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Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba

February 2006

Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Several dissident organizations make calls to put an end to repression against their members and to violence. Cuba's 15th International Book Fair takes place throughout the island. The Conference of Cuban Bishops reorganizes its structures.

Economy: Cuba and Venezuela seal agreements on cement and agriculture. Trade between Cuba and China grows. The number of crimes in Cuba's state economy increased in 2005.

Foreign Affairs: Several Latin American and Caribbean countries benefit from Operation Miracle. Cuba offers support to Iran on its atomic program for peaceful purposes. The European Parliament urges EU member states to increase their pressure on Cuba to release all political prisoners. Some 200,000 Cubans crowd Revolution Plaza for a ceremony granting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez UNESCO's 2005 Jose Marti International Prize.

US-Cuba Relations: US oil executives and government representatives meet with Cuban officials in Cancun. Under pressure from the US government, the Sheraton Hotel in Mexico City expels a group of Cubans who were meeting with US oil executives.



Economy

February 1: Cuba, Venezuela trade amounted to USD 1.2 billion in 2005, said Venezuelan ambassador to Cuba Adán Chávez, brother of President Hugo Chávez. In a news release published by the Venezuelan President's Office, the diplomat stressed that "by the end of 2005, the economic flow boosted by Venezuela-Cuba agreements was around USD 1.2 billion." "Based on production this year, we have a goal to reach USD 2 billion in the two periods," the communiqué added. Adán Chávez added that in October 2005, Caracas and Havana initialed 182 new agreements in the framework of the sixth joint committee intended to assess progress in bilateral relations in the fields of education, health, energy and petroleum. He added that Cuba granted 10,000 scholarships for Venezuelans willing to study community integral medicine. Some 4,500 Venezuelans started these studies last year. (*El Universal*, 1/2/06)

February 2: Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago will increase their relations with the creation of an office to facilitate trade, announced Jerry Narace representative of the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Tourism and Trade in Havana. Narace explained that the office will have its headquarters in Havana and will facilitate exchanges, contributing to the elimination of linguistic barriers and differences among the two country's commercial systems. (*Ahora*, 2/2/06)

February 3: Cuban Basic Industry Minister Yadira Garcia toured Havana Province to check on the national energy program. In visits to San Nicolas de Bari, Nueva Paz, Madruga and Santa Cruz del Norte municipalities Garcia voiced satisfaction with the quality of the power generators installed there. The new sets will contribute 280 mw to the National Energy System, the minister was quoted as saying by Granma daily. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/2/06)

February 5: Fidel Castro offered to send half a million tons of cement to Venezuela, which could be paid for with products, said Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. In a letter read by Chávez in his Sunday radio and television program *Aló Presidente*, Castro wrote. "I decided to communicate to Chávez that we are in a position (...) of offering half a million tons of cement which can be paid for with Venezuelan products or any other surplus that may be available". (*Reuters*, 5/2/06)

February 10: Mexican trade surplus with Cuba rose 28.7 percent year-on-year to \$181.9 million (152 mln euro) in the period January to November 2005. Over the last three years Mexico reversed the downward trend that marked its trade relations with Cuba before 2002. While diplomatic relations between Mexico and Cuba have been strained in recent years, trade relations between the two countries have been improving. Mexican exports to Cuba stood at \$200 million (167 million euro) in the first 11 months of 2005, a 26 percent year-on-year increase. The growth rate in Mexican exports to Cuba in the first 11 months of 2005 was the highest one registered since 1995, according to foreign trade data of the Bank of Mexico (Banxico). (*Latin America News Digest*, 10/2/06)

February 10: Cuba sold about 160 million of its world-famous cigars in 2005, in line with recent years' sales, a tobacco executive said in announcing plans for this year's annual international cigar festival. Sales numbers in recent years have averaged around 150 million cigars. Manuel Garcia, vice president of the island's cigar-marketing firm Habanos SA, told reporters that the world market for premium cigars is about 400 million, about half of which are sold in the US. Cuba cannot legally export cigars or any other products to the US under a 45-year-old American trade embargo against the island. European countries are the largest market for Cuba's \$350 million annual cigar business, especially Spain and France, followed by Germany. Asia is also a growing market for Cuban cigars, Garcia said. (*AP*, 10/2/06)

February 10: A Cuban delegation visited a Russian airplane manufacturing plant in Ulyanovsk, about 550 miles east of Moscow, and expressed interest in purchasing three Russian passenger airliners. Cuban Ambassador to Russia Jorge Marti Martinez, who headed the delegation, said Cuba wanted to buy three of the Tu-204 from the plant in Ulyanovsk for Cubana Air Lines. (*Novosti*, 10/2/06)

