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Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Cuba announces and then postpones new legislation guiding the Internet. The Young Communists Union (UJC), prepares for its 8 th congress. Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo requests his legal resident status from Cuban authorities.

Economy: Cuban anti-cancer drugs are introduced to the European market. The number of foreign companies engaged in joint ventures with Cuba decrease.

Exile Community: Cubans residing abroad will be exempted from acquiring a visitor entry permit to the island.

Foreign Affairs: Orthodox Christians Patriarch, Bartholomew I, visits the Cuban capital. The III Hemispheric Meeting Against the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) takes place in Havana. Amnesty International adds four more Cubans to its list of "prisoners of conscience".

Security: Cuba starts 2004 with a reinforcement of its military defenses.

Terrorism: The trial of four Cuban exiles, accused of a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro, is postponed indefinitely.

US-Cuba Relations: US officials announce the suspension of bilateral migration talks with Cuba. The US accuses Cuba and Venezuela of trying to destabilize the region. The Carter Center meets with a dozen US-based Cuban exile groups. Fidel Castro accuses George Bush of plotting to assassinate him.



Domestic Affairs

January 3: Declaring that together they had written "an unprecedented page of history," Fidel Castro gathered with several thousand members of Cuba's political elite Saturday to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph that brought him to power. Mr. Castro told the formally dressed guests that the protagonists of the revolution

sought social justice, not fame. "Our objective never was the search for glory," he said. Mr. Castro's speech was broadcast on state-run television and radio. (*The Globe and Mail*, 4/1/04)

January 2: Cuban dissident activist Osvaldo Payá gave the foreign press a message for the year 2004. In his Message of Hope, Payá calls on "everyone to reflect on a dialogue. For we have already proclaimed: 'it is better for all to have rights and not just a few with all the power and all the privileges'." Payá also states that "the Cuban dissident movement achieved a higher social reach and it is, unquestionably, the most authentic expression of the yearnings and concerns of most Cubans even though they have yet to openly express them, they want peaceful changes for Cuba". (*Puente Informativo*, 4/1/04)

January 2: This will be a difficult year, with increased crime and a greater risk of natural disasters, according to the "Letter of the Year" released by a group of Santeria priests, who also advised the Cuban people to be extremely law-abiding. Each January, believers in this Afro-Cuban religion eagerly await the "Oddun" or "Letter of the Year," read by the "babalawos," as Santeria priests are known. The Cuban Council of High Priests of Ifa, the first group to publish its "Oddun" this year, said Friday the year's governing deity would be Ochun - identified in Cuba with the Catholic religion's Our Lady of Charity - along with Obatala, associated with Our Lady of Mercy. The sign of the year, according to the priests, is a sign of harshness and aggression and related to death, although the babalawos' message says that this time the sign appears with "Ire" (luck). (*EFE*, 2/1/04)

January 3: Elsa Morejon, wife of the Cuban civic leader, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet Gonzalez, said that her husband is unrecognizable since she last saw him four months ago. "He is so thin, pale and ill looking", " these punishments are destroying him and if he continues where he is he will die...", Morejón added. Cuban prisoner of conscience, Dr. Oscar E. Biscet Gonzalez, who is serving a 25 year prison sentence, continues confined with a common criminal in a cell with no windows or light which he described as a "dungeon", for refusing to stand up to acknowledge the presence of prison guards and officials during the recount of prisoners. His punishment prohibits family visits, food supplies, toiletries, clothing, receiving or sending any correspondence, and going out in the sun. (*NetforCuba*, 4/1/04)

January 4: Cuba is reporting a 6.3-per-cent infant mortality rate in 2003, which it views as proof of its social development. The local daily Granma newspaper reports say that the rate ranks the island among the top in the world for healthcare, especially in terms of mother-child care. Cuba reported 136,772 new births, that according to preliminary data stands for 4,243 less than 2002, with 862 deaths occurring as a result of birth defects, especially in the heart, in addition to influenza, pneumonia and home accidents. (*BBC*, 4/1/04)

January 5: Cuba's baseball world was shaken up with the announcement that four top players, including two who had starred on the national team, were kicked off their clubs, reportedly for trying to defect to the United States and its juicy pro contracts. Sluggers Kendry Morales, Barbaro Canizares, Olympic pitcher Jose Ibar and Jose Miguel Abat, a rookie from Santiago de Cuba, have been removed from their respective teams for allegedly trying to flee the island secretly, a baseball official told the press. Morales and Canizares "were suprised by authorities in the central town of Caibarien as they were trying to leave the country illegally, presumably headed for the United States," a baseball official told the press. "They were immediately taken to a police station in that city, where they were briefly detained," added the official, who asked not to be named. Another sports official said that neither Kendry Morales nor Barbaro Canizares "is currently under arrest. Both are at their respective homes." No official statement has yet been made confirming or denying either of those two cases, nor that of Ibar, an Olympic team pitcher also caught trying to leave the island from the western province of Pinar del Rio, the official said. (*EFE*, 5/1/04)

January 7: "The design of novel anti-HIV compounds has now become a crucial area for scientists working in numerous interrelated fields of science such as molecular biology, medicinal chemistry, mathematical biology, molecular modelling and bioinformatics," scientists in Cuba explained. "In this context, the development of simple but physically meaningful mathematical models to represent the interaction between anti-HIV drugs and their biological

targets is of major interest. One such area currently under investigation involves the targets in the HIV-RNA-packaging region." In a recent study, H.G. Diaz and colleagues at the Central University of Las Villas "applied Markov chain theory in an attempt to describe the interaction between the antibiotic paromomycin and the packaging region of the RNA in type-1 HIV." (*Biotech Week*, 7/1/03)

January 8: Hundreds of Cuban children have recreated Fidel Castro's triumphant entrance into the capital when his rag-tag group of followers overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista in the 1959 revolution. The march into the city was part of the celebrations marking the 45th anniversary of the Cuban revolution which ushered in the Western Hemisphere's only communist government. School children taking part in the "victorious caravan", as it was dubbed by Cuban officials, left the city of Santiago de Cuba and ended their march at the capital's Freedom School which was the Batista regime's main military barracks. (*EFE*, 8/1/04)

January 10: Cuba tightened its controls over the Internet, prohibiting access over the low-cost government phone service most ordinary citizens have at home. The move could affect hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Cubans who illegally access the Internet from their homes, using computers and Internet accounts they have borrowed or purchased on the black market. Cuba's communist government already heavily controls access to the Internet. Cubans must have government permission to use the Web legally and most don't, although many can access international e-mail and a more limited government-controlled intranet at government jobs and schools. Now Cubans will need additional approval to access via the nation's regular phone service. Since few Cubans are authorized to use the Internet from home _ only some doctors and key government officials _ the new law amounts to a crackdown on illegal users. (*AP*, 10/1/04)

January 11: A new Cuban domestic opposition group, the self-styled "National Unity Front" (NUF), demanded the release of all Cuban "political prisoners" and that "free, democratic elections" be held. The Front gathers 34 political opposition movements and organizations. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 11/1/04)

January 12: The Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN) stated in its semi-annual report, that 2003 was a distressing year due to the "systematic transgressions" against the Cuban people's human rights. Among the most frequent offences against human rights, says the CCDHRN, are related to freedom of expression, information, press, the right to due process, and to protection from arbitrary treatment. "All of this contrasts strongly with the high priority the government of Cuba has placed on the expansion and perfection of the systems of education and basic medical assistance, which correspond to the field of social rights," says the report. (*IPS*, 12/1/04)

January 12: A Cuban human rights group said that at least 10 of the island's 315 political prisoners are so ill that Fidel Castro's communist government should let them finish their sentences at home. The worst case is that of economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, who has severe cirrhosis, followed by Martha Beatriz Roque, also an economist, who suffers from chronic diabetes, it said. Both have been moved to a military hospital due to their conditions. Many of the jailed dissidents are more than 50 years old and the frail health of some has been aggravated by hunger strikes. Some dissidents have been beaten in jail, the rights commission said in a semi-annual report. Cuba bars International Red Cross officials from visiting its jails. The Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission also called for the release of a blind dissident, Juan Carlos Gonzalez, jailed without trial since March 2002. (*Reuters*, 12/1/04)

January 12: Cuba ended 2003 with 750 sites in the Internet and some 1,100 domains .cu, a report of the Cuban Ministry of Computing and Communications (MIC) showed on January 12, 2004. According to the same report some 270,000 computers are operating on the island, 65 pct of them are connected to the Internet. The report also showed that the accounts of e-mails were more than 480,000 and that the Cuban Internet users increased every year. According to the report, the use of the information technologies and communications in the country is low and must increase in the next years. Most of the island's residents who can send and receive international e-mails, do not have open access to the world wide web. (*Latin American News Digest*, 13/1/04)

January 13: In Cuba, cell phones are a symbol of status and power, a way to slip into the wireless world, if only for a moment. But they're hard to get in a place where the telecommunications industry is so tightly regulated. And they're expensive to operate, as much as \$5.85 per minute. Still, many Cubans are dying to be connected. Technically, Cuba's state-run cell phone companies can offer service only to foreigners or to Cubans who are authorized to go wireless. Thousands now have service. But some ordinary Cubans find ways around the rules, usually by persuading a visitor or tourist to help them. Cuba's leading cell phone company is government-run Cubacel. Its local rates range from 30 to 70 cents per minute. Callers are also charged 30 to 66 cents for incoming calls. Long distance is pricier, from \$2.45 to \$5.85 per minute - serious money in a place where most people earn just \$10 or \$12 per month. The high rates and strict regulations have prevented Cuba's cell phone industry from growing more rapidly, some telecommunications experts say. Mobile phones remain scarce on the island, despite their allure. (*The Dallas Morning News*, 13/1/04)

January 13: In an interview with the Italian digital magazine Korazymque, the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, pointed that leaving the country has become the dream of a lifetime for many young Cubans. "With regards to emigration, there is an individual project but there is no collective plan. People from all sectors --from Catholics to the children of high government officials-- share this dream. The greatest threat to our future is posed by massive emigration," said Ortega. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 18/1/04)

January 14: Weeks after meeting with Fidel Castro during a vacation in Cuba, Bogota's mayor said the 77-year-old Cuban leader's health appeared to be deteriorating. "He seemed very sick to me," Luis Eduardo Garzon, a former communist union organizer, told Caracol Radio. "You could tell he had physical limitations, especially in his speech." (*AP*, 14/1/04)

January 14: In Cuba, there is a veritable underground cyber-market, which includes the design, production and placement of pages on web sites outside of Cuba, advertising rental property, tour guides, art galleries and private restaurants on the island. A web page of this type can cost 600 to 800 dollars to post. For every legally connected computer, there could be 10 or more with illegal Internet access, according to estimates by communications experts. (*IPS*, 14/1/04)

January 14: A large portion of the Cubans with electronic mail accounts connect with servers at their places of work, allowing them to download or send messages without going beyond to the Internet itself. Economists consulted on this matter say it would be much more beneficial for the country to open up Internet services for everyone who is interested, instead of maintaining high rates payable only in dollars. A full-time connection can cost 230 to 300 dollars a month, depending on the Internet service provider. Communications authorities assure that the Fidel Castro government would be willing to make Internet access available to the general public, but that there are major economic barriers that have forced the government to give priority to certain sectors of the population and to what is known as "social use". According to Ignacio González Planas, minister of information technology and communications, "The country's policy of giving priority to access from institutions is based on technical limitations." (*IPS*, 14/1/04)

January 15: Speaking with the press, Cuban Information Technology and Communications Minister Ignacio González Planas said that in Cuba, there are over 480,000 e-mail accounts and nearly 100,000 Internet users. He added that Cuba maintains 1,100 .cu domains, and 750 Websites or portals. "Currently, there exist 270,000 computers in the country, 65% of which are network-connected," the Minister pointed out. (*AP*, 16/1/04)

