political-military leadership are." The mass war games start on December 13 and are due to run through to December 19. (*AFP, Prensa Latina, 12/12/04*)

**December 13:** Cuba's Defense Minister Raul Castro officially announced the beginning of the Bastión 2004 military defense exercises that will take place across the island over the next 7 days. During a radio and television announcement from Havana, Raul Castro said that hundreds of thousands of combatants will unite with millions of Cubans in the various military activities and civilian preparations programmed to repel a possible enemy attack. The Cuban military leader informed the population that the National Defense Council will emphasize adapting the country's economy to war conditions and perfecting economic production, services and other structures designed for prolonged resistance. He stressed that Bastion 2004 is focused on the defense of life and the achievements of the Cuban people. (*Radio Habana Cuba, Prensa Latina, 13/12/04*)

**December 19:** Cubans awoke to air raid sirens, and practiced shooting, putting on gas masks and doing duck-and-cover drills as the communist nation wrapped up a weeklong series of defense exercises to prepare for a potential attack by the United States. The activities, called the Strategic Bastion 2004 Exercise, were aimed at evaluating how prepared Cuban society is to face possible military action against Cuba during a second term by US President George W. Bush. State-run newspapers reported that the exercises were a success, and that Cuba's "capacity to resist and overcome an imperialist aggression" was demonstrated. (*CNN, 19/12/04*)

**December 29:** Cuba's Army General Leonardo Andollo considered that the country has extensively reinforced its defense system with the recent drills Bastion 2004 (Stronghold 2004). Addressing a TV-radio round table talks, the vice chief of Cuban Armed Forces Ministry's General Staff announced that from now on maneuvers will be carried out every four years. "Recent drills have provided us with lots of experiences and ideas for reinforcing our defense system in the face of US increasing threats and aggressions," added Andollo. (*Prensa Latina, 31/12/04*)

**December 31:** A top North Korean official said North Korea and Cuba will wage a joint struggle against the United States. In a message to Fidel Castro, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and Kim Yong-nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, said the two countries will continue to jointly fight US aggression and intervention on the basis of their traditional friendship and cooperation. (*Yonhap News, 31/12/04*)

## **US-Cuba Relations**

**December 1:** One of the five Cuban prisoners incarcerated in the United States has been placed under severe limitations. No reason has been given to Gerardo Hernández for confining him to his cell over the past few weeks, providing him with cold food only and giving him reduced bathing time, reported the Cuban daily *Juventud Rebelde*. The newspaper described the punishment as effective solitary confinement at the California prison in Victorville where Hernández is being held. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 1/12/04*)

**December 1:** US filmmaker Oliver Stone's letter to Fidel Castro was made public in Cuba. Stone's letter was sent on October 26 from London, according to *Granma* newspaper. The paper says the existence of the letter was known on November 24 through the Cuban embassy in Spain. In his letter published by Cuban newspapers, Stone calls Fidel an

incredible man, "first you fall and fracture your knee and instead of relaxing and allowing doctors to administer anesthesia, as most people would do, you keep on working during surgery." (*Prensa Latina*, 1/12/04)

**December 2:** Senator Byron Dorgan (Democrat-North Dakota) said the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) is quietly using new tactics and resources to stop legal sales of American farm products to Cuba. Senator Dorgan said he is calling on the Treasury Department's Inspector General to investigate whether OFAC is exceeding its legal authority by using its resources to block Cuba food sales. OFAC's top job is to track terrorists' funding sources, Dorgan noted. The new effort diverts attention and resources from that, in addition to hurting US farmers at a time when farm incomes need bolstering. (*Hindustan Times*, 2/12/04)

**December 3:** The Bush administration has temporarily halted the transfer of money to US agricultural firms selling goods to Cuba. Congress Daily reported that the move, apparently aimed at discouraging trade with the communist nation, comes amid a review of existing law to investigate whether Cuba is required to make advance payments for US farm products. (*UPI*, 3/12/04)