February 12: Fidel Castro met with visiting Chinese State Councillor Chen Zhili, at the Chinese embassy in Havana. Castro said the rapid economic development of China has become one of the engines behind the growth of world economy. He also spoke highly of the "putting people first" governance philosophy upheld by the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government and the "scientific concept of development". On Cuba's domestic situation, Castro said that in view of the hiking world oil prices, his government has placed high priority on energy conservation in the country's economic work. Cuba is ready to cooperate with China in this field, he added. (*Xinhua*, 13/2/06)

February 13: The success of biotechnology research in Cuba is the main pull-factor for a Swiss delegation arriving in the country for a one-week official visit. Leading the delegation is the State Secretary for Education and Research, Charles Kleiber, the highest-ranking Swiss government representative to travel to Cuba on official business. "There are very few relations in the field of science and we think that it's the moment now to strengthen our cooperation," Kleiber,

who was previously in Cuba in 2002, told the press. He said the aim of the trip was to see where Cuban science was at the moment, mainly in the field of biotechnology. (*SwissInfo*, 13/2/06)

February 14: Carib Cement has turned to Cuba to help supplement its cement production, following the shortfall that the company says was due to inclement weather in October last year. The cement manufacturer had initially publicly stated that it was looking to its sister firm Arawak Cement in Barbados to make up the deficit. However, the company's marketing manager Alice Hyde confirmed that the bulk version came from Cuba. While the cement imported from Cuba was far less expensive than the brand out of Barbados, it attracted a 40 per cent duty because Cuba is not a member of Caricom. (*Jamaica Observer*, 15/2/06)

February 14: Over 88,000 house electrical-system protectors will be installed in the eastern city of Camagüey, in the first half of 2006, as part of the Cuban project to optimize power. The protectors will be used to replace the faulty or inappropriate switches between the public electric supply and houses, according to local-electric-company officials. This measure is part of the Energy Revolution that Cuba is developing and includes the change of switches with an amperage capacity under 32, they said. The program to increase energy efficiency in Cuba also includes installation of thousands of emergency generators connected to the national system, devoted to eradicate power outages due to generation shortage. (*Prensa Latina*, 14/2/06)

February 15: The government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is set to make a new disbursement of petrodollars to further cement trade ties with Cuba. Luis Quiaro, president of Banco Industrial de Venezuela, the largest Venezuelan state bank, explained that, "We are making a contribution of capital amounting to US\$50 mn for our branch in Cuba. Obviously, this money goes to the parent company, and is then deposited in our Cuban branch." This money is intended to fund "Venezuelan, Cuban or joint companies," in order to fuel bilateral trade. (*El Universal*, 15/2/06)

February 15: C completed down to 3 465 metres in the west part of Bloc 7, the Tarara 100 well, operated by Pebercan, was successfully production-tested. The oil quality is similar to that of the Santa Cruz find which is significantly better than Canasi and Seboruco. The well has found a new shallow field different from the conventional objective of Veloz carbonates. The company is running long-term production and pressure tests to assess the extent and quality of this new potential field, which is at the limit of the available seismic data. Depending on the results of these tests, an evaluation program will be prepared to develop this new oil reservoir. However, pending the result of the current surveys and tests, there is still nothing to confirm that the productive structure revealed can have a significant impact on the company's reserves. (*Pebercan Press Release*, 15/2/06)

February 15: Venezuela and Cuba invested some US\$26 million (euro21.9 million) in joint agricultural projects last year, the government news agency reported. Cuban specialists have helped set up chicken, rabbit and pig farms that have benefited 2,500 low-income Venezuelans, under a series of cooperative projects, said Francisco Galan, a vice minister at Cuba's Agriculture Ministry, in a Bolivarian News Agency broadcast. The projects include 33 Cuban advisors in sugar cane and coffee plantations in the Venezuelan state of Lara. The Cuban specialists have also been training Venezuelans in agricultural techniques in the cultivation of aromatic plants and other farming projects, Galan said. (*Business Week Online*, 15/2/06)

February 17: During his address at the official ceremony of the delivery of Chinese buses to the island, Fidel Castro highly praised the importance of the collaboration with China in the field of transportation. Castro said that the deal for 800 of the 1,000 buses bought in July prove the remarkable moment Cuba is living. The Cuban leader extolled the Chinese authorities' respect during the negotiations and said that the deal to purchase buses, like the purchase of 12 locomotives last January, were calmly and consciously transacted, in accordance with the practice of meeting financial obligations without the smallest delay. He also referred to a deal with the Chinese firm Yutong for the purchase of 8,000 inter-provincial, municipal, urban, school and tourism buses. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/2/06)

February 18: Iran Export Development Bank and Cuba Foreign Bank signed an agreement to facilitate export of Iranian goods as well as engineering and technical services to Cuba. The Majlis press and news affairs department reported that the two countries' speakers of parliaments were present in the signing ceremonies. The agreement stipulates for the Iranian bank to allocate up to a 90 million dollars ceiling for credit facilities. It is estimated that Tehran-Havana trade will top 50 million dollars this year. Iran has a positive trade balance with Cuba. (*IRNA*, 19/2/06)