January 16: Communist Cuba is betting on its merit as the world's top medal winner per capita to win a bid to hold the 2012 Olympics in Havana, officials said. While other cities publicised their bids for the Games with fanfare and costly presentations, cash-strapped Cuba did nothing to mark the closing of the applications deadline and promote Havana's case, regarded as a long shot. Havana deserves to have the 2012 Games on Cuba's merit in sports," Cuban Olympic Committee official Ernesto Pino said. (*Reuters*, 16/1/04)

January 16: Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina, a political prisoner, declared prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, was sentenced to 6 more months in prison, after a summary trial. Rodríguez Lobaina had begun a protest for the arbitrary situation he is in, after having completed more than half of an unjust sentence imposed on him back in March 2000. He began a hunger strike to obtain national and international attention to his imprisonment for promoting democratic ideas and respect for the human rights. In response, authorities tried him summarily and sentenced him to 6 more months in prison, for the supposed crime of vandalism, alleging that Rodríguez Lobaina had broken a door at the Yaya police station. (*Puente Informativo*, 27/1/04)

January 17: The life of the 50 years old political prisoner Carlos Miguel López Santos is in danger. He has been on a hunger strike since December 10, protesting that after having completed his sentence prison authorities refuse to release him from prison. López Santos has not ingested any food in the last 38 days. (*Puente Informativo*, 18/1/04)

January 18: Imprisoned last spring for opposing Cuba's one-party state, Oscar Biscet has spent the first nine months of his 25-year sentence in solitary confinement or with hardened criminals, enduring insufficient food and unsanitary conditions, according to his wife and letters smuggled out of prison. "The characteristics of the cell violate the law," Biscet, 42, wrote in a November letter. "There are no windows. There are only walls. Always in darkness ... The sky can't be seen." Biscet has spent weeks at a time in a small cell, sleeping on a thin mattress and using a hole in the floor as a toilet, said his wife, Elsa Morejon. "I haven't seen my wife and my father in more than four months," he wrote, saying most family visits had been denied. (*Chicago Tribune*, 18/1/04)

January 18: The Cuban Information Technology and Communications Minister, Ignacio González Planas, denied that his country is restricting Internet access for Cubans. He said that the "social use" of online access provided in the island is the "most democratic and widespread" among Third World nations. (*El País*, 19/1/04)

January 19: Yankees righthander Jose Contreras says his family was barred from leaving Cuba, the newspaper La Prensa reported. Contreras told the newspaper that Cuban officials twice refused permission for his wife, Miriam Murillo, to go to Nicaragua and that she will have to wait four years before applying again. He told La Prensa that Nicaragua had issued visas to his wife and two daughters, but that they had expired. Contreras has a legal residence in Nicaragua. "While they call me a traitor, I don't feel that I'm a traitor," Contreras told La Prensa. "I have not committed any offense, any crime. I took the decision to leave the island. It was a personal decision, and my daughters and my wife should not have to pay any price. They aren't guilty of anything, even if any guilt exists. (*AP*, 20/1/4)

January 19: According to Nathan Shachar, a reporter for the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter, though many Cubans have Internet access at work, their web surfing activities are closely monitored, which accounts for increased online traffic on weekends, when there is less control. (*Cuba Nuestra*, 19/1/04)

January 20: Isabel Ramos Martínez, mother of the political prisoner Arturo Suárez Ramos, who began a fast on December 8 for the freedom of all political prisoners to demand that medical attention be given to her son in prison, shaved her head as part of her protest. (*Puente Informativo*, 20/1/04)

January 21: At some Havana post offices, Cubans line up for hours for their turn in the "surfing room." When users get to one of the four computers, they can send and receive e-mail and surf an Intranet of Cuban Web sites, but access to the global Internet is barred. Getting online is not easy in Cuba, where the state strictly controls all Web servers and recently announced plans to crack down on illegal Internet access. E-mail accounts are available at the Cuban Postal Service, but writing to friends abroad comes at price: A three-hour prepaid card costs \$4.50, one-third of the average Cuban monthly wage. At the recently opened Servi-Postal cybercafe in Havana's Miramar district, Cubans don't get to surf the World Wide Web. "The Internet is for foreigners. The Intranet is for Cubans," said Miguel Perez, managing the cybercafe in Havana's International Business Center where Cubans have to show identification and sign a contract to

get an e-mail account. Cubans said some small cybercafes do allow them Internet access, including the National Academy of Sciences cybercafe where users are charged \$5 an hour. (*Reuters*, 21/1/04)

January 21: The umbrella opposition movement Arco Progresista has released a report on political, economic and social developments in Cuba in 2003. The illegal Arco Progresista, which includes, among others, the Cuban Democratic Socialist Current, the Cuban Movement for Democracy, and the Social-Democratic Coordinating Committee, condemned the Cuban government's repression of its people, with particular reference to the arrests of 75 political dissidents in April last year. The report also had harsh words for the US initiative to create a new Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba with the express aim of hastening democratic transition on Cuba. The report said that Cuba must find democracy from within and did not need to be disciplined by the US as if it were a rebellious child. Arco's report also painted a bleak picture of the state of the Cuban economy, with a poor sugar crop and negligible growth in the tourism industry in 2003, and no signs of the US embargo being lifted. (*EFE*, 21/1/04)

January 24: In what is considered a milestone, a team of Cuban speleologists have discovered bones of the "Desmodus Rotundus" bat, commonly known as vampire bat, in western Matanzas province. Researcher Adrian Alvarez told the press that the remains were found at El Palenque mountain range, some 62 miles east of Havana. "The finding is of paramount importance in order to understand the distribution and characteristics of the species," stated Alvarez, who noted that vampire bats only attack sick animals, thus playing an important role in the biological and natural equilibrium. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/1/04)

January 24: Cuba's government has backtracked on plans to limit internet access for the Cuban population, Latin American newspapers reported. Cuban telecoms operator Etecsa said it has postponed the measure which was scheduled to come into effect this weekend, and did not set a new date. The law prohibits Cubans who pay their telephone bills in local currency from accessing the internet from their homes. Only government institutions, foreign companies and foreign individuals that pay their bills in United States dollars are excluded from the restrictions. Etecsa said the measure was designed to eliminate theft of passwords, "international degradation" and fraudulent, unauthorized use of the internet. (*Business News America*, 24/1/04)

January 24: Highly acclaimed Cuban actress Raquel Revuelta was buried at Colón Cemetery in Havana. According to the official media, Revuelta died at 79, "after a protracted illness." In the course of her 60 year-long artistic career, she portrayed numerous characters on stage, as well as in cinema and television. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Activists from 32 countries who oppose the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) met in Cuba to brainstorm on how to kill the hemispheric trade pact backed by the United States. Encouraged by growing resistance to the FTAA throughout Latin America, about 1,000 delegates from peasant, workers, student and political groups will spend four days planning demonstrations this year against the trade accord which Washington hopes to see in place by 2005. Fidel Castro, whose communist-run country is the only one excluded from the talks to dismantle trade barriers in the hemisphere, attended the opening session. "We are here to work for international union against globalization," said Quebec City student Thomas Frechette, sporting a red Che Guevara T-shirt. (*Reuters*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Even though as many Cubans on the island have serious misgivings about those in exile, a majority believe Cuban Americans should be able to return to their homeland to contribute to rebuilding efforts following a regime change, according to a study that will be released. The study, which relied on survey responses from recently arrived Cubans, attempts to understand the "value system" of Cubans who have lived under the 45-year communist rule of Fidel Castro in an effort to better prepare for a transition in the Caribbean nation. The results of the study, Understanding the Social and Political Value System of Cubans on the Island, will be released by the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. (*The Miami Herald*, 26/1/04)

January 28: Almost one million Cuban children participated in the IV National Reading Martí Competition that was dedicated this year to the literacy campaign currently underway in Venezuela. The director of the José Martí National Library, Eliades Acosta spoke of the Venezuelan people's "heroic effort" to eradicate the "humiliation of illiteracy". The National Library sponsors the competition and Acosta attributed its popularity to the interest of young Cubans in the life and work of the National Hero. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 28/1/04)

January 28: Otto Rivero Torres, First Secretary of the Young Communists Union (UJC), publicly call to the celebration of the 8 th congress of the organization. "We are encouraged by that infinite faith of Fidel in people and his deep conviction that only those who fight have the right to victory", the young leader said. "Cuba, attacked and blocked, is one of the favorite targets of the current US government", adds the call and states that in view of such strategic challenge "it is necessary to make a deep and critical analysis of the present, looking to the future to make a better homeland". (*AIN*, 28/1/04)

January 28: The work of outstanding Cuban scientists was recognised in an award ceremony in Havana. The Cuban Academy of Sciences (ACC) published the names of 57 prize-winning research scientists in the Biomedical, Agrarian, Technical, Natural, Exact, Human and Social science fields. The Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (CITMA) also nominated its foremost young scientist and awarded diplomas in the area of Technological Innovation. The Centre for Synthetic Antigens of the University of Havana received recognition for the development of the vaccine against haemophilus influenzae type B. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 28/1/04)

January 28: Cuba's war on drugs led to the seizure of five tonnes of marijuana and cocaine in 2003 and the arrest of hundreds of people in a crackdown on domestic use, the Communist Party newspaper Granma reported. Cuba, which is tougher than other Latin American countries in combating narcotics, began a crackdown on domestic drug use last year, and 600 people are on trial, Granma reported. But, in recent weeks, Havana's courts have been busy trying drug cases, with lines of relatives waiting outside. Granma said Cuban offenders face jail sentences of up to 26 years. (*Reuters*, 28/1/04)

January 28: Ángel Tomás Iglesias, a Cuban member of the Board of Administration of the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB), told the FIVB president, Rubén Acosta, that Cuban volleyball, and even baseball, athletes would be allowed to relocate abroad and join teams from different parts of the world. (*EFE*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Leading Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya complained that the communist government failed to issue the exit permit necessary for him to attend a human rights ceremony in Europe. "I couldn't attend because the Cuban government kept me from traveling," Paya said of the ceremony in Brussels that awarded the European Union's top human rights prize to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan on behalf of all UN workers. Paya's charges were contained in a letter sent to Pat Cox, president of the European Parliament, and later distributed to international journalists in Havana. (*AP*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Cuba refuted reports of a policy shift regarding national athletes signing contracts with foreign teams. In a statement to the media, Pedro Cabrera, Director of Press for the Cuban Sports Ministry, said that "Cuba will not "authorize the migration, transfer, or hiring of its athletes." (*AP*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Cuba will bid for the 2012 summer Olympic Games, the Cuban Olympic Committee (COC) announced. The COC will hold a news conference to discuss its bid and Committee president José Ramón Fernández said that the formal request to hold the 2012 Games in Havana would be submitted in May. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 29/1/04)

January 29: The "Casa de las Américas" literary award, created 45 years ago and one of the most important and longest-standing of its kind in the continent, went this year to authors from Argentina, Cuba, Colombia, Martinique, and Brazil. (*EFE*, 30/1/04)

January 31: Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo, former army commander in the early days of the Cuban Revolution, who resided in the US for years after serving prison time in Cuba, and who is now residing in Cuba, told the press in Havana that his request to Cuban authorities to obtain legal resident status on the island had been denied. He explained that two months earlier he had contacted the Cuban Foreign Ministry to communicate his intentions but was asked not to submit his application, as there would be no one available qualified or authorized to handle his case. (*World Data Service*, 31/1/04)

January 31: Teachers from several generations are gathering at the 3rd Pedagogy Congress, been held in Havana. (*AIN*, 31/1/04)

Economy

January 1: Cuba closed 2003 with nearly 700 collaboration projects with foreign institutions, according to the Ministry for Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration (MINVEC). In statements to the press, MINVEC Deputy Minister Eduardo Santos said that these programs total US \$230 million and mainly benefit the sectors of education and health, and municipal governments. He added that 46 percent of the projects are being carried out in eastern Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/1/04)

January 5: Cuba allocated US 2 billion 159 million dollars to social security in 2004 to cover assistance to more than one million retired and pensioners. The figure represents a three percent increase over the 2003 budget, indicated Georgina Barreiro, Minister of Finance and Prices. (*Prensa Latina*, 5/1/03)