**December 3:** President George W. Bush will be committed during his second term to the "liberation of Cuba" by extending moral and political support to the Cuban people, a top State Department official said. Roger Noriega, who heads the department's Latin American bureau, also said once Fidel Castro is no longer in power, the United States is ready to support broad economic and political changes in Cuba "to ensure that vestiges of the regime don't hold on." Noriega noted Washington has a blueprint for providing social, economic and other types of assistance to Cuba in the post-Castro era. (*Canadian Press*, 3/12/04)

**December 3:** Spain's push for a more flexible EU policy toward Cuba is "wrong-headed," the top US diplomat for Latin America said. "Making concessions to a regime of that nature is really a wrong-headed policy," Roger Noriega said. "Foreign Minister (Felipe) Perez Roque said months ago that Spain would come crawling on its knees to Havana. I laughed when I read that. And my guess is that Perez Roque is doing the laughing now," Noriega said. (*EUBusiness*, 3/12/04)

**December 4:** Michael and Angela McCarthy a Port Huron, Michigan, couple is driving to Washington to find out how much the US government will fine them for their illegal trip to Cuba. In April 2001, when the couple crossed the border from Ontario into Michigan, an officer asked them where they'd been, and they answered truthfully -- Cuba -- and mentioned they had brought back a couple of cigars. Administrative Law Judge Irwin Schroeder could make them pay up to \$110,000 after considering their case during a hearing. The McCarthy case is one of about 20 now before judges of the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control, according to the Center for International Policy, which advocates ending travel restrictions to Cuba. Many more cases get settled before they ever reach a judge. (*AP*, 4/12/04)

**December 5:** According to Cuban sources from the Tourism industry, during 2004 travels from Cuban Americans to the island have decreased significantly. "For Christmas 2003 we processed documents for 3,500 persons, while this year the number only rose to less than 250", said Armando García, vice president of Marazul, a travel agency. Other tour operators have said that tickets prices have gone up by 30 %. Non-official statistics reveal that in 2003 over 154,000 persons travelled to Cuba, while only 30,000 travelled during 2004. This reduction resulted in lost income of 66 million USD, compared to year before. (*DPA*, 5/12/04)

**December 7:** Banco Santander Central Hispano, the Spanish bank which owns Abbey National, has been fined \$20,000 (£10,000) by the US authorities for breaching trade sanctions against Cuba. The fine has been levied against Santander's bank in Nassau, Bahamas, for a transfer of funds through Cuba in 2001. Information posted on the treasury department's website showed that the Spanish bank was fined last month. Santander was fined under the range of civil penalties used by the department, which can levy financial penalties of up to \$55,000 for each violation. Criminal

penalties for violating the sanctions range from 10 years in prison, \$1m in corporate fines and \$250,000 in individual fines. (*The Guardian*, 9/12/04)

**December 8:** The US Treasury Department announced that it had identified as Cuban-owned and operated a travel agency offering US citizens special rates on trips to the island and helping them evade Washington's travel ban to Havana. The company, Tour & Marketing International LTD, helps US citizens travel to Cuba via third countries. A communique from Treasury's assistant secretary of its financial crimes and terrorist financing division, Juan Carlos Zarate, said the agency "generates resources that the Cuban regime uses to oppress its people" and helps people violate US economic sanctions against the island's Communist government. Tour & Marketing International has five offices in Cuba, one in Spain, one in England and another in the British Virgin Islands. The firm's main officials are Cubans living on the island. (*EFE*, 8/12/04)

**December 8:** A Senate Democrat threatened to block the president's Treasury Department appointments as the Bush administration reconsiders a rule for companies that sell food and agricultural products to Cuba. Senator Max Baucus of Montana, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, said a potential revision threatens to obstruct trade and "takes this administration's dangerous obsession with Cuba to a whole new level." "I will not sit idly by if the Treasury Department attempts to rewrite legislation Congress intended to facilitate trade with Cuba," he said. (*AP*, 8/12/04)