February 20: Trade between Cuba and China is growing at a breathtaking rate, and is the most visible expression of the close ties between the two countries, which appear to have overcome past differences and reached a high point in their relations. In the space of just one year, from October 2004 to October 2005, bilateral trade increased from 551 million dollars to 775.3 million dollars, moving the Asian giant up from fourth to second place among Cuba's trading partners. Trade with China is likely to climb quickly to the one billion dollar level, and Cuban foreign trade experts call Beijing "the most dynamic agent" in the economy of this socialist nation. Chinese exports to Cuba include domestic appliances, the machinery for manufacturing bicycles, and equipment to modernize the country's telecommunications, for a total cost of 200 million dollars. Havana in turn exports sugar, nickel, tobacco, Biorat rat poison, the medical drug interferon, high-technology medical equipment, vaccines and shellfish. So far, the two nations have entered into ten joint ventures, according to the Ministry for Cooperation and Foreign Investment. Official sources informed IPS that China has extended credit of 400 million dollars to pay for infrastructure and development exports. (*IPS*, 20/2/06)

February 22: A recent study has confirmed that drought is intensifying in Cuba since it rains much less now than 46 years ago. The situation is worst in the eastern provinces of the island, says the study carried out by the Cuban National Institute of Water Resources (INRH). INRH experts warned that the average annual rainfall has decreased, between 1961 and 2000, from 1,468 millimeters to 1,335, as posted on Granma newspaper online. In the eastern part of the country the situation is critical since the average rainfall has dropped to 1,279 millimeters. Rainfall in all five eastern provinces has diminished by 260 millimeters, adds the report. (*AIN*, 22/2/06)

February 22: Cuba broke the record of foreign tourists accommodated in a day when reporting 65,280 travelers in pleasure facilities, according to an official note issued by the Tourism Ministry (MINTUR). Released by the MINTUR website, the report adds this number was last broken on March 25, 2005 with 64,956 people lodged in Cuban hotels. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/2/06)

February 23: In 2005, Cuba increased its foreign trade 23 percent, a reversal of the situation in the 90s, triggered by Cuba's loss of its traditional partners when socialist countries in the Soviet Union and Europe disappeared. Cuba's main trade partners now are Venezuela and China, followed by Spain and Canada. This weekend at Expocuba, Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Raul de la Nuez also highlighted the increased trade with the region. The island's total trade with Latin America and the Caribbean has grown from 50 percent to 72 percent. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/2/06)

February 24: A Swiss delegation has recently visited Cuba in order to learn from the country's biotechnology sector, which is one of the most advanced in the developing world. Switzerland has scant relations with Cuba in the field of science and is looking to strengthen co-operation in this area. Cuba currently exports biotechnology products to 50 countries in the world, mainly in Latin America and Asia, and overseas sales total around US\$300mn per year. Cuba is one of the top three drug exporting nations in Latin America. (*Emerging Markets Daily News*, 24/2/06)

February 24: Tang Rouxin, president of SINOSURE, China's leading export and credit insurance corporation, concluded a visit to Cuba with promising results for trade between the two nations. SINOSURE is the official Chinese institution that finances the country's exports. It has growing annual operations in world trade, which exceeded 22 billion dollars in 2005. As a result of the visit by the Chinese official, a memorandum of understanding was signed between SINOSURE and Cuban authorities, which offers a financial framework to cover the dynamic growth in commerce between Cuba and the People's Republic of China. Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas and Central

Bank Minister-President Francisco Soberon signed the document on behalf of Cuba, in a ceremony that was presided over by Fidel Castro. (*Granma*, 27/2/06)

February 25: The number of crimes in Cuba's state economy increased in 2005 due to lack of control by State agencies. During an annual general meeting of the Ministry of Domestic Trade it was reported that in 2005 there were "45 more crimes than in the previous year", for which no figures were given, raising the losses to 6.5 million pesos (\$260,000 dollars). In 2005, 890 audits were conducted of companies under this department, "and more than half of the audited entities were assessed as poor or inadequate in terms of economic control", according to newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*. (*AFP*, 27/2/06)

February 26: Havanatur international tour operators and the Ecuadorian air company TAME have endorsed an alliance to promote the Caribbean island as a tourist destination. Havanatur General Manager Pedro Hernandez highlighted that TAME is sending one flight a week to the Cuban capital from February 11 in order to consolidate that route and open new tourist opportunities for his agency and the Ecuadorian airline. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/06)