January 6: Oil production in Cuba increased in 2003 for the tenth consecutive year. According to Fidel Rivero Prieto, director of the Cuban petroleum company CUPET, more than 4,300,000 tons were pumped, for an increase of 3.7 percent over the previous year. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 6/1/04)

January 7: Cuba is making use of Chinese experience in the cultivation of vegetables to raise the yield of its agricultural production, a senior Cuban official said. The President of the National Institute of the State Reserve of Cuba, Moises Sio Wong, praised the techniques used by Chinese farmers, saying they are useful and fit for Cuba. Sio said that cultivation of short-cycled yam vegetables would be of interest to Cuba, as shown by the nearly 100-ton-per-hectare output secured by Chinese agricultural producers in three consecutive years. The Chinese research institute was collaborating with the Cuban Food Research Institute, in the central province of Villa Clara, exchanging experiences and expertise in agricultural production. (*The People Daily*, 8/1/03)

January 7: According to a report from the National Tax Administration Office (ONAT), in the course of two months, operations involving several Ministries and departments from the Assembly of the People's Power as well as the Ministry of the Interior uncovered over 9,643 alleged violations, carried out primarily by unauthorized self-employed individuals. Among these, there were 1,764 food processors and vendors, 838 transporters, 768 produce market vendors, 95 landlords, and 658 in other independent productive and commercial sectors. Since 2002, the ONAT has not issued any new operating licenses to self-employed workers. (*Cubanet*, 7/1/04)

January 8: Heads are rolling in Cuba's leisure industry, from the president of the largest tourism corporation to a dishwasher at the famous Hotel Nacional. The tourism ministry announced last month that it had fired Jose Vega, the president of Cubanacan, and other company executives for "grave management errors" at the sprawling conglomerate that operates 13,000 of the island's 40,000 tourism quarters, 23 joint ventures, hundreds of restaurants and other establishments. The company has 30,000 employees and reported revenues of 330 million in 2002. "Cubanacan executives were told (Jose) Vega, vice-president Orlando Enterian and the heads of Cubanacan's reception and

transportation divisions were fired for financial mismanagement and poor human resource policies," says an industry source. But according to at least one Cuban economist, "the employees at various Havana hotels said all personnel records were under review in search of those who bought their jobs instead of going through a government-organised training and placement system that is supposed to give jobs to the best qualified. It remains to be seen how many people will lose their jobs in the crackdown that western diplomats say is being orchestrated by President Fidel Castro to preserve revenues for the state and appease popular discontent at tourism industry privileges. Government insiders say that Ibrahim Ferradaz's days as tourism minister may be numbered. (*The Financial Times*, 8/1/03)

January 12: Cuba's rodenticide Biorat is now being marketed in several Latin American nations, China, Vietnam and Angola, according to the island's Biological and Pharmaceutical Laboratories (LABIOFAM). Deisy Lorenzo, a company representative in the central province of Matanzas, told the press that Biorat, which is harmless to other animals and has an excellent track record, is doing as good or even better than similar products sold by other firms. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 13/1/04)

January 12: The Norwegian super-semi, Eirik Raude, is to drill an exploration well in Cuban waters for Repsol-YPF, with an option to drill a second. The rig is expected to spud the first well in March, which will be the first attempt at deepwater drilling off Cuba. The drilling location will be off the island's north-west coast in 1,650m. Repsol holds the licence mandate to explore six blocks under a production-sharing agreement with Union Cubapetroleo (Cupet), the Cuban national oil company. (*Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 12/1/04)

January 15: In its annual report for the year 2002, the Central Bank of Uruguay's declared irrecoverable credit assets owed by Cuba. (*La República*, 15/1/04)

January 16: According to a Venezuelan daily, last year alone, the Cuban government's debt to state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) reached a total of US \$891 million. Out of that figure, US \$240 million --to be paid in Banco Nacional de Cuba (Cuba's National Bank) IOU's-- account for Havana's long-term debt, which became due last December. The remaining US \$651 million account for the island's short-term credit. El Universal adds that, of 92 shipments made by PDVSA, with payment due between January 2003 and March 2004, Venezuela has received IOU's for only 20 of them. (*Encuentro en la Red*, 16/1/04)

January 17: Cuba's Telecommunications Enterprise ETECSA will install 80,000 new telephone lines this year based on conventional technology by using wire and wireless connections. In 2003, the Cuban enterprise installed 60,000 phone lines, 81% of which benefited residential areas, while the digitalization of phone service reached 80% last year. Such a program will continue to expand toward the island's eastern municipalities in coming months. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 17/1/04)

January 17: European entrepreneurs are taking part in 56 percent of the more than 4,000 international economic associations currently operating on the island. According to Deputy Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, Ricardo Guerrero, most European businesspeople working in Cuba are from Spain. Guerrero made the observation during an evaluation of the sector's performance in western Pinar del Río province. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 17/1/04)

January 17: Cuba's Central Agriculture Workshops Enterprise, located in western Pinar del Rio province, and the Argentinean FAMACON company have signed a cooperation agreement to develop windmills. The Pinar del Rio enterprise will contribute machinery and technical personnel, while the Argentinean firm will provide financing, raw material and technology. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 17/1/04)

January 21: Cuba has received its first group of 20 Chinese tourists since China designated the Western Hemisphere's only communist-run nation as one of its tourism destinations last year, a Cuban tourism official said. Tourism has

become the island's main source of hard currency since the loss of support from the former Soviet Union. (*National Post*, 22/1/04)

January 23: Cuban Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro said the sugar harvest was on track, with mills opening on time and operating at acceptable levels and cane estimates were holding firm, state-run radio reported. "Ulises Rosales del Toro said mills have opened on time unlike the previous harvest (...) he said 56 mills were operating and the remainder would open soon," Radio Reloj said. At this time last year Cuba reported 30 mills were grinding. Rosales said mills were operating at 72 percent capacity, compared with 62 percent during the previous harvest. Rosales said in December, as he opened the harvest, that sugar output would increase 19 percent to 2.6 million tonnes, with 700,000 tonnes for domestic consumption and the rest for export. (*Reuters*, 23/1/04)

January 24: Cuban biotechnology is now, among other things, leading the way in the development of a new generation of anti-cancer therapies expected to be available to the European market by 2008. Havana's Carlos J. Finlay Institute has entered into a deal that allows major drug multinational GlaxoSmithKline to license its discovery in order to facilitate the first entry of a Cuban medical product into the more lucrative Western market. Another centre of excellence is the Pedro Kouri Institute of Tropical Medicine (IPK) which works closely with the United Nations World Health Organisation in Geneva. It is currently working on a new cholera vaccine and seeking to match the efforts of Western countries in the race to find the first vaccine against Aids. (*The Straits Time*, 24/1/04)

January 24: The number of foreign companies engaged in joint ventures with Cuba fell by 15 percent last year, state-run media said, as a political squabble with Europe and increased economic regulation took their toll. The decline, the first reported by the communist nation in more than a decade, comes as the government struggles with a foreign exchange shortage that has slowed economic growth. "Currently there are 342 active economic associations (joint ventures), and the most important foreign partners in these businesses are Spain with 98, Canada with 52 and Italy with 51," the Communist Party's daily, *Granma*, said, reporting on the annual meeting of the Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation. The ministry reported 403 ventures at the close of 2002, of which Spanish companies accounted for 105, Canadian companies 70 and Italian companies 57. Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Marta Lomas said at the meeting that seven joint ventures were formed last year compared with 24 new joint ventures in 2002. (*Reuters*, 24/1/04)

January 24: The Guayaquil Paediatrics Association and the Ecuadoran Paediatrics Federation are protesting a plan for several doctors from Cuba's Centro Habana paediatric hospital to teach an international course in paediatric intensive care in Guayaquil and other Ecuadoran cities. The president of the association, Cecilia Cedeño, said that the aim is to teach intensive care to recent paediatric graduates and give them diplomas for a job so complex that only those with experience can perform it. "To be qualified for paediatric intensive care, one must have practised three years as a resident in a children's hospital and then sub-specialize by practising two years in the intensive care unit," Cedeño said. The first module of the course will last for eight months and will be taught three days a week. It costs 2,000 dollars and 15 days of practical training in Havana are also offered for an additional 850 dollars. (*BBC*, 24/1/04)

January 24: Negotiations with Chinese enterprises over their participation in the industrial development of nickel, rubber and oil prospecting in the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Gulf of Mexico are paving the way for that nation occupying a priority place as a trade partner in Cuba's future. During the annual report from the Ministry for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC), Minister Marta Lomas also highlighted Cuban investment in the biotechnology and tourism sectors in China. With fewer joint ventures than in previous years, there was a 13% growth in income and exports, respectively, and profits per dollar invested were greater than in 2002.

January 28: Cuban sugar crushing mills total 56 in the current 2003/04 crop year, up from 30 units in the year-ago period, it was reported. The 56 mills work with 72 pct of their production capacity in the current season, while those working in the previous crop year used 62 pct of their capacity. Other eight units are expected to start operations in

February 2004, according to the Cuban Government. The country's 2003-2004 sugar output is expected to reach some 2.6 million tonnes, an 18.2 pct increase year-on-year, according to the Sugar Ministry. (*Latin American News Digest*, 28/1/04)

January 30: Cuban specialist Melbridge Container Line is stopping its Europe-Cuba service after 10 years, blaming stiff competition in the Cuban market. Ending the service also means the end of the shipping line, because it only operates on this route. A company insider, who did not wish to be named, said Melbridge Container Line's owner, believed to be a Panamanian single shareholder, had decided to call a halt to the service, and added: "It is out of our hands." He said he did not believe the state of the Cuban economy was related to the decision: "The Cuban economy has had problems for years." The European-Cuban market had seen increasing competition since the service was launched in 1994. (*Lloyd's List*, 30/1/4)

January 31: The representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to Cuba, Francisco Arias Milla, said that the island could supply itself with enough rice in the future due to successful production results on the island. Cuba imports 60 percent of the rice it consumes. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 31/1/04)

January 31: Cuba's Minister of Foreign Trade Raul de la Núez said that the island still has to improve in its exporting capacity. The Cuban official made this statement during the closing of the General Assembly of the island's Chamber of Commerce, in which they discussed the institution's work during 2003. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 31/1/04)

Exile Community

January 9: According to Lt. Col. Lamberto Fraga, head of a department with the Cuban Immigration Directorate (DIE), new procedures are currently being implemented whereby, as of April 2004, Cubans residing abroad would be exempted from acquiring a visitor entry permit, a decades old consular requirement for those travelling to the island. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/1/04)

January 16: Uncorroborated rumors that Fidel Castro had died or suffered a stroke buzzed around Miami-Dade County, with anxious callers inundating police departments, media outlets and exile groups. "We've gotten hundreds of calls, mostly from the media, but also from our own officers and some members of the public," said Miami-Dade police spokesman Randy Rossman. "At this point, we are not mobilizing anyone for anything special at this time." The latest rumor -- something that has occurred frequently over the years -- appears to have spawned from comments published from Luis Eduardo Garzón, the leftist mayor of Bogotá, Colombia. He said that Castro appeared to be "very sick" during their talks in late December. (*The Miami Herald*, 17/1/04)

January 28: A University of Miami project has taken the first steps toward measuring the ideological divide between newly arrived Cubans and those who have lived in the United States for decades. A preliminary survey of 208 newly arrived Cubans recently found that the new arrivals distrust the established Cuban exile community in the United States and institutions in Cuba. That has implications for a post-Castro transition in Cuba, said Andy Gómez, co-director of the project and a senior fellow at the UM Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies. Researchers hope to use the early findings to secure funding for a broader study of the Cuban-American community, Gómez said. (*Sun Sentinel*, 28/1/04)

January 29: The First International Congress on Cuban Culture, organized by the Spanish Association "Cuba in Transition" (AECT), began in Madrid. Its goals include among others, showing support for the Cuban domestic opposition and solidarity with persecuted democracy proponents, particularly those from cultural circles, as in the case

of the poet Raúl Rivero. For three days, this conclave will bring together more than one hundred leaders of the Cuban opposition in exile. (*ABC*, 29/1/04)