**December 9:** Changing the method of payment for US farm goods sold to Cuba could be detrimental to America's farmers and ranchers, according to the American Farm Bureau Federation. AFBF, and an extensive coalition of agricultural associations, sent a letter to President Bush asking him to instruct the Office of Foreign Assets Control to not change the method of payment procedures used in agricultural exporting to Cuba. The letter was prompted by indications that the OFAC, an office under the Treasury Department, is considering new guidelines to interpret payment terms in a way that would force US exporters to receive payment before goods leave US ports. The value of US agricultural exports to Cuba has reached about \$400 million per year. (*AFB*, 9/12/04)

**December 9:** Agriculture Secretary Dennis Wolff announced that Pennsylvania will export the first live cattle shipment made from the US since bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, was found in a cow in Washington state last December. In January 2005, some 200 Holstein and Jersey cattle, predominately from Pennsylvania, will be exported to Cuba as part of a recent trade agreement. Pennsylvania's agricultural products are known worldwide for quality," said Wolff. "Earlier this year, I discussed dairy genetics in detail with Fidel Castro during a trade mission to Cuba. Since the first cattle from Pennsylvania shipped so successfully, Cuba is interested in purchasing another group of the state's bred cattle. We believe this is a great step towards increased trade with Cuba, and a great sign to the international community that Pennsylvania genetics are a good investment." (*PRNewswire*, 9/12/04)

**December 9:** The Head of the Cuban Communist Party's Ideology Office concluded the 6th National Festival of Written Press by calling on Cuban journalists to take a firm stance against what he called "the moral decadence and arrogance" of the United States government. Rolando Alfonso Borges warned that the swing to the right witnessed in President George W. Bush' administration and the escalation of the media war against perceived enemies of the US made military aggression against Cuba increasingly possible. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** Cuban dissidents placed their wishes for a democratic Cuba in a time capsule and buried them in the garden of the top US diplomat in Havana, along with a copy of George Orwell's "Animal Farm." The candle-lit ritual was planned by US mission chief James Cason to mark International Human Rights Day. "This is a ceremony of hope," said leading Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya, who heads the Varela Project, a signature drive calling for a referendum on civil liberties under Fidel Castro's communist government. The time capsule will be opened when Cuba holds

democratic elections, said Cason, who asked a dozen dissidents to write messages to future Cuban voters. (*Reuters*, 10/12/04)

**December 10:** The top American diplomat in Cuba said the end is near for Fidel Castro and his government and that even Castro's supporters are preparing for a transition to democracy. US Interests Section Chief James Cason spoke at his official residence where dissidents gathered for a time capsule ceremony marking International Human Rights Day. Castro's government "is on its last legs," Cason said as dissidents filled the capsule with messages spelling out their dreams for a different kind of Cuba. "Even regime supporters are discreetly preparing for the inevitable democratic transition" on the communist-run island, the American official said. (*AP*, 10/12/04)

**December 12:** After years of fighting defensive maneuvers to keep US sanctions on Cuba intact, changes in Congress and the White House have emboldened pro-embargo legislators to consider more aggressive policies against the island. The addition of Florida's Mel Martinez to the Senate, the strengthening of the Republican majority in Congress and Condoleezza Rice's nomination as secretary of state have shifted the balance of power in favor of the pro-embargo camp, analysts and congressional officials say. "We're going to get together and form a coalition with other members of like mind to have a proactive stance," said Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican-Florida). Ros-Lehtinen, Martinez and Representatives Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart, brothers and Miami Republicans, have created a congressional bloc, tentatively named the Cuba Democracy Group, to counter the bipartisan Cuba Working Group, which favors more trade with the island. Much of the Cuba Democracy Group's efforts will target freshmen legislators who might be unfamiliar with Cuban issues. (*The Miami Herald*, 12/12/04)

**December 13:** The military exercises organized by the Cuban government seek to prevent people on the Communist-ruled island from focusing on their problems, the US State Department said. The maneuvers represent "one or more of the many things that the Cuban government does to try to distract people from the problems that they face in their daily lives," department spokesman Richard Boucher said at a daily press briefing. Boucher dismissed that as a pretext, saying that "we don't think there's any justification or any particular foundation for this kind of charge." He also reiterated Washington's repeated calls for a peaceful transition toward democracy in Cuba. "We think that's what the Cuban people deserve and we think they deserve it in a peaceful fashion," he said. (*EFE*, 13/12/04)