February 27: Rum, Cuba's "national drink," is getting scarce due to a shortage of alcohol supplies for its producer/distributor in the Cuban capital. Dora Carbonell, assistant production manager for the Drinks and Soda Company who is in charge of production and distribution in the Havana area, said in a statement published in the weekly magazine "Trabajadores" that in January there was already no way to supply rum to the distribution network ("cadena de distribución") for products sold in Cuban pesos. "In January we sold nothing to the "cadena" and in February only 2,170 cases, but since this month we have received none of the necessary raw materials, there's a danger we will not even be able to export what we had projected for March," Carbonell said. Cuba produces some 34 commercial brands of rum and has 11 plants dedicated to its production for export. The island produces a total of 43 million cases of rum for both export and domestic sales per year, according to statistics of the Food Industry Ministry. (*EFE*, 27/2/06)

February 27: More than a thousand cigar lovers from 60 countries ringed the center of the cigar universe in Havana, comparing notes and celebrating Cuba's finest smokes. Distributors, specialists and simple aficionados packed opening day of the Eighth Habanos Festival, an annual event sponsored by Habanos, a global distributor of the esteemed Cuban cigar. British actor Joseph Fiennes was among a hundred celebrities on hand for the festivities, dedicated this year to Habanos' leading brand, Cohiba. The presence of the 36-year-old actor at the event, who played the lead of Will Shakespeare in the 1998 film comedy "Shakespeare in Love," coincided with an opening performance based on the Bard's "Romeo and Juliet" at the Havana Grand Theater. The performance of "Shakespeare and His Masks" by the Cuba National Ballet marked the 131st anniversary of the Romeo y Julieta brand. "We dedicate this festival to the emblematic brands of premium Cuban cigars" which total 34 brands of pure, hand-rolled tobacco, said Enrique Babot, marketing director of Habanos SA, the Spanish-Cuban-French company that virtually holds a monopoly on Cuban cigars. (*AFP, Canadian Press*, 27/2/06)

February 28: Smoking bans around the world have cast a pall of uncertainty over the Cuban cigar business which is angling for emerging markets such as China to keep growing, retailers said. In Cuba, where the government has been unable to enforce a year-old smoking ban, hundreds of wealthy aficionados and cigar sellers are enjoying unrestricted smoking in public at the annual festival of the Habano, Cuba's premium hand-rolled cigar. "Despite the world's determination to stop people smoking, the sale of cigars is bearing up quite well," said Hong Kong entrepreneur and international socialite David Tang. "We had a very good year in 2005, but the uncertainties are growing hourly," said Simon Chase marketing director at Hunters & Frankau, exclusive Habanos distributors for Britain. British lawmakers voted to ban smoking in all pubs, clubs and indoor public spaces in England from mid 2007, adding to the growing list of countries taking a tough stand against smoking. Spain, Cuba's largest cigar market, banned smoking in all offices and certain other public places as of January 1. Cuban cigar maker Habanos S.A., a joint venture between the state-run tobacco industry and Franco-Spanish tobacco group Altadis, is preparing for a difficult year in 2006. Habanos is

turning for growth to new markets in the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, including China where the rise of capitalist entrepreneurs has increased cigar smoking. (*Reuters*, 28/2/06)

Exile Community

February 6: The case against two Florida International University employees believed to be supplying Cuba information about South Florida exiles has stirred up once again the element of political distrust that exists between exiles on the left and the right. The question for exiles of who's trustworthy in the island's opposition, comprised of people mostly born and raised in the communist system, is even more complex than whom to trust on this side of the Florida Straits. FIU Professor Damián Fernández explained that one of the Castro government's main goals is to create division and distrust among dissidents because the government fears them. Another important goal for the communist government: to get exiles to distrust the dissidents so much that Cuban Americans stop supporting them. "These people live under tremendous psychological and financial pressure," Fernández said. "Life is very hard for the legitimate ones. They operate in a climate of total mistrust, and it's hard to trust and believe if you operate within that context." (*The Miami Herald*, 5/2/06)

February 9: The Democracy Movement has called for picketing in front of the Bahamas Consulate General to protest the brutal treatment of Cuban migrants by Bahamian authorities and the beating, arrests and confiscation of their cameras and videos, against TV reporters from Univision and Telemundo. The pickets demand a thorough investigation on the side of the Bahamian Government of the events that took place on February 7 in Nassau, as well as the documented and well known abuses against Haitian, Cubans and others detained in the Bahamas due to immigration reasons. On February 7, an official of the Defense Forces of the Carmichael Road Detention Center in Bahamas noticed that one of the Cuban detainees had a cellular phone, resulting in a vicious and forceful search. The Cuban detainees were mistreated and beaten. All their properties were broken or confiscated. (*Puente Informativo*, 9/2/06)