January 30: Several Cuban Americans said they met with Bush in Austin but denied that there has ever been any discussion of assassinating Castro or of military action to remove him from power. Castro's allegation that President Bush and Cuban Americans in Miami were plotting to assassinate him was widely covered by foreign correspondents in Havana, although he has made similar allegations on at least four other occasions, including in two speeches in which he claimed that the plot was hatched during a Texas meeting between Bush and exiles before the 2000 presidential election. "Castro needs to have a constant war against shadows," said Joe Garcia, executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, who attended the Austin meeting. He said the gathering, which included several exile leaders, was short and focused on Bush's stance on US policy toward Cuba, including the embargo. 'Castro's accusation has no basis or foundation of truth,' Garcia said. "There's no need to kill Castro. He's half-dead already," said Luis Zuñiga, a member of the anti-Castro Cuban Liberty Council in Miami. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/1/04)

January 31: Governor Jeb Bush fired up a roomful of supporters of his brother's reelection campaign in Miami, but there were signs of lingering tension over the Bush administration's Cuba policy. A few Cuban-American Republican legislators and local elected leaders chose to skip the morning rally and a closed-door reception with the governor, underscoring, they said privately, concern over the president's commitment to a crackdown on Fidel Castro. "The lack of turnout among Republican-elected officials at the campaign kickoff may highlight a problem among Cuban-American voters that must be addressed," said state Representative David Rivera of Miami. He was among the legislators who did not attend, saying he had scheduling conflicts. "As Republican-elected officials, we want to deliver overwhelming support for the president's reelection, but we need help on the Cuba issue to achieve it," said Rivera. (*The Miami Herald*, 1/2/04)

Foreign Affairs

January 1: Relations between Cuba and Haiti are based on mutual respect and in the friendship of its peoples, Haitian Ambassador to Cuba Marie-Andrine Constant said in Havana. According to Juventud Rebelde newspaper, 744 Haitians are currently studying in Cuba. Around half are in Santiago while the rest are in Havana, Camagüey, Ciego de Avila and Guantánamo. The results are promising and make us proud; since each year our young people are included among the best students. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/1/03)

January 2: The mayor of a Newfoundland town is among hundreds of Canadians whose foreign spouses are being ordered to return home to be re-sponsored to Canada in a policy change. Cec Stein, 68, said it could take years before his Cuban wife, Sandra Marguerita Figueroa, 31, is allowed to return to Canada with their three-month-old son, Bill. Toronto lawyers said Figueroa is among the hundreds of out-of-status spouses ordered by immigration officials to leave Canada to reapply for spousal sponsorship. Stein said he has spent about \$10,000 on legal fees in failed bids to obtain status for Figueroa, who has been ordered to leave Canada or face deportation. (*Canadian Press*, 2/1/04)

January 7: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque has called for peace and justice for the Haitian people, demanding that their right to development be respected. Pérez Roque attended a ceremony in Havana to commemorate Haiti's National Day. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 7/1/04)

January 7: The Cuban Ambassador to Mexico, Roberta Lajous, said that Cuba-Mexico relations would become stronger this year, following a deterioration of bilateral ties during the Summit Segment of the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey City in 2002. She added that, possibly this year, an agreement would

be reached on the options available to Cuba for payment of its debt to Mexico, further strengthening relations between the two nations. (*Notimex*, 7/1/04)

January 7: The Argentine government responded angrily to declarations by Roger Noriega, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, on relations between Nestor Kirchner government and Fidel Castro's. Noriega told reporters he was "disappointed" that officials visiting Cuba failed to meet dissidents, a reference to Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa's recent trip. "We consider the declarations aggressive (...) and inopportune, and the foreign minister has expressed this in the name of the Argentina government," Vice Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana told local radio. Some US officials have said there is a growing alliance emerging in Latin America between Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, countries that have swung to the left in recent years amid a backlash against free-market policies advocated by Washington. (*Reuters*, 7/1/03)

January 7: The Iranian Embassy in Havana has expressed its appreciation to the people and government of Cuba for their support and condolences after the devastating earthquake that destroyed the city of Bam. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 7/1/04)

January 9: Cuba accused Colombian paramilitary groups of working in collusion with US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega to assassinate Cuban doctors in Venezuela. An editorial in the official daily Granma says that the plot aims at discouraging bilateral collaboration. (*Europa Press*, 9/1/04)

January 9: Argentine Cabinet Chief, Alberto Fernández, said that his government will once again abstain from voting against Cuba for human rights violations in the island at the annual meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission, scheduled for next April. (*Europa Press*, 9/1/04)

January 10: Wives and mothers of Cuban dissidents that received harsh prison sentences last year demanded more activism on the part of the Latin American governments with regards to the social and political crisis in the island. Under the title "Message to the Heads of State of the Americas," a score of women wrote a letter to the presidents in the Hemisphere, asking them to consider the human rights situation and lack of democracy under Fidel Castro. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/1/04)

January 10: Cuba has offered five professors to teach technical programmes at the 2-year old Kyambogo University over the next two years, reports Geresom Musamali. Cuba has also offered three more professors to teach at Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST). At least 10 Cuban professors have already been supporting teaching programmes at MUST since it was started about 10 years ago. Tom Butime, state minister for foreign affairs, said there was wide co-operation between Cuba and Uganda in the fields of education, agriculture and medicine, among others. (*All Africa*, 12/1/04)

January 11: The Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), César Gaviria, acknowledged that regional disagreements have prevented an OAS intervention to advance democracy in Cuba. Gaviria pointed that the community of nations in the continent is divided on the subject of Cuba, whose OAS membership has been suspended since 1962. (*EFE*, 11/1/04)

January 12: Brazilian doctors have expressed their concern over a governmental decree that allows Cuban doctors to work in the country without having their medical qualifications validated. Despite the opposition they tend to receive from doctors in host countries, Cuban doctors often provide medical services in locations shunned by their domestic counterparts. In Brazil, many of the Cuban doctors work for low salaries in challenging environments such as the Amazon rainforest. (*Tanja Sturm*, 12/1/04)

January 12: President Bush told Latin Americans they had a "God-given right" to freedom in a sharp attack on Cuba's Fidel Castro and other rivals in a region where anti-US sentiment is rising. Speaking at a 34-nation summit of leaders across the Americas, Bush singled out Fidel Castro for his toughest condemnation. "Through our democratic example, we must continue to stand with the brave people of Cuba, who for nearly half a century have endured the tyrannies and repression," Bush said at the summit's inaugural ceremony. "Dictatorship has no place in the Americas. We must all work for a rapid, peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba," he said. (*Reuters*, 12/1/04)

January 12: In his intervention during the inauguration ceremony of the Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez commended Fidel Castro's government for the health care and education assistance it provides Venezuela. (*AFP*, 12/1/04)

January 12: Amnesty International expressed concern at the impact on freedom of expression and information of Cuba's new law restricting internet access. "The new measures, which limit and impede unofficial internet use, constitute yet another attempt to cut off Cubans' access to alternative views and a space for discussing them," said Amnesty International as a new law came into force. "This step, coming on top of last year's prosecution of 75 activists for peacefully expressing their views, gives the authorities another mechanism for repressing dissent and punishing critics." (*Amnesty International Press Release*, 12/1/04)

January 12: Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo has awarded the Cuban medical brigade serving in his country the Order of Quetzal. Expressing his gratitude for the solidarity shown by the Cuban people and government, the Guatemalan president noted that the Order of Quetzal is the highest distinction granted by the Central American country. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 12/1/04)

January 13: Spanish President José María Aznar said that any decisions regarding Cuba should be made with the "Cubans of the future" in mind, as their president, Fidel Castro, "is a tyrant who will fortunately disappear one day." Aznar made these comments following an exchange with business people, organized by the US Chamber of Commerce. (*EFE*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Reporters Without Borders has strongly condemned an assault against Victor Rolando Arroyo Carmona, a journalist who was brutally beaten by prison guards in the provincial Guantánamo prison, eastern Cuba, and urged the authorities to punish his assailants and to protect prisoners from further harm. Arroyo was taken from his cell by three prison guards and dragged to a room where they beat him about the face and body. They also deliberately shut his leg in a door. He told his wife Elsa González Padrón in a telephone call that he was still suffering from the after effects of the attack. "It is the second time in a month that a jailed journalist has been attacked," said Robert Ménard, secretary general of Reporters Without Borders. (*Notimex*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Foreign Affairs First Vice Minister, Fernando Remírez de Estenoz, left for Guatemala, presiding over the official delegation to the inauguration of the new government. Oscar Berger, was elected Guatemalan President on December 28. (*AIN*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Irish officials managing their nation's term in the European Union's rotating presidency say they're willing to resume talks and seek improvement of recently frosty relations with Cuba, if they receive a formal proposal from Havana to do so. "There's no date or concrete plans," presidential sources said, adding that "we are always ready to renew the dialogue" with the Caribbean island. They made it clear, however, that it would be up to Fidel Castro's government to make the first move. (*EFE*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Mexican President Vicente Fox avoided expressing his opinion on George W. Bush's criticisms of Cuba and Venezuela by stating that Mexico maintains a "solid relationship" with Cuba and respects Venezuela's sovereignty. He said that a relationship with Cuba "is, and will continue to be, part of (Mexican) foreign policy." (*AFP*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Mexican Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez asserted that there is no reason for Mexico to share the US views on Cuba, "since our relation with the Caribbean state is very transparent and rooted in tradition," and we share a maritime border. (*Notimex*, 13/1/04)

January 13: The Round Table, a Cuban TV talk show that features pundits' discussions of the latest political developments, labeled Mexico as the US "backyard" and criticized President Vicente Fox's actions at the Special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey. (*La Jornada*, 13/1/04)

January 14: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez made a surprise stop in Cuba to rest after an "exhausting" hemisphere-wide summit in Mexico and to review bilateral accords with Fidel Castro, Havana's Radio Reloj reported. The station said the two leaders and friends met for several hours during Chavez' stopover to discuss their nations' Cooperation Agreement, which includes allowing Cuba to purchase 55,000 barrels of Venezuelan crude a day under preferential terms. (*EFE*, 15/1/04)

January 14: Guatemala's vice president Eduardo Stein expressed to Fernando Remírez, Cuban viceminister of Foreign Affairs, the interest of his country in increasing the current number of medical students in Cuba. Remírez headed the Cuban delegation to the presidential transfer of power ceremony in the Central American country. (*Notimex*, 14/1/04)

January 14: Demetris Christofias head of the Representative Chamber (Parliament) of Cyprus, met in Havana with Ricardo Alarcón, president of the National Assembly of People's Power. (*AIN*, 15/1/04)

January 15: Argentine President Néstor Kirchner confirmed that he would not be visiting Cuba in February, as previously announced. He explained the cancellation citing important meetings involving the Jewish community in Argentina. (*Radio Martí*, 15/1/04)

January 17: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, stated that the solution to current conflict between the European Union and Cuba is "in the hands of the EU". "This situation was created by and is the full responsibility of the EU". "The only possible solution to this situation would be to end the diplomatic sanctions imposed on Cuba, especially those of inviting mercenaries [dissidents] to their diplomatic parties. (*AFP*, 17/1/04)

January 18: In a letter commending his ministry and pastoral efforts, Pope John Paul II congratulated Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega's, Archbishop of Havana, on the 25 th anniversary of his episcopal ordainment. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 18/1/04)

January 18: A Russian delegation led by Tax Minister Gennady Bukayev will hold talks with Cuban officials on several important issues as part of its visit to Havana. The Russian delegation arrived in Cuba on an official visit. During the visit, Bukayev will meet Cuban Finance and Price Minister Georgina Barreiro and officials of the national tax bureau. The sides are expected to sign an intergovernmental agreement on the exchange of information and tax cooperation. "The agreement will help our businessmen to actually plan their work in Cuba. I am sure that in the end the information exchange will make it possible to raise [tax] contributions to the two countries' budgets," Bukayev said. (*ITAR-TASS*, 19/1/04)