**December 13:** Two years ago in December, fewer than 30 US business representatives came to Havana to sign agreements with Cuban officials to export food to the Caribbean island. This week, Cuba expects more than 340 people — primarily producers of American farm goods — to attend the latest round of talks, in which communist officials hope to sign deals worth about \$100 million. "This shows a great interest on the part of American businesses," Pedro Alvarez, chairman of the Cuban food import company Alimport, said. Alvarez was optimistic that President Bush in his second term will start heeding requests from US business interests and lawmakers — particularly those from farm states — to ease restrictions. "I have absolute confidence that intelligence will prevail," Alvarez said. "I think the time is right." More than 165 US companies will be represented in this week's talks. Senator Max Baucus of Montana, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, is expected to attend, as well as several state lawmakers and agricultural commissioners. (*AP*, 13/12/04)

**December 15:** Cuba's most senior US diplomat says he has been warned by the government of serious consequences unless he takes down Christmas decorations in Havana. James Cason says he will not remove the display at the American interests section, which includes a reference to 75 dissidents jailed last year. Cuba has twice told US diplomats to remove all decorations immediately. The display at the US interests section includes a huge white Santa Claus, an image of galloping reindeer and a flashing sign wishing Cubans a Happy Christmas. A large figure 75, is picked out in neon, inside a large circle. James Cason, head of the interests section, says the decorations will remain in place until the end of the holidays and that any action taken by Cuba against US personnel or the US mission in Havana will not affect his government's determination to draw attention to human rights. "Our intent, in the spirit of Christmas,

was to call attention to the plight of these 75," Cason told reporters. "We're prepared to pay whatever price for the things we believe in." (*BBC, AP, 15/12/04*)

**December 15:** The US State Department said it was "troubled" by Venezuela's economic pact with Cuba. "We are troubled that a country with a democratic tradition like Venezuela would want to strengthen its ties to the only undemocratic regime and closed economy in the hemisphere," spokesman Richard Boucher said. The comments came after Venezuela and Cuba signed an economic integration agreement and Caracas adopted internal measures similar to Cuba's. (*UPI, 15/12/04*)

**December 15:** US Senator Max Baucus said in Havana that Cuba's recent decision to release seven of the so-called Group of 75 dissidents jailed last year was "very important." The Montana Democrat attended the opening of a round of trade negotiations between Cuban and US companies meeting in Havana's Palacio de las Convenciones to commemorate the third anniversary of the initiation of such operations. "I congratulate Cuba for having freed several opponents," Baucus said, adding that the relationship between Havana and Washington is a "two-way street" and suggesting that the United States should respond positively to the development. (*EFE, 15/12/04*)

**December 15:** Pedro Alvarez, the president of Alimport, the Cuban state import agency, said that in 2004 imports from the United States would account for nearly \$480 million, triple the figure for 2002. Several agreements were signed between Alimport and US companies - including several from Montana - for nearly \$40 million in agricultural and food products like frozen chicken and milk. (*EFE, 15/12/04*)

**December 15:** The president of the Cuban National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón, was complaining about the Christmas decorations in the garden of the US Interests Office in Havana, among them the number "75," alluding to the group of peaceful dissidents jailed in spring of 2003. "It was a horrible thing done by this gentleman (Interests Office chief James Cason), who was desperate to provoke (us). I don't think this deserves comment," Alarcón said in brief statements to foreign correspondents at the premiere of a film about five Cuban spies serving long sentences in the United States. (*EFE, 15/12/04*)

**December 16:** Cuba has agreed to purchase up to \$10 million worth of farm products including potatoes, apples, and dairy cattle from Maine producers, Governor John Baldacci said. The announcement came at the end of a trade mission to Cuba involving representatives from the state's potato, apple, dairy, cattle and maple syrup industries. (*The Boston Globe, 16/12/04*)