February 15: Representatives of the Spiritual Leaders Working Group, Monsignor Agustín Román, Rev. Martín Añorga and Rev. Onell Soto got together to ask the Cuban people to not cooperate with government-organized mobs that harass human rights activists on the island. Dozens of religious leaders of the exile community joined to draft a document titled, "Contra el terror, el civismo" (Against terror, civility). In the document, they manifest their support for those neighbours in Cuba who have shown their solidarity with activists that have been attacked by government-organized mobs. (*Puente Informativo*, 15/2/06)

February 17: Miami-based organizations that promote armed struggle against Fidel Castro's regime announced the creation of an aid committee to help an "insurrection in Cuba". The appeal is part of a statement calling for the firm support of organizations and individuals to accelerate the dismantling of the regime via an uprising from within the island. The signatories to the proposal are Movimiento de Recuperación Revolucionaria (MRR), Congreso Nacional Cubano, Comandos F-4, Comando Nazario Sargén, Fundación Caribe, Junta Militar, Municipio Bayamo and Cubanos Combatientes No Afiliados. (*El Miami Herald*, 18/2/06)

February 22: Carlos Costa has been dead for 10 years, shot out of the sky along with three other men by Cuban fighter pilots as they flew unarmed airplanes on a humanitarian mission, looking for Cuban rafters in 1996. Costa's parents have preserved his bedroom and his things exactly as they were then. This February 24 marks the 10th anniversary of the Brothers to the Rescue incident, when a Cuban MiG fired missiles at two small airplanes over the Florida Straits, killing three American citizens: Costa, 29; Armando Alejandro, Jr., 45; Mario de la Peña, 24; and U.S. resident Pablo Morales, 29. The shoot-down, which galvanized Miami's Cuban exile community and has set the tone for US-Cuba relations for the last 10 years, still haunts the family members of the victims. They have immersed themselves in a

quixotic quest for justice, collecting evidence in hopes the US government will indict Raúl Castro, head of the Cuban armed forces. Cuba maintains that the Brothers' unarmed planes violated its territorial airspace, but the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organization concluded the planes were over international waters and the UN Security Council condemned Cuba by a 13-0 vote. (*The Miami Herald*, 22/2/06)

February 25: The White House and Cuban-American leaders are finalizing the date for a meeting in March to discuss the Cuban migration accords and the controversial wet-foot, dry-foot policy. US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said the tentative date for the meeting is March 8. White House spokesman Blair Jones did not confirm a date, but said, "We are committed to holding a meeting as soon as possible." The White House agreed to meet with Cuban-American leaders to discuss US-Cuba migration policy after a well-known Cuban exile activist went on a hunger strike to protest the repatriation of 15 Cuban migrants who had been found by the Coast Guard standing on the pilings of the old Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys. Cuban-American leaders hoped that the Republican Bush administration would revoke, or at least change, the policy to allow the migrants access to lawyers and contact with family members on humanitarian grounds. (*The Miami Herald*, 25/2/06)

Foreign Affairs

February 1: The Czech Foreign Ministry considers the explanation of the arrest of Czech supermodel Helena Houdova and psychologist Mariana Kroftova, which Cuba's Chargé d'Affaires Aymee Hernandez presented, incomplete and unsatisfactory, Richard Krpac from the ministry said. "The Foreign Ministry expects to receive additional information from the Cuban diplomats as soon as possible," Krpac said. Cuban police detained both Czech women when they were taking photographs of a slum in Havana. Hernandez said they were arrested because they deliberately waged a campaign against Cuba in cooperation with Cuban dissidents. Krpac said that Hernandez was not able to say why Houdova and Kroftova had not been allowed to contact the Czech Embassy in Havana. He added that Hernandez said she will require the information from the authorities in Havana. According to the ministry, Cuban police "clearly violated international law." (*CTK*, 1/2/06)

February 1: Venezuelan Vice-Minister for Africa, Reinaldo Bolívar, informed that his office will have Cuba's support in the development of five cooperation projects in African countries, modelled after social missions that the Venezuelan Government finances in the country. Havana's participation "is indispensable" given that Cuba is the Latin America nation with the most embassies in that continent. (*El Nacional*, 1/2/06)

February 1: Cuba and Venezuela are the first countries to offer aid to flood victims in Bolivia, where several areas were declared under state of emergency due to recent strong rains, Bolivian President Evo Morales has confirmed. Morales said that Venezuela is sending food and material aid, while Cuba offered six tons of medicine and 140 physicians to assist some 55,000 victims. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/2/06)

February 1: Fidel Castro told the 843 Cuban participants at the recently closed World Social Forum in Venezuela he hopes consciousness and internationalist spirit were strengthened with the meeting, Granma daily reported. Addressing members of the Cuban delegation, specifically the health workers who took part in Cuban missions worldwide, the Cuban leader praised their international mission. "Integration, solidarity and making use of human capital to solve the problems of humanity like war, terrorism, genocide, torture, lies, and imperialism are the actions progressive forces should carry out now," the Cuban president declared. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/2/06)