January 20: Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has appointed his brother as ambassador to Cuba, Venezuela's foreign minister said. Roy Chaderton said that Adán Chávez, the president's older brother and close confidant, would replace Julio Montes at the Venezuelan Embassy in Havana. Montes has been ambassador to Cuba since November 2000. (*AP*, 21/1/04)

January 20: Reporters Without Borders demonstrated against the imprisonment of 30 journalists in Cuba, at an art exhibition at a major Paris landmark attended by the Cuban Culture Minister. Demonstrators made their protest at the

Great Arch of La Defense as the Cuban minister and the Cuban ambassador to Paris visited the rooftop opening of a major exhibition of contemporary Cuban art. (*Netfo Cuba.com*, 20/1/4)

January 20: Public librarians from around the world have condemned Cuba's violation of human rights after it introduced new restrictions on access to the Internet. The new law increases the Cuban government's control over Internet use. It had previously taken measures to block various Internet sites and restrict general access to the Web. "While the World Summit of the Information Society was debating how best to improve access to information using information technology, the Cuban government was preparing a law that will further restrict Internet access for its citizens," said International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions Chair Paul Sturges. (*Local Government International Bureau UK*, 20/1/04)

January 21: Fidel Castro received the leader of the world's estimated 300 million Orthodox Christians, Patriarch Bartholomew I, upon his arrival in the Cuban capital. Bartholomew I is making his first trip to Latin America to this country, which for decades was officially atheist, to consecrate a tiny cathedral for a faith representing fewer than one in 5,000 of the island's residents. The many flashbulbs going off as journalists took pictures of the two men spurred Castro to remark jokingly, "It looks like the bombing of Baghdad." Neither Castro nor the patriarch made any official statement at the airport and from there they rode in the same car to the Palace of the Revolution, where an official welcoming ceremony had been scheduled. (*EFE*, 21/1/04)

January 21: Cuba said that the naming of the brother of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as the new ambassador in Havana will further fortify bilateral relations. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque commented on the appointment of Adan Chavez to the key diplomatic post. Perez Roque said that Adan Chavez "is not only the brother of the president, but also a man who has worked hard throughout the years in the Bolivarian process (...) [and] knows our country." (*EFE*, 21/1/04)

January 22: The Cuban Ambassador to New Zealand refused the accusations made by Amnesty International about a crackdown on internet in the island. In a letter published in a local newspaper, Miguel Ramírez says that the assessment of Amnesty International against freedom of expression in Cuba is "totally biased and full of prejudices according to the values of western and developed countries, that do not take into consideration particular and historical conditions in Third World countries." (*Scoop*, 22/1/04)

January 22: Following denunciation by Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), the French Minister of Culture, Jean-Jacques Aillagon, expressed his "firm condemnation" of the physical assault of a reporter at the hands of the security staff during a Cuban art exhibit in Paris. [[AFP journalist attacked outside contemporary Cuban art exhibition](#)] (*EFE*, 22/1/04)

January 22: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I toured the new Byzantine cathedral that he will consecrate on Sunday, the purpose of his first visit to Latin America. Accompanied by City Historian Eusebio Leal, the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians walked through the small sanctuary and later stopped outside to look at an Eastern-style mosaic of himself and Fidel Castro plastered on the side of the church. "I'm very grateful for the construction of the temple of St. Nicholas," said Bartholomew. The religious leader was attending a concert of Greek music. (*AP*, 22/1/04)

January 22: The Cuban Parliament President, Ricardo Alarcón, met with a delegation from Mexico's Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). During the delegation's stay in Havana, the visitors will meet with Cuban Vice-president Carlos Lage, and with Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque. (*AIN*, 23/1/04)

January 23: Cuban dissidents have expressed their hope that the visit by Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of Orthodox Christians around the world, will occasion the release of dissident prisoners. It is often during such visits that Castro

does make such gestures. They are usually politically motivated. Indeed, during the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998, 200 prisoners were released, an event that marked a period of relative political liberalisation on the island and brought about improved relations with EU states, amongst others. (*WMRC*, 23/1/04)

January 23: The Ecumenic Patriarch Bartholomew I met with Roman Catholic Cardinal Jaime Ortega, archbishop of Havana, and other Latin American and US religious leaders. The meeting between Bartholomew, who is the spiritual head of some 300 million Orthodox Christians, and the head of the Catholic Church in Cuba was "very cordial," according to the Orthodox prelate's spokesman, Benjamin Leavenworth. Bartholomew is the leader of Greek Orthodox Christians and is considered "first among equals" of 14 patriarchs representing Orthodox Christian congregations in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Local Orthodox clergymen as well as from other religious groups also took part in the meeting between Bartholomew and Ortega at the Rivera Hotel. (*EFE*, 23/1/04)

January 22: In a letter, five Argentine authors petitioned the Foreign Affairs Ministry to have the Argentine embassy in Havana, and all other Latin American diplomatic missions, open doors to Cuban dissidents. The letter was signed by, Marcos Aguinis, María Sáenz Quesada, Sylvina Walger, Juan José Sebreli, and Fernando Ruiz. (*Radio Martí*, 22/1/04)

January 23: Bartholomew I, Fidel Castro, and 23 others dined at Havana's posh landmark Hotel Nacional, said Benjamin Leavenworth, spokesman for the Orthodox patriarch. "It was an extremely successful dinner," he told the press, without elaborating.

January 24: Oswaldo Paya, leader of the banned dissident Christian Freedom Movement (Movimiento Cristiano Liberación), issued a statement saying that those "wanting to be respectful and supportive of the Cuban people" should support "peaceful democratic change, referendum and dialogue, liberation of political prisoners, raise their voice and pray for our silent people, and not lose hope." The statement was handed to Orthodox Archbishop Dimitrios of New York - who traveled to Cuba for Ecumenic Patriarch Bartholomew's visit - at a reception at the residence of the US representative in Havana, James Cason. Several dissidents asked the Archbishop to press the Cuban government to free dozens of opposition figures sentenced to lengthy prison terms in last year's sweeping political crackdown. "I told him about the situation of the 75 political prisoners in Cuba and that they had to be released," said Miriam Leiva, wife of imprisoned dissident Oscar Espinosa Chepe. "He said that they are praying." Cason's event was attended by several dissidents, spouses of jailed dissidents, foreign diplomats and a delegation of Greek Americans. Bartholomew I and his entourage, invited and expected to attend the reception, did not show up. (*AFP, The Chicago Tribune*, 24/1/04)

January 25: The spiritual leader of 140 million Orthodox Christians called the US embargo of Cuba a "historical mistake". Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I expressed the view during his sermon at the new Orthodox Church in Havana. The Orthodox leader said: "The blockading of peoples and countries by society in general from other nations on earth is a historical mistake." "And the problems between nations and countries, like those between people, are resolved through dialogue." In the four-hour ceremony filled with centuries-old pageantry, the head of Greek Orthodoxy also consecrated the tiny limestone Cathedral of Saint Nicholas. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, in turn honoured Mr Castro with his church's Cross of St Andrew the Apostle, which is given to supporters of the Orthodox faith. Former Greek King Constantine and his family attended the consecration, along with wealthy Greek American businessmen and hundreds of Orthodox Christians who travelled to Cuba for the event from the United States and Greece. There are only a handful of Orthodox Christians living in Cuba, and most are Russians. Fewer than 50 Greek Orthodox followers call the island their home. (*Aljazeera.Net, AP*, 25/1/04)

January 26: The Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, leader of over 300 million Orthodox Christians from all over the world, concluded his six-day visit to Cuba. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Cuban opposition leader Oswaldo Paya telephoned Madrid from the island to express his gratitude for Spain's support of the Cuban people's efforts to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy similar to its own following

the 1975 death of dictator Francisco Franco. The Cuban dissident spoke with those attending the presentation of a document entitled "National Dialogue in Cuba" drafted by Paya in his capacity as the leader of the Christian Liberation Movement together with other Cubans. (*EFE*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Ten Cuban intellectuals released a letter of support for the government in response to criticism by five Argentine authors who petitioned their Foreign Minister, Rafael Bielsa, to have the Argentine embassy and all other Latin American diplomatic missions in the island open their doors to Cuban dissidents. (*Encuentro en la Red*, 28/1/04)

January 26: The International Committee for Democracy in Cuba (CIDC) and the Czech non-governmental organization People in Need Foundation (PINF) have nominated Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya Sardiñas for the Nobel Peace Prize 2004. The nomination reflects their acknowledgement of Oswaldo Paya and the Cuban democratic opposition's continuous effort for a non-violent transition to democracy, CIDC and PINF said in a statement. According to the organizations, Paya is a man of firm moral principles and an example of courage who contributes to the strengthening of freedom and peace in the world. The nomination of Paya for the Nobel Prize also means full support for the Varela Project, which strives for a referendum on extending political freedoms in Cuba, and for the Cuban opposition in its fight for freedom and democracy, according to the organizations. (*Czech Republic Business News Service*, 26/1/04)

January 26: The Spanish Popular Party (PP), the Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE), the Democratic Union of Catalonia (UDC), and other organizations, stressed the importance of maintaining a dialogue and consensus within Spanish political circles with regards to a "peaceful political change" in Cuba based on the Varela Project and inspired by the Spanish Transition. (*EFE*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Leonel Godoy, leader of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), of the Mexican opposition, met briefly with Fidel Castro before concluding his five-day visit to the island. (*Notimex*, 26/1/04)

January 27: European Foreign Commissioner Chris Patten deplored and condemned the Cuban government's decision to prevent dissident Oswaldo Paya from traveling to attend the 2003 Sakharov Prize ceremony, which this year will be bestowed on US Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The decision "evinces great weakness" on the part of Cuban leaders and "deserves condemnation," the commissioner told the European Parliament's Foreign Committee, to which he reported on his recent trip to Latin America. Answering a question from Spanish MP Jose Ignacio Salafranca, Patten expressed hope that the Cuban leaders would "reconsider" the ban and allow Paya to attend the awards ceremony. The delivery of the Sakharov Prize for Human Rights and Freedom of Thought is slated to take place at European Parliament headquarters. (*EFE*, 27/1/04)

January 27: The Bolivian Congressional Representative and Farmers' leader, Evo Morales, called for unity amongst the progressive social forces in both continents against the FTAA. Morales spoke of the Bolivian experience as proof that an organized and mobilized population can overthrow neo-liberal governments that refuse to accept local realities. The Bolivian leader issued a severe warning to the United States, which although it may succeed in imposing what Morales called the "hegemonic project", will never be able to apply the FTAA because "the people will no longer permit the rape of their countries by the IMF and transnationals." (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 27/1/04)

January 28: A formal invitation will be extended to Fidel Castro to visit Mt. Athos, by Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomeos, in his letter thanking him for the warm welcome during his historic visit to Cuba, which opened up new horizons for Orthodoxy and Hellenism, both in this island country of the Caribbean, and throughout the American continent. In a discussion with the press shortly before the landing of the "Olympic Airways" flight in Istanbul, the Ecumenical Patriarch mentioned the unexpectedly warm welcome he received from the Cuban government and Fidel Castro, as well as the pressures of the US. (*Macedonian Press Agency*, 28/1/04)

January 28: Still confined after more than nine months in a Curazao prison, five Cuban immigrants, three of which with have alleged ties to the Cuban dissidence, risk deportation back to their country. (*El Miami Herald*, 28/1/04)

January 28: Fidel Castro may visit Russia this year, said Cuban Ambassador to Moscow Jorge Martí Martínez. "I do not rule out that Fidel Castro could pay a reciprocal visit to Russia this year. I hope this will happen as soon as possible. He accepted an invitation to visit Russia from Vladimir Putin long ago," the ambassador told the press. The ambassador recalled that Putin was on an official visit to Cuba on December, 2000, during which he invited Castro to visit Moscow. Marti also said Cuban Minister Without Portfolio Ricardo Cabrisas, who oversees Cuba's foreign economic relations, will pay an official visit to Moscow in the first half of 2004. (*Interfax*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Amnesty International added four more Cubans to its list of "prisoners of conscience," reinforcing Cuba's status as the country with the highest number of such prisoners in the Western Hemisphere. "At least in terms of prisoners, it's not getting any better in Cuba," Eric Olson, Amnesty's Americas advocacy director, said in a telephone interview. The move brought to 84 the number of "prisoners of conscience" in Cuban jails. That includes all 75 government opponents convicted in summary trials during an island-wide sweep last spring. [[Newly Declared Prisoners of Conscience](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 29/1/04)