**December 16:** The United States has eased sanctions against Cuba, Iran and Sudan to facilitate literary and scientific exchanges. A new rule, released by the Treasury Department, enables American persons to freely engage in most ordinary publishing activities with individuals and groups in the three countries. Restrictions on "certain interactions" with the local governments in the area of publishing will be maintained, but the department did not specify in its statement how broad they will be. (*ABC, 16/12/04*)

**December 17:** Cuba put up several huge billboards near the US mission with pictures of abused Iraqi prisoners and American soldiers pointing a rifle at children, in response to a US Christmas display in support of imprisoned Cuban dissident. Two billboards with photos of hooded and bloodied inmates at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, a swastika and the word "fascists" in bold red letters were erected across the street from the US diplomatic mission, where the display of Christmas lights includes the number 75, in reference to 75 pro-democracy activists imprisoned for lengthy terms last year. Another billboard faces the back of the building, with large photos of US soldiers searching and pointing a rifle at children, presumably in Iraq. A US diplomat called the billboards fanatical. (*EFE, Reuters, 7/12/04*)

**December 17:** US Secretary of State Colin Powell chided Cuba for displaying Nazi swastikas and pictures of Iraqi prisoner abuse to counter US Christmas decorations in Havana that paid tribute to jailed Cuban dissidents. "I don't think

that is very wise on their part," Powell said in the latest volley in the holiday season row that has erupted in the Cuban capital. Powell, speaking in an interview with the press, refused to back down on the US decorations, which he called a gesture of solidarity with political prisoners in Cuba. "And the Cuban government's response is to put forward and show the world a swastika?" he said, according to a State Department transcript. "I don't think that is very wise on their part, and we will continue to stick by our troops down there, our diplomats down there and our Christmas display, with the "75." (AP, 17/12/04)

**December 17:** US officials were critical after Cuba used Nazi swastikas and pictures of Iraqi prisoner abuse to counter US Christmas decorations in Havana. "Any government that puts up swastikas ought to answer its own questions about why it does that," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said. (*The Globe and Mail*, 17/12/04)

**December 18:** Cuba has agreed to buy about \$125 million in farm goods from US companies attending trade talks in Havana, officials said. The deals, which were agreed on during three days of negotiations, surpassed expectations, Pedro Alvarez, chairman of the Cuban food import company Alimport, told the press. Cuba had expected to sign deals worth about \$100 million going into the talks, he said. More than 300 people, primarily producers of American farm goods, attended the meetings, as did several lawmakers — including Senator Max Baucus of Montana, the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee. Fidel Castro addressed the group for several hours on subjects ranging from Cuba's health care system to a recent government decision to take the American dollar out of circulation on the island. (AP, 18/12/04)

**December 19:** Fidel Castro said that "the risks of attack (by the United States) are real," Cuban television reported. The island's leader, who is the overall commander of the Cuban military, "closely followed" the unfolding of the military maneuvers and "drew up important plans directed at strengthening the country's defense," the television said. In several working sessions, Castro "was informed of the activities carried out all over the island and gave instructions about crucial defense matters," it added. The Cuban president "acknowledged the quality of the preparation and specialization" by the exercises' participants, and was reported to be "impressed" by the country's advances in its defense, Cuban TV declared. (*Prensa Latina, EFE*, 19/12/04)

**December 20:** Police and the US Coast Guard searched for refugees in the ocean waters off Palm Beach County after a suspected Cuban national swam to shore in this exclusive town wearing just his underwear. After being taken into custody, the refugee, who was described as being in his 30s, told authorities he had been on a roughly 15-foot, homemade raft containing six other men, who were mostly in their 20s. He said the raft's engine stalled about two miles offshore and he and two other men decided to swim to shore. He said he lost track of the other two during his more than 17-hour swim to shore and does not know what happened to them. (*Sun Sentinel*, 21/12/04)