February 1: President of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, started a working visit to Cuba, responding to an invitation by Fidel Castro. According to Granma newspaper, the aim of his visit is to step up the excellent ties of friendship and cooperation existing between the two Caribbean nations and respective governments. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/2/06)

February 2: Six Cubans have died and eight have been rescued after being stranded at sea for more than two weeks, family members said. Miriam Valiente Rodriguez told the press that her son, Yohan Concepcion Valiente, 29, was one of the survivors spotted by a fishing vessel on Elbow Cay in the Bahamas. The Coast Guard has not confirmed if the migrants were the same ones aboard a rickety boat spotted on January 26 about 46 miles (74 kilometers) southeast of Marathon. Authorities lost track of that boat in bad weather and called off the search after 48 hours. (AP, 3/2/06)

February 2: Cuba and Venezuela said they would oppose moves to refer Iran to the UN Security Council over an atomic program the West fears could be hiding weapons development. "We will vote No," Venezuelan Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Gustavo Marquez Marin, told reporters, as the UN nuclear watchdog gathered in Vienna, where it was expected to endorse a European-led resolution demanding referral. If Venezuela holds out it would force the issue to a vote, rather than the IAEA's usual tradition of achieving decisions by consensus. Cuba, a new member of the board of governors, said in a statement it would also vote against referral, saying it would amount to "manipulation by the United States and their allies". (AFP, 2/2/06)

February 2: Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque laid a wreath at the Monument to Cuban Heroes in Namibia and highlighted friendship and cooperation between the two countries. In a two-day visit to this capital, Perez Roque gave Namibian President Hifikepunje Pohamba an official invitation to attend the 14th Non-Aligned Countries Movement (NAM) Summit, to be run in Havana next September 11-16. (Prensa Latina, 2/2/06)

February 2: The European Parliament urged EU member states to increase their pressure on Cuba to release all political prisoners. In a resolution, the lawmakers also called for human rights issues to be raised by every high-level EU visitor to Cuba. "Cuban authorities have not provided the significant signs that the EU has been demanding relative to full respect for fundamental liberties and, especially, freedom of expression and political association." The European legislators condemned "the worsening repression" in Cuba, as well as the increase in the number of political prisoners and ban on the Women in White - relatives of jailed dissidents - from traveling to Strasbourg, France, in December to accept the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament. "In 2005 no prisoners of conscience held in Cuba were released and (...) the number of political prisoners significantly increased," said the resolution, which didn't call for renewed sanctions against the island. Members of the European Parliament during the debate ahead of the vote stated that it was particularly unacceptable and shocking that some of the political prisoners are not receiving the help they need and are in very poor medical condition. "These facts deceive the aspirations to improve relations between Cuba and the EU," MEPs stated, adding that repression in Cuba is worsening, despite a recent attempt by the EU to boost diplomatic ties with Fidel Castro. The European Union's member states plan to formally review relations with Cuba in June. (EFE, AP, EUObserver, 2,3/2/06)

February 2: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was to travel to Cuba to receive an award from the United Nations and inaugurate an international book fair in the capital, Cuba's state-run media reported. Chavez was expected to arrive on February 2, with the ceremonies being held February 3. Thousands of medical students from Venezuela, Bolivia and other Latin American countries, as well as some 200,000 Cubans were expected to fill Havana's Revolution Plaza as Chavez receives the UNESCO award, the Communist Party daily Granma reported. (AP, 2/2/06)

February 2: Nobel Peace Prize laureate Oscar Arias, who leads election polls in Costa Rica, considered "useless" to try to improve relations with the government of Fidel Castro. "20 years ago I talked with him a lot on many issues, but nothing has changed", said Arias to the foreign media covering the electoral process in his country. "I doubt Costa Rica could improve relations with Fidel's Cuba", he added. (AFP, 2/2/06)

February 3: US and European delegates at an emergency meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency worked to broaden support for Iran's virtually certain referral to the UN Security Council over its nuclear program. The UN nuclear watchdog is considering a US-backed resolution sponsored by Britain, France and Germany that would open the door to possible Security Council action against Iran. Support for Iran has shrunk since Russia and China lined up