January 29: The III Hemispheric Meeting Against the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) concluded in Havana with calls for further resistance to what representatives from 32 countries called "economic aggression". One of the results of the meeting is the discussion of alternative models to the free trade agreement that delegates have labeled 'neo-colonial'. The Venezuelan delegation proposed a 'Bolivarian Alternative for America' (ALBA) that focuses on regional integration against what many see as the threat of United States hegemony. The meeting advocated greater unity and cooperation in the fight against the FTAA and convoked the First Social Forum of the Americas to be held in Quito, Ecuador this July. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Fidel Castro expressed his admiration for the serious and profound analysis of issues dealt with at the 3rd Hemispheric Encounter against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Speaking to one thousand representatives of social and people's movements from 32 nations, Fidel Castro warned about the dangers posed by the "imperialist project". (*AIN*, 29/1/04)

January 29: One hundred Venezuelan intellectuals signed an open letter addressed to Cuban Minister of Culture Abel Prieto, accusing Havana of "disseminating propaganda among Venezuelan writers, exalting the virtues of the Cuban regime." Prieto is currently attending the First Cuba-Venezuela Meeting of Writers, in Caracas. Personalities from a sector of the Venezuelan intelligentsia openly expressed their criticism of a conclave to which only pro-Chávez intellectuals were invited, excluding those who oppose him. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Venezuela's health minister accused opponents of President Hugo Chavez of trying to bribe Cuban doctors to defect from a health program at the center of a growing political alliance between Caracas and Havana. Roger Capella was responding to local media reports that a number of the more than 10,000 Cubans working in the "Inside the Barrio" program had left their posts and were seeking asylum in third countries. Left-winger Chavez has made the program, which brings primary health care to poor Venezuelan slum dwellers, the flagship of his cooperative ties with Fidel Castro. Although Venezuelan officials declined to confirm any defections, diplomatic sources said a number of Cuban doctors had deserted the joint project. (*Reuters*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Russian President Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with Fidel Castro to discuss relations between the two countries. (*ITAR-TASS*, 28/1/04)

January 30: The Russian Orthodox Church harshly criticized the visit to Cuba by Bartholomew I, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. "The Patriarch of Constantinople has no more than 50 followers" in Cuba, yet

Bartholomew I "has been able to open a church in the middle of Havana," said the Russian Orthodox hierarchy in a press release. They added that the Cuban authorities, however, "have not allowed the Moscow Patriarchs a single church, not one room, leaving them no choice but to hold service at the offices of the Russian Commercial Mission. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 2/2/04)

January 31: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, who is attending the two-day Forum for the Cooperation of Eastern Asia and Latin America, said that the Cuban delegation worked hard and that he believes the meeting has been useful. Pérez Roque added that the forum could turn into a mechanism for dialogue and cooperation between Latin America and eastern Asian nations. The Cuban official stressed that discussions among nations were based on mutual respect of each other's sovereignty. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 31 /1/04)

Terrorism

January 21: The Panama trial of four Cuban exiles accused of a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro has been postponed indefinitely, a defense attorney said. Luis Posada Carriles, considered Cuba's most wanted terrorist, was arrested in Panama City in late 2000 along with three Miami-Dade County men -- Gaspar Jiménez, Guillermo Novo and Pedro C. Remón -- accused of plotting to kill Castro with a bomb while he attended a presidential summit in Panama. The Cuban government released a statement expressing "worry and indignation" over the "maneuvers" by defense attorney Rogelio Cruz to delay the trial. Cruz acknowledged that the latest delay was caused by a change in judges that defense attorneys requested. Judge Enrique Paniza was replaced by Judge José Ho Juistiniani after Cruz raised questions about Paniza's impartiality. Ho postponed the trial after saying he had not had time to rule on important evidence. But Cruz said he did not want the delay. [[Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Relations](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 21/1/04)

January 21: The lawyer for four Cuban exiles accused by Cuba of plotting to kill Fidel Castro said he would ask a judge to release his clients temporarily after the court again suspended the trial. "We have been left once again without knowing a date for the start of the trial," said lawyer Rogelio Cruz. "The fairest thing would be for the Cubans to be released conditionally" until the trial begins. (*AP*, 21/1/04)

January 27: A Panamanian court has rejected an appeal to free four Cubans who are in jail on charges they plotted to assassinate Fidel Castro in 2000, the suspects' lawyer has said. Attorney Rogelio Cruz told the press that he had filed a habeas corpus motion but that it was denied by judges on the Second Superior Court. Local television reports said the judges ruled that the preventative detention of the four suspects was legal and therefore rejected the appeal. (*EFE*, 27/1/04)

January 29: The four terrorists accused of plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro are to remain in prison in Panama after a court declared their detention legal, government sources stated. A spokesman for the Supreme Court of Justice announced that the Second Higher Court considers legal the detention of Luis Posada Carriles and three other persons implicated in conspiring to assassinate Castro during the 10th Ibero-American Summit in Panama City. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 29/1/04)

January 29: Three juveniles who were captured in raids in Afghanistan have been released from a US prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and repatriated to their home country, the Pentagon said. The Pentagon would not identify the three or provide details about the circumstances surrounding their capture and release, saying they were concerned they may be threatened by Taliban or al-Qaeda sympathisers. (*News.24*, 30/1/04)

US-Cuba Relations

January 1: Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, dismissing US charges that Cuba is developing weapons of mass destruction as the words of a "liar," says Bush administration policies have made the risk of US invasion "a real, present danger for us." Mr. Alarcon took strong exception to remarks by Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton. "He's a liar," Mr. Alarcon said of Mr. Bolton during a recent interview in Geneva. Noting that the United States had cited Saddam Hussein's suspected weapons programs as justification for the invasion of Iraq, he said: "The risk of [Cuba] being attacked at this time — when preventive attacks have become a new American doctrine — is a real, present danger for us." (*The Washington Times*, 1/1/04)

January 1: US Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote in *The New York Times* that the United States was "working for the advent of a free Cuba." "This struggle will not be confined to the Middle East. We are working for the advent of a free Cuba, and toward democratic reform in other countries whose people are denied liberty", Powell wrote. (*Khaleej Times Online*, 1/1/04)

January 2: The Bush administration is becoming increasingly concerned about what it sees as a joint effort by Cuba and Venezuela to nurture anti-American sentiment in Latin America with money, political indoctrination and training. Roger Noriega, Secretary of State Colin Powell's top aide for Latin America, said that the 77-year-old Castro, in his "final days," appears to be "nostalgic for destabilizing elected governments. From the point of view of his democratic neighbors, Castro's actions are increasingly provocative." U.S. officials say Castro has dispatched thousands of doctors, teachers and sports trainers to Venezuela who supplement their professional duties by carrying out political tasks. Cuban agents are said to be providing security for high-ranking Venezuelan officials. Cuban officials acknowledge that Cubans are active in Venezuela but insist their mission is strictly humanitarian. (*AP*, 5/1/04)

January 3: The State Department has expelled a Cuban diplomat, accusing him of associating with criminal elements, US officials said. The expulsion of Roberto Socorro Garcia, a third secretary at the Cuban mission in Washington, was carried out last month without announcement. Officials at the Cuban mission did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment. Cuba has announced no retaliatory measures in response to the expulsion, said the US officials, asking not to be identified. (*AP*, 3/1/04)

January 5: Venezuela's neighbors are bothered by close ties between the Venezuelan and Cuban governments and their potential dangers to democracy, the State Department said. Department spokesman Adam Ereli also said Cuba remains an antidemocratic force in the region but stopped just short of implicating Venezuela in antidemocratic activities. [For more on this, see [US Department of State Daily Briefing, Cuba/Venezuela.](#)] (*AP*, 5/1/03)

January 6: The US Coast Guard has eight Cuban migrants in custody after their sinking boat was spotted by a cruise ship and was provided with care. The Coast Guard is expected to return the eight Cubans back to the island nation aboard a cutter under current US policy. Spokesman Michael Sheehan of Royal Caribbean Lines said passengers on the *Brilliance of the Seas* spotted the eight men 36 miles southwest of Key West. (*UPI*, 6/1/03)

January 6: The US State Department's top official for Latin America chided Cuba in a speech for attempting to destabilize the democratic governments of several Latin American countries, but dismissed the possibility of a military response from Washington. "The United States does not contemplate any military response," Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega said in an address to the Council of the Americas, while stressing that Washington and its allies would keep a close eye on Cuban leader Fidel Castro. "He's in his last days and perhaps he feels a little nostalgic for the days when he played an important role in the Americas," Noriega said, referring to the

septuagenarian Cuban autocrat. Noriega was replying to a question regarding the United States' stance on the alleged presence of foreign agents in several Latin American nations with the mission of destabilizing their governments. "It should be very clear to Fidel Castro that his actions have caught the attention of Latin American leaders and that his actions to destabilize Latin America are increasingly provocative to the inter-American community," the diplomat said at a press conference following his speech. "Those that continue in destabilizing democratically elected governments, interfering in the internal affairs of other governments, are playing with fire," he said. (*EFE*, 6/1/04)

January 6: Cuba announced that US officials have suspended regular migration talks scheduled in Havana this week. In Washington, State Department spokesman Curtis Cooper said he had no information about the migration talks, including whether they had been suspended. The Cuban Foreign Ministry said in a statement sent to international reporters that State Department officials had informed Havana the talks were impossible "until Cuban authorities show a true interest in dealing with very important issues for achieving orderly, legal and safe migration between the two countries." Without specifying what issues the Americans were reportedly concerned about, the Cuban foreign ministry said they had nothing to do with migration accords the countries signed in 1994 and 1995. [For more on this, see [Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Relations](#)] (*Sun Sentinel*, 6/1/04)

January 6: Despite US restrictions, Cuba looks forward to normal trade relations with the United States, where the island's purchases increased in 2003. In statements to the press, the director of Alimport enterprise Pedro Alvarez said that in the past 25 months Cuba has paid in cash some 524 200 000 dollars, 344 millions of which belong to last year when the amount of purchases doubled the 2002 figure. Alvarez also stressed the signing of an accord at a value of 10 million dollars with the governor of Kansas, Kathleen Sebelius, which was the first of its kind at that level. (*AIN*, 6/1/04)

January 7: US officials announced the suspension of bilateral migration talks with Cuba in a further sign of deteriorating relations between the two nations. US officials said the talks -- which occur every six months and were scheduled to begin today in Havana -- were cancelled because Cuban officials refused to discuss several key issues involving an accord governing the legal flow of migrants from Cuba to the United States. Among the issues are Cuba's failure to grant exit visas to about 200 Cubans who already have been issued permanent entry visas by the United States. "We have told Cuba that we're ready to go to talks when they're ready to discuss the serious issues that need to be discussed," Richard Boucher, the US State Department spokesman, said in Washington. "Unfortunately, the Cubans have continued to refuse to discuss the issues that we've identified." [For more on this, see [US Department of State Press Briefings](#).] (*Chicago Tribune*, 8/1/04)

January 8: Cuba's top diplomat for North America defended a diplomat recently expelled from the United States and rejected US officials' accusations that he had associated with criminal elements. The expulsion of Roberto Socorro Garcia, a third secretary at the Cuban mission in Washington, was carried out last month without announcement. US officials said last week that Socorro was expelled for associating with criminal elements but didn't elaborate further. But one news report said he had been linked to drug trafficking. "The Foreign Ministry totally rejects and categorically denies that comrade Roberto Socorro Garcia has associated with people or activities related to drug trafficking in the United States," Rafael Dausa Cespedes, the ministry's director for North America, said in a statement published in the Communist Party newspaper Granma and other Cuban media. (*AP*, 8/1/04)

January 8: Echoing comments made earlier this week by his deputy for Latin America, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that Cuba has tried to destabilize the region throughout the nearly two decades he has been serving in senior government posts. "I've been in senior national security positions for - on and off - over the last 17 years, and for that whole period of time, Cuba has been trying to do everything it could to destabilize parts of the region," he said at a press conference. "That has been his history. That has been his tradition for all these many years," Powell said, referring to Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who last week marked the 45th anniversary of his successful revolution.