**December 20:** Five thousand Cuban students rallied outside the US diplomatic mission in Havana, denouncing US policy toward their country, Iraq and elsewhere. Communist youth, university, and high school leaders blasted "US imperialism" at the evening rally between anti-war and nationalist songs, as two powerful members of the Communist Party Political Bureau, Vice President Carlos Lage Dávila and National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón, looked on. "The new fascism of the United States continues harassing our revolution (...) As long as the provocations continue, we will do what is needed to fight them," said the leader of Havana University students, Carlos Lage Codorníu. The event, celebrating the 82nd anniversary of the University Students Federation, was held in front of the US mission, on Havana's busy sea-side drive, to protest a Christmas display that has angered local authorities. The rally was broadcast live by the state-controlled media. (*Reuters*, 20/12/04)

**December 21:** The number of passengers flying to Cuba from the United States has plummeted since last year, according to figures compiled by the State Department. The decrease suggests tougher travel restrictions by the Bush administration are having their intended effect. Since July, when the new regulations took effect, 50,558 seats have

been reserved on charter flights to Cuba, most originating in South Florida. During the same period last year, the number was 118,938. (*Chicago Tribune*, 21/12/04)

**December 21:** The United States Interests Section in Havana (USIS) withdrew a visa issued to dissident Osvaldo Alfonso, who was recently released from prison for health reasons. Alfonso, 39, had been granted a visa as a political refugee and had plans to immigrate to the US with his family. During his 20 months in prison, Alfonso suffered serious nervous disorders, which led to an attempted suicide. His case received particular attention during the summary trials of April 2003. Alfonso testified then that he was manipulated by USIS in his opposition activities. Images of his trial were broadcast by the official media and used by Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque as “proof of US interference in their internal affairs”. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 21/12/04)

**December 21:** An Alabama trade mission to Cuba lined up \$18 million in sales of agricultural products and more deals are expected to result from the trip, state Agriculture Commissioner Ron Sparks said. The deal is the biggest yet with the communist island nation since Alabama agriculture officials began pursuing trade in 2002, Sparks said. "Clearly, the results from this trip show how Alabama profits from exporting to Cuba," he said. Alabama's delegation was one of several from the United States that participated in trade negotiations last week. Cuban officials said they agreed to buy \$125 million in farm goods from the US. (*AP*, 21/12/04)

**December 22:** The Cuban Olympic Committee said that athletic exchanges between the Communist island and the United States, which had continued despite decades of animosity between the two nations' governments, have been reduced to near zero by a recent tightening of the US embargo. The committee mentioned what it termed "the intensification of the blockade," lamenting its effect on the Cuban people "and particularly on its athletic sector." Washington last summer began applying a series of measures to tighten the 42-year-old US embargo against Cuba in hopes of speeding up a democratic transition on the island. The new restrictions reduced the number and kind of approved visits by US citizens to the island. (*EFE*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** Cuban art students and cartoonists painted an American eagle cartoon on the asphalt of Havana's coastal highway so cars can drive over it as they pass the US diplomatic mission, the latest salvo in a spat over pro-dissident Christmas decorations hung by the Americans. Police closed off two blocks of the highway as the students drew the colorful cartoon of an aggressive-looking eagle with an enormous "B" on its chest. . "This character represents the blockade and will be squashed by all the cars and people who pass by here," said Ernesto Padrón, a well-known cartoonist who worked on the painting. The government has used the figure in a televised campaign to criticize four decades of sanctions. A two-storey high cartoon depicted the top US diplomat in Cuba, James Cason, as a huge Father Christmas - whose sack contains bombs, not presents. (*Sun Sentinel*, *BBC*, *Reuters*, 22/12/04)

**December 22:** Cuba's Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, said in Havana that his country is ready to respond in kind to the latest US provocations by resorting to options that "will become public at the appropriate time." Speaking to the press at Havana's Convention Center, Perez Roque said that his country is endowed with "an arsenal of ideas" to counter what he deemed subversive actions by the US Interests Section in Havana. (*Prensa Latina*, *BBC Mundo Latino*, 23/12/04)