behind the United States, Britain and France during overnight talks with the three other permanent Security Council members earlier in the week. Cuba, Venezuela and Spain are among the few nations still opposed to the referral. (*The New York Times*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Fidel Castro had a fraternal embrace for Hugo Chavez, his closest ally in what both men call the battle against US "imperialism," as the Venezuelan president arrived in Havana for a UN award ceremony. Cuba's state-run media reported that the 79-year-old Castro was waiting for Chavez shortly before 2 a.m. local time at the foot of the stairway of the plane that brought Chavez to Havana. They embraced and remained on the tarmac conversing for several minutes, according to the reports. "A hug and a kiss for Cuba, which I love," Chavez said before getting into a car with Castro and leaving the airport. UNESCO says the Marti Prize, first proposed by Cuba, was created by the agency in 1999 to honor a person who has "contributed to the unity and integration of the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean and to the preservation of their identities, cultural traditions and historical values." Previous winners of the US\$5,000 (euro 4,140) prize, chosen by a seven-member international jury, have included Mexican sociologist Pablo Gonzalez Casanova in 2003, Ecuadorian painter Oswaldo Guayasamin in 1999 and Dominican historian Celsa Albert Bautista in 1995. (*EFE, AP*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez signed a cooperation agreement to set up the Cultural Fund for the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas Regional Integration Project, known by its Spanish acronyms ALBA. The signing ceremony took place during the inauguration of Havana's 15th International Book Fair, which is dedicated to Venezuela this year. The initiative, which is aimed at strengthening the cultural identity of Cuba, Venezuela and the rest of the Latin American nations, includes the creation of the AIBA publishing house to promote the work of intellectuals of the region. It will issue a publication on culture and thinking and another one aimed at children, under the title "La Edad de Oro" (The Golden Age). The accord signed by both heads of state also sets up the ALBA record label and will bring benefits for both countries' radio and TV sectors. (*AIN*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Some 200,000 Cubans crowded Revolution Plaza for the ceremony granting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez UNESCO's 2005 Jose Marti International Prize. Fidel Castro himself handed over the framed certificate to Chavez, a close ally. The forum gave Castro and Chavez a chance to promote regional solidarity while bashing the US government. Fidel Castro strongly rejected recent statements by US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who compare Chavez with German dictator Adolph Hitler. The Cuban Head of State also lashed out at Washington's statements regarding the democratic election of the indigenous leader Evo Morales as President of Bolivia. "They do have reasons to be concerned; this is a new and unexpected event for those who, like Hitler, dreamed of a one-thousand-year empire," said Fidel Castro in direct reference to the hegemonic policy of the Bush administration. Thousands of young Venezuelans, Bolivians and other Latin Americans studying medicine for free in Cuba attended the ceremony, screaming their support for both leaders. (*AFP, AIN*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Members of the Cuban medical brigade who have gone to Bolivia to help the victims of the heavy rains left for the affected areas to initiate their labors. The leader of the group, Daniel Posadas, informed the press that 140 professionals are to be distributed in a total of 47 towns in Santa Cruz province. At least two doctors will go to each of the communities and larger groups have been formed for more populated areas. Each brigadista will take two backpacks with 13 kilograms of medicines and work materials, he explained, while highlighting the warm welcome they have received from the Bolivians. The Cuban professionals arrived in Santa Cruz in eastern Bolivia, with Luis Felipe Vázquez, the Cuban ambassador to Bolivia, and were received by María Luisa Ramos, deputy minister of International Economic Relations, and Santa Cruz City Councilor Oswaldo Pérez from the governing Movement Toward Socialism (MAS). (*Granma Internacional*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Guyana's President Bharrat Jagdeo described his talks with Fidel Castro as very productive. In a statement to the Cuban press, the Guyanese Head of State explained that after a 14-hour meeting with Castro, they considered

different initiatives aimed at further strengthening bilateral relations between Cuba and Guyana. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/2/06)

February 3: Peruvian presidential candidate Ollanta Humala is “eager” to travel to Cuba and meet Fidel Castro. “I will not hesitate to travel to Cuba when the opportunity arises”, he said in an interview with Prensa Latina . “I hope to be able to meet Commander Fidel Castro”, added the ex-military, who visited Venezuela some weeks ago. (*EP/AP*, 3/2/06)

February 4: In a move that could change the course of international diplomacy towards Iran, the 35-nation board of the International Atomic Energy Agency approved a resolution to report the country's nuclear case to the United Nations Security Council. Cuba, Syria and Venezuela voted against the resolution. (*The New York Times*, 4/2/06)

February 5: Cuba will grant nearly 1,000 scholarships to Guyanese students during the next five years, set up an eye care clinic and send 20 doctors to work for free in Guyana, officials said. The 965 scholarships would mostly be given to medical students, said Guyana's presidential spokesman Robert Persuad. The students would begin studying in Cuba in September, he said. "We will see the benefits of this down the road, in about six to seven years when the doctors start to return," Persuad said. The announcement comes just days after Guyana President Bharrat Jagdeo traveled to Cuba, where he and Fidel Castro discussed new programs to provide Cuban health care assistance to Guyana. (*AP*, 5/2/06)