"Fortunately," the secretary said, Cuba's ostensible attempts at fomenting trouble "turned out to be massive failures for the most part." (*EFE*, 8/1/04)

January 8: Dagoberto Rodriguez, the lead Cuban diplomat in Washington, accused the State Department of using lies as pretexts to cancel migration talks that were to have taken place this week between the two countries. "The ball is on their side of the court, and we expect them to come up with a date proposal to hold the talks, setting aside those pretexts that only seek to satisfy narrow anti-Cuban interests," said Rodriguez, chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington. (*Sun Sentinel*, 9/1/04)

January 8: Cuba and the state government of South Carolina signed a trade agreement that provides for thousands of tons of farm products to be sold to the island at a cost of \$10 million. This latest agreement was signed by Pedro Alvarez, president of Alimport, the Cuban company authorized by Fidel Castro's government to purchase agricultural products, and South Carolina Lt. Governor Andre Bauer, who heads a state delegation visiting the island. (*EFE*, 8/1/04)

January 9: During a press briefing, US National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, said that Cuba is "an anachronism in the hemisphere". "Cuba can't focus on its own people because it is an oppressive, nondemocratic state that is an anachronism in the Western Hemisphere. It belongs to another era". "It's a sad thing that the proud people of Cuba are the only ones who have, at this point, no hope for a democratic future", she added. (*White House Press Release*, 9/1/04)

January 9: Cuba rejected US accusations that it was seeking to destabilize democratic governments in Latin America with the help of Venezuela's populist president Hugo Chavez. A front-page editorial in the Communist Party newspaper Granma defended the presence of 12,000 Cuban doctors, teachers, sports trainers and social workers supporting Chavez's social programs in oil-rich Venezuela. "Since when has promoting education and culture been seen as destabilizing nations?" the editorial, probably penned by Fidel Castro himself, said. Poverty, unemployment, hunger, unpayable foreign debts and International Monetary Fund demands were to blame for social upheaval in Latin America, not Cuba, it said. [For more on this, see [Las mentiras, miedos y estupideces del imperio.](#)] (*Reuters*, 9/1/04)

January 10: Cubans continued their attempts to reach the US shores illegally last year, but that option is taking a back seat to the Mexican border route. According to Department of Homeland Security statistics, 1,541 Cuban immigrants made it to Florida in 2003, continuing a declining trend in the last four years, while 1,374 of them were picked up by the US Coast Guard at sea, the highest number of interceptions since 1999. However, quickly on the rise are the statistics for the US-Mexican border cross points, where increasingly more Cubans are arriving in search of political asylum. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/1/04)

January 13: Leading American and Cuban neuroscientists and psychiatrists are meeting in Cuba for a four-day conference, the second in a series of meetings to develop collaborative research in basic and clinical neuroscience. The agenda for the conference includes presentations by both US and Cuban clinicians and scientists. There will be sessions on Cuban science and health, depression, neurodegenerative disorders, stress and anxiety, schizophrenia, functional imaging, developmental problems of childhood, and addiction. (*Ascribe News*, 13/1/04)

January 13: Cuba has demanded that the US government "end the hostilities" against the five Cubans imprisoned in that country since 1998 and their families, and is calling on Washington to fulfill its international, legal and moral obligations. The Foreign Ministry statement condemns the fact that the US State Department recently stated that the wives of Gerardo Hernández and René González should have made their visa applications personally and not through the normal Ministry of Foreign Affairs channels. [For more on this, see [Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Relations.](#)] (*Granma International*, 14/1/04)

January 14: Relations between Cuba and the United States are likely to worsen this year because of the American elections, the Cuban ambassador to Spain said. "There are no clear horizons in our relationship with the US. This year is full of storm clouds," Isabel Allende told reporters in Madrid. "The embargo might be tightened for electoral purposes." She mentioned the US suspension this month of regular migration talks, the highest-level discussions between the two nations. Those talks, Allende said, are meant to prevent a repeat of the 1994 exodus in which tens of thousands fled Cuba for the United States. (*The Herald Tribune*, 14/1/04)

January 14: Despite the US Supreme Court ruling that persons ordered deported from the country cannot be held for longer than six months, more than 1,000 Cubans are detained indefinitely because Fidel Castro's government will not take them back and the United States will not release them under its administrative custody-review procedures. These Cubans have served their criminal sentences and been ordered deported. In some cases, relatively short prison terms have stretched into multiyear administrative detention with little chance of release anytime soon. Many of the detained Cubans departed from the port of Mariel as part of the 1980 exodus of 125,000 refugees. Their arrival in the United States created a legal dilemma: how to treat persons defined as "excludable aliens" whose return Castro refused. (*The Miami Herald*, 14/1/04)

January 15: The Coast Guard transported 14 Cuban migrants back to their homeland while another was sent to Guantanamo Bay for further questioning by federal immigration officials. The 15 migrants were rescued by the Coast Guard from two 16-foot rafts, which had been lashed together. They were discovered about 40 miles south of the Dry Tortugas. The migrants had been at sea for several days and were in various states of hypothermia and dehydration. Several were unconscious, said Petty Officer Anastasia Burns in a prepared release. (*Sun Sentinel*, 15/1/04)

January 15: Most Latin American countries have no policies geared toward promoting democracy in Cuba and are just waiting for Castro to die, said Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega. According to Noriega, the US feels that it is important not to wait, but to take action to expedite a democratic transition in Cuba. (*La Jornada*, 16/1/04)

January 15: The largest US library association opted not to demand the release of private Cuban librarians jailed by Fidel Castro's government in the spring, despite voting to support an investigation of the incarcerations by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. At its national meeting in San Diego, the American Library Association, noting that individuals operating private libraries in Cuba consider themselves "political dissidents" not librarians, left out specific language calling for their release. "Today marks a tragic date in the history of the American Library Association," said Robert Kent, head of the New York-based advocacy group Friends of Cuban Libraries. "They failed to live up to their highest ideal, which is a support for intellectual freedom as a universal human right." John W. Barry, a former ALA president and head of the group's international relations committee that was involved in writing the report, said that the group did act, but avoided stronger language because of internal opposition. (*Washington Times*, 16/1/04)

January 16: The US Supreme Court said it would decide whether hundreds of Cuban criminal aliens and other convicted immigrants who have completed their U.S. prison terms can be held indefinitely when they represent a danger to the community or their home countries refuse to repatriate them. More than 2,000 criminal aliens are currently being detained by federal authorities, based on Justice Department arguments that they are too much of a risk to be released. Most are part of an influx into the US of Cuban criminals from Port Mariel in 1980, when Fidel Castro temporarily lifted restrictions against leaving the island and released hardened convicts and others from Cuban jails and mental hospitals in what has become known as the Mariel boat lift. The Cuban government has refused to permit their return and, as a result, about 1,750 Mariel Cubans still remain in federal detention because of their danger to the community. (*The Washington Times*, 17/1/04)

January 16: A top US official and several public health experts warned of the urgent need to plan for chaos, shortages and a potential migrant crisis in a post-Castro Cuba. "There's a real possibility of a complex emergency" including "a high risk of chaotic migration," Andrew Natsios, Agency for International Development administrator, told a conference on the future of Cuba. The Bush administration's top officials on Cuba policy said an interagency commission studying how to hasten a transition to a free Cuba and get assistance to the island will report to President Bush by May 1. "There is growing urgency for this kind of planning," Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega said. Otto Reich, special White House envoy, said the swift delivery of aid ``would help the Cuban people see that the future is better than the past." (*The Miami Herald*, 17/1/04)

January 16: Roger Noriega, US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, said that the March 2003 crackdown on Cuba's pro-democracy dissidents by the regime of Fidel Castro "demonstrated the regime's palpable concern that there is something growing in Cuban society that it cannot control --specifically, a nascent democratic element that is losing its fear of the regime and dares to stand up and criticize it." Appearing at the Cuba Transition Project Seminar hosted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Noriega explained Castro's harsh reaction to dissidents as irrefutable evidence that "he does not want a democratic opposition to grow and topple him just as it had toppled regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere." The widely condemned crackdown, said Noriega, was the Cuban dictator's "attempt to eradicate civil society at its roots, to strangle it in its cradle before it could become a threat."

January 17: US President George W. Bush announced that he is proroguing for another 6 months legislation preventing US citizens from filing legal suits against the Fidel Castro regime for property expropriation. (*Europa Press*, 17/1/04)

January 18: More than 600 university students from the United States arrived in Havana aboard the cruise ship "SS Universal Explorer" as part of the University of Pittsburgh's Semester at Sea (SAS) program. Havana University director Juan Vela Valdes headed the delegation that received the students at the Sierra Maestra terminal, along Puerto Avenue, in the capital's historic district. Valdes praised the educational program, which is making its tenth visit to Havana. (*EFE*, 18/1/04)

January 19: Dagoberto Rodriguez, Cuba's top diplomat in Washington, wonders if "regime change" is in the cards in this election year. That possibility can't be ruled out, he says, because the administration "has proved a tendency in the past to solve problems through violent means." Rodriguez said Cuba's suspicions have been heightened by what he sees as several "provocative" U.S. actions in recent days. To Rodriguez, the most inexplicable and troubling development has been the recent U.S. allegation of Cuban meddling in Latin America, sometimes in collaboration with the country's main South American ally, Venezuela. "That issue could legitimately have been raised 20 years ago, but not now," Rodriguez said, pointing out that Cuba has normal relations with all hemispheric countries except El Salvador. "They are trying to recreate the phantom of Cuban interference," he said. (*AP*, 19/1/04)

January 20: The Cuban foreign minister has strongly denied allegations by US officials that a Cuban envoy in Washington associated with criminal elements and was involved in narcotics trafficking. The foreign ministry in Havana called the allegations against Roberto Socorro Garcia, who was expelled by the United States, a "gross lie" and a "manipulation of reality." "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs totally rejects and categorically rebuts that Roberto Socorro Garcia has been associated with people or activities connected with drug trafficking in the United States or has engaged in actions that are harmful to the U.S. government or that violate his diplomatic status," the ministry said in a statement. (*The Washington Post*, 20/1/4)

January 20: Representatives from the National Council of Churches, USA (NCC), are planning to intercede with Fidel Castro on behalf of the 75 dissidents on the island that were handed out lengthy prison sentences. "We have requested this meeting with President Castro because, from a moral standpoint, this matter is crucial to the interests of our

organization and its relations with Cuba," said Dr. Antonios (Tony) Kireopoulos, NCC Associate General Secretary for International Affairs and Peace, "We believe those sentences to be excessive." (*El Nuevo Herald*, 21/1/04)

January 21: The Carter Center in Atlanta is meeting with a dozen US-based Cuban exile groups to debate the island's future. According to the Carter Center, the meeting, a "private" affair organized "at the request" of these organizations, includes the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). (*Europa Press*, 21/1/04)

January 21: In Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque's opinion, US President George W. Bush's recent State of the Union Address was just "electoral rhetoric." Voicing his hopes that the US president will not go beyond words, he said that if Washington toughens its policy toward Havana, or should it choose to invade, Cuba would resist. (*Notimex*, 21/1/04)

January 21: Although Cuba typically discourages religion, the nation has nonetheless become the destination of "caravans" of Florida United Methodists over the past five years. The most recent one traveled from Christ United Methodist Church, which sent its pastor and two members to the island as part of what the denomination's Florida Conference refers to as the Cuba/Florida Covenant. Most recent figures indicate that there are 197 Methodist churches in Cuba, with many missions attached to each. (*St. Petersburg Times*, 21/1/04)