**December 22:** US immigration authorities ordered the deportation of a former Cuban government employee accused of persecuting dissidents in his communist-led home country. Luis Enrique Daniel Rodriguez, a former Cuban interior ministry employee, was detained in July after a judge issued a deportation order. Rodriguez, 37, has been held at an immigration detention facility in Miami. US authorities accuse him, among other things, of breaking into the homes of two Cuban dissidents in Havana, including the residence of Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, Rodriguez's attorneys said. But Sanchez has denied that Rodriguez took actions against him. (*AFP*, 22/12/04)

**December 23:** Cuba has agreed to buy more than \$1 million worth of yellow peas from North Dakota while industry officials sort through a new trade proposal that could change future negotiations. A North Dakota trade delegation secured a deal in October to sell 5,000 metric tons of peas to Cuba, with a verbal agreement for an additional 20,000 metric tons. A contract was completed for about 10,000 metric tons to be shipped early next year, the North Dakota Dry Pea and Lentil Association said. (*AP*, 23/12/04)

**December 24:** The US mission in Cuba stepped up its Christmas symbols battle with the Cuban government by sending holiday postcards with the number 75 representing dissidents held prisoner by the communist-led island. The card is decorated with a shackled peace dove behind bars and a padlock with the number 75 for the dissidents who were rounded up in a government crackdown on the opposition last year. "Peace on earth, goodwill toward all," says the postcard sent to foreign diplomats and journalists. The card is signed by the chief of the US special interests section, James Cason, and his wife Carmen. (*AFP*, 24/12/04)

**December 28:** Hundreds of Cuban children have rejected, through drawings and writings on the road surface, the latest acts by the US Interest Section (SINA) in Havana against the island, Juventud Rebelde daily informed. Gathered in front of the SINA, the children made paintings about peace and human understanding. "We cannot just stand here doing nothing over the US provocative acts," some of the children said. (*Prensa Latina*, 28/12/04)

**December 28:** US Representative Arthur Davis said he will ask the US Treasury Department not to change Cuba trade policies, because new rules could damage Alabama's growing trade relationship with the nation. Alabama-based agricultural companies have built an \$18 million export industry since 2002, when the state first began pursuing trade with Cuba. "If there was a significant problem with late payments, it would make sense to tighten the cash schedule but Cuba has made its payments in a timely fashion," Davis (Democrat-Birmingham), told the press. "It's either Alabama fills these chicken orders or Brazil fills these chicken orders. If someone else fills those orders, we are not going to get them back," said Alabama Agriculture Commissioner Ron Sparks. Alabama's exports include poultry, timber and snack foods. (*AP*, 29/12/04)

**December 29:** Cuba's government has asserted that countering US hostilities against the country is one of the main priorities of Cuban foreign policy. After assessing Cuba's strategy in the face of mounting US hostile policy towards the island in 2004, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque asserted that "the US imperialism has once again failed in its bid to overthrow or weaken the Cuban Revolution". "We reiterate our deep conviction in the ideas we defend," stressed Perez Roque, Granma daily reported. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/12/04)

**December 31:** The first shipment of Florida-bred cattle to Cuba in more than 40 years was leaving from Port Everglades, near Fort Lauderdale. Twenty-two beef cattle were on a cargo ship for the three-day trip to Havana, said J.P. Wright & Co. Inc., which has a contract to ship the livestock under an exemption to the long-standing US trade embargo on Cuba. The shipment is the first part of a nearly \$1 million order totaling 300 head of Florida-bred cattle. The rest is expected to ship within the next few months. (*Sun Sentinel*, 31/12/04)

**December 31:** Cuban Parliament Chairman Ricardo Alarcón has denounced that the imprisonment of five of his countrymen in the United States clearly demonstrates Washington's complicity with terrorist groups based in South Florida. If those youths had really sought to harm that country, the White House spokespersons, so prolific telling lies against Cuba, would mention it every day, as they do with accusations that Cuba is producing biological weapons, Alarcón said. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 31/12/04)