January 21: In his talks with 637 US students and 24 US professors, Fidel Castro stressed the importance of knowledge and culture to better understand the problems facing the world. Responding to several questions posed by the students, Castro stressed that the guarantee of the revolutionary process lies "on teaching the people how to think". The group is visiting Cuba as part of the Semester at Sea Cruise program. (*AIN*, 21/1/04)

January 21: In a press statement issued by the State Department, the US government condemned "the continued unfair detention" of political prisoners in Cuba, and demanded to Cuban authorities their release. The document emphasizes the release of 75 independent Cuban journalists, librarians, and human rights defenders, who have been kept in jail since April 2003. But it adds that: "Such deprivation and flagrant abuse of human rights have not been limited to the group of 75. In February, human rights activist Leonardo Bruzon Avila, who is in poor health due to repeated hunger strikes, will soon complete two years in prison without a trial. In March, blind pro-democracy activist Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leyva will also complete two years in prison without a trial. Gonzalez was jailed for protesting the police beating of an independent journalist. Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, who has worked tirelessly to express his commitment to the use of non-violence to achieve change, was arrested in December 2002 for attempting to teach others about international human rights practices ." [[U.S. Condemns Continued Imprisonment of Cuban Human Rights Defenders](#)] (*Europa Press*, 22/1/04)

January 21: At the closing ceremony of the 2nd Cuba-U.S. Biological Psychiatry Workshop, which took place over five days at Havana's Hotel Nacional, Dr. Ismael Clark, president of the Cuban Academy of Science, confirmed that the reestablishment of a free exchange of knowledge, experiences and achievements is the desire and aspiration of Cuban scientists. Clark qualified the conference as a unique opportunity for opening new horizons for mutually beneficial collaboration in neuroscience. Dr. Charles Nemeroff, head of the Faculty of Psychiatry at the University of Emory, Atlanta, expressed his hope that the current barriers to cooperation will be eradicated, thus permitting cooperative advances toward the common goal of preventing neuropsychiatric disorders and developing more effective treatments against them. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/1/04)

January 22: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque says that Washington's policy toward Cuba is "incoherent." Speaking with reporters at a news conference called to announce the new Venezuelan ambassador to Havana, Cuba's foreign minister said a majority of US farmers and businesspeople are opposed to the economic blockade of the island and that many are actively working to have it lifted. On another topic, Felipe Pérez Roque said that the State of the

Union address by US President George W. Bush, delivered in Washington, was simply "more of the same" and is typical of this election year in the United States. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/1/04)

January 22: A delegation of the US National Council of Churches left for Cuba on a six-day visit. The trip includes consultations with Cuban churches, celebration of the consecration of a Greek Orthodox cathedral in Havana, and possibly a meeting with Fidel Castro on political dissidents, the council said. The NCC, in the requested meeting with Castro, which was not yet confirmed, said it was "hoping to discuss church concerns and issues pertaining to US-Cuban relations, including the harsh sentences imposed on 75 dissidents by Cuba's courts in spring 2003. (*AFP*, 22/1/04)

January 22: The Port of Corpus Christi is sending another large shipment to Cuba. The shipment consists of 6.6 million pounds of beans currently sitting in a warehouse. (*KRIS TV*, 22/1/04)

January 23: Cuba supplied information to former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's intelligence service on the movement of US troops and other military activities, The Washington Times reports, citing a senior US Defense Department official. Intelligence ties between the two countries are believed to be an offshoot of Cuba's covert oil-purchasing arrangement with Iraq under Hussein, the report said. (*Dow Jones*, 23/1/04)

January 23: US Senator Max Baucus is asking Secretary of State Colin Powell to let Cuba send a veterinarian to Montana to expedite a sale of state cattle to that country. Cuban officials want a technical expert, Alejandro Portales, to visit Montana and inspect the cattle before they are shipped to Alimport, Cuba's top importing agency. Baucus said such inspections are routine and necessary because Cuba and the United States have no mutual inspection system. "Getting this visa approved is critical to moving a sale of live cattle," said Molt rancher Dave Kelsey, one of the producers who accompanied Baucus in a former trip to Cuba. "We're ready to roll, but the Cubans, understandably, want to see our cattle with their own eyes." (*AP*, 23/1/04)

January 23: Federal authorities said they seized two go-fast boats and arrested eight smuggling suspects caught transporting 5,600 pounds of marijuana and 100 pounds of hashish between Great Inagua Island in the Bahamas and Cuba. The Coast Guard said its ships and crews worked with aircraft and agents from the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to stop the smuggling operation. (*Sun Sentinel*, 23/1/04)

January 25: Film producer Robert Redford invited the family of Ernesto (Che) Guevara to a private screening of his company's new movie about the revolutionary's early years. "The Motorcycle Diaries", directed by Brazilian Walter Salles, and featuring Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal in the lead role, tells of Guevara's travels across Latin America before joining the revolution of Cuban leader Fidel Castro. "I've come to present the movie I produced about Che," Redford said in brief comments to reporters outside a Havana theatre, "I'm very happy to be here." Guevara's widow, Aleida March, and several of their children were seen arriving for the show. (*The National Post* 25/1/04)

January 26: Fidel Castro paid a call on actor Robert Redford at his Havana hotel and discussed his latest film, on revolutionary icon Che Guevara. Redford was in Cuba over the weekend wearing his producer's hat for a private screening of "The Motorcycle Diaries" for the widow and children of the legendary Argentine guerrilla fighter. "He came to me (...) He seemed in good health, good humor, good spirit," Redford said of the 77-year-old Cuban leader after their brief encounter at the Hotel Nacional. (*CNN*, 26/1/04)

January 26: Eight Cuban men came ashore Key West, Florida, police said. A patrolling officer spotted the migrants at the corner of White Street and Atlantic Blvd. Their small homemade boat was discovered beneath one of the underpasses at the White Street Pier, and they were transferred to the Monroe Co. Detention Center to be picked up by the US Border Patrol. (*The Miami Herald*, 27/1/04)

January 27: Republican US Senate hopeful Larry Klayman stepped up his call to forcibly remove Fidel Castro, whom he described as "a master terrorist" and a primary threat to US security. Five Republican and three Democratic candidates seeking the vacant Senate seat created by the retirement of three-term US Senator Bob Graham, Democrat - Miami Lakes, spoke about their campaigns during a two-hour forum at the 10th annual planning meeting hosted by The Associated Press. "It's time to remove Castro once and for all, by force if necessary," said Klayman, a former Justice Department attorney. "He's had free reign for too long." He said Castro also has bioweapons and shelters international terrorists while the U.S. looks the other way. "All the politicians go around talking about how bad the situation is, but they don't do anything," Klayman said. "If we can do it for the Iraqis, create democracy there, can't we do it for the Cubans who have done more for this country?" Governor Jeb Bush said he would not comment on suggestions the US should invade Cuba to overthrow Castro. (AP, 27/1/04)

January 27: The two Cuban-Americans in the Senate race, Republican Mel Martinez of Orlando and Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas support Fidel Castro's removal, but not by force. "I am totally for a regime change in Cuba, but we must do it by peaceful means unless it's apparent that Castro is a more obvious threat than he appears to be today," said Martinez, who came to the US from Cuba at 15 to live with foster parents until his family was able to rejoin him. "The notion of taking a collective military action in Cuba without any specific evidence of imminent threats to America I would not support," said Penelas, who also spoke Spanish on two occasions to differentiate himself from his Democratic opponents. (AP, 27/1/04)

January 27: The National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC) applauds the introduction of the bi-partisan US-Cuba Trademark Protection Act (S. 2002) in the United States Senate. This bi-partisan bill will help US companies protect trademarks registered in Cuba and prevent Cuba from becoming a haven for counterfeiting and trademark encroachment. "We commend Senators Baucus and Craig for introducing this comprehensive legislation aimed at protecting the more than 5,000 American trademarks registered in Cuba. Currently, these trademarks are vulnerable to counterfeiting and infringement, thanks to a five-year-old special-interest law known as Section 211," said Bill Reinsch, president of NFTC. The bi-partisan bill was recently introduced by Senator Max Baucus (Democrat) and Senator Larry Craig (Republican). Similar bi-partisan legislation in the House, H.R. 2494, has more than doubled its sponsorship to 19 members since its introduction in the summer of 2003. (US Newswire, 27/1/04)

January 27: An amnesty for 75 Cuban dissidents sentenced to long prison terms in last year's crackdown would help Americans working to end US sanctions against the communist-run island, a representative of a leading American church council visiting Cuba said. "It's an internal matter," the Reverend Fred Morris, Latin America director for the National Council of Churches USA, said of the long sentences given out last year. But, he said, "a gesture of compassion could help" efforts by the council and other groups fighting for an end to the trade embargo and restrictions on American travel to the Caribbean country. Under the leadership of Reverend Bob Edgar, a United Methodist minister, the delegation hoped to meet with Castro and discuss the dissidents' sentences, among other concerns. But, the day before the group was to leave, no meeting had occurred. Edgar late last year sent Castro a letter urging him to "please take advantage of the coming Christmas season to declare an amnesty for those dissidents, either reducing their sentences greatly, or, better yet, simply freeing them as a sign of good will and desire to work toward reconciliation." (AP, 27/1/04)

January 28: The Bush administration has eliminated cultural exchange licenses that allowed just about any American to travel to Cuba, which has been subject to a U.S. trade embargo for more than four decades since Fidel Castro seized power. These so-called "people-to-people" licenses, introduced in 1999 by the Clinton administration, were intended to let Cubans and Americans learn about each other through educational trips. But federal officials now say the exchanges had become little more than thinly veiled tourism and eliminated the program. The last licenses expired on December 31 and some travel agencies are scrambling to find a legal alternative. (AP, 28/1/04)

January 30: The Cuban government agency responsible for importing food and agricultural products from the United States has selected A.R. Savage & Son as its shipping agent for goods sent from Tampa Bay. The agreement formalizes the business relationship between Alimport and A.R. Savage of Tampa, which has handled five shipments of the animal feed supplement dicalcium phosphate from Port Manatee and private docks to Cuba last year, according to Arthur Savage, chief executive of the company. Although trade with Cuba remains limited, the designation may give Savage the inside track if it expands over time. (*St. Petersburg Times*, 30/1/04)

January 30: Fidel Castro has accused his US counterpart George Bush of plotting to assassinate him. Speaking at the end of a regional meeting against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, Castro said the assassination was aimed at overthrowing Cuba's communist government. "We knew that Mr Bush had made a commitment with the mafia of the Cuban-American Foundation to kill me. `I said it once before and today I'll say it clearer: I accuse him!" Castro told some 1000 representatives from 32 nations. Cuba's long-serving leader vowed to "go down fighting" if the US tried to invade the country at any time". "I am not asking to survive a war. I've already done my part and I still have to do what I have to do. With weapons in hand, I don't care how I die, but I'm confident that if they invade us, I will go down fighting," he was quoted as saying. After charging Bush with conspiring with the virulent anti-Castro Cuban-American community of Miami, Florida to turn Castro into a dead man, he said referring to himself: "The deceased can still talk. The deceased can make plans. He's not dead yet." "And those idiots better not believe we're wasting our time, because we really work at our job. This country will never give up. It will never lay down its weapons," Castro stressed. He said Cuba does not want "in any way to assume the cost of a war (against) Yankee imperialism," but warned that despite the tremendous pressure from Washington, "we won't budge at all from our principles." (*Al Jazeera, AFP, The Miami Herald*, 30, 31/1/04)

January 31: Top US officials have dismissed the allegations by Fidel Castro that US president George Bush was plotting to assassinate him. "The world would be better off without Fidel Castro, a lot better off, but that doesn't mean anybody's trying to kill him," said Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, who was in Miami. "It's a ridiculous assertion." (*The Miami Herald*, 31/1/04)

January 31: The US State Department's top official for Latin America said the negotiations for the 34-nation Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), would not be derailed by governments that don't fully support the trade bloc. Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, was asked at a business conference whether Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro can influence other Latin American nations to lessen their support for the President George W Bush-backed free trade area. "I don't think any one country constitutes a roadblock on the FTAA," Noriega said. "We'll just go around them." (*The Globe and Mail*, 31/1/04)