February 5: Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad welcomed Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque in Teheran. Perez Roque was carrying a letter from Fidel Castro to the Iranian leader. While in the Iranian capital, the Cuban Minister said that Cuba honours friendship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In a meeting with mullah-run majlis Speaker Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, Perez Roque said that Cuba supports Iranian legitimate rights in the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). "I've come to Iran to convey the respect and support of the Cuban government and nation to the Iranian government and nation," Perez Roque said. "Cuba supports the Islamic Revolution and the Cuban government and nation appreciates the solidarity of the Iranian nation with Cuba." Perez Roque said that economic relations lag behind diplomatic ties and hoped that the upcoming visit to Havana of Gholam Shire'i would help boost economic ties. (*Persian Journal, Encuentro en la Red*, 6/2/06)

February 6: The 8th International Meeting of Economists on Globalization and Development that opened in Havana will discuss during four days the main economic challenges the world is facing today. Since its first meeting, different economic trends have been exposed with the aim of providing concrete solutions to favour sustainable growth. Delegates from the Latin American Economic System, the UN Commission for Latin America and the World Bank, among other institutions, are attending this international forum. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/2/06)

February 6: Slovakia will request that the European Union assess its relations with Cuba more strictly, said Foreign Ministry spokesman Juraj Tomaga. Slovakia thus reacted to the European Union's call on its member states to increase pressure on Cuba and demand the release of all political prisoners. (*Sme*, 6/2/06)

February 7: Fidel Castro invited Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf to an upcoming summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to be held in Cuba in September this year. The invitation came as Islamabad embarked on a new policy to expand ties with Cuba, which extended 'whole hearted' support to the quake-hit Pakistan by establishing 32 field hospitals in the quake ravaged areas. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque met Gen Musharraf and handed over the invitation to him. Cuba has offered Pakistan one thousand scholarships in medical studies. The offer was made by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque during a meeting with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in Islamabad. Perez Roque said Cuba would be ready to receive one thousand Pakistani youth for this purpose by the end of this year. The Cuban Foreign Minister said his country would soon be opening its embassy in Islamabad. (*Pakistan Press, New Kerala.Com*, 7/2/06)

February 7: Mexico issued a complaint against an American-owned hotel that -- under pressure from the US government -- expelled a group of Cuban businessmen meeting with US energy executives, saying the company violated investment and trade protection laws. Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez said the Mexican government is considering a diplomatic complaint against the United States in the case. He said his department had formally started a complaint process against the Sheraton for violating investment and trade protection laws, and that the hotel would have 15 days to respond. The hotel could face fines of nearly \$500,000 (US) or even be shut down, officials said. "I think that there was evident contempt for Mexican law on the part of the Hotel Maria Isabel Sheraton (...) and it is going to be punished for discrimination, consumer fraud and, moreover, for applying laws that do not apply in Mexico," Mr. Derbez told reporters in London, where he is on an official visit. A Mexican diplomat is currently in Washington to find out how it all occurred, and "he will bring back information so that we can decide if it will be necessary or not to present a complaint with the US government, Derbez said. Three Mexican agencies -- the Mexico City government, the federal consumer protection office and the national commission against discrimination -- will look into the incident, said Rubén Aguilar, spokesman for President Vicente Fox. Mexico "will certainly not tolerate any discrimination against any person visiting Mexico," he said. Other officials said the Sheraton María Isabel hotel in the heart of the Mexican capital could be fined or even shut. (*The Globe and Mail*, *AP*, *The Miami Herald*, 8/2/06)

February 7: The main Iranian leaders, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Parliament President, Ghoilam Ali Haddad, announced they would visit Cuba as a show of appreciation of the support offered by Fidel Castro on the controversial issue of Iran's nuclear program. The Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, confirmed his attendance to the Non-Aligned Countries Summit that will take place in September in Cuba, after receiving Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, in Teheran. (*AFP*, 7/2/06)

February 8: British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Venezuela to "observe the rules of the global community" and added that he would like to see Cuba operating "as a true democracy." During the weekly question and answer session, Labor Congressman Colin Burgon asked Blair about the takeover in Latin America of leftist governments. Blair emphasized that Latin American nations should act in accordance with international community rules. (*El Universal*, 9/2/06)

February 8: The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador informed that another group of people travelled to Cuba to undergo eye surgery under the "Operation Miracle" program. This is the fourth group of Salvadorans that have gone to Havana, bringing to 185 the number of those who have undergone sight correction surgery in the framework of a program carried out by the governments of Cuba and Venezuela in Latin America. (*Notimex*, 8/2/06)

February 9: The Mexican foreign secretary said in Mexico City that Washington did not violate Mexican law nor apply US law outside its own territory by ordering a US-owned hotel in this capital to expel a group of Cubans. At a press conference, Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez said that Mexico will not send a diplomatic note to the US government to complain about the February 3 expulsion, when a group of Cuban officials meeting with US businessmen in the Hotel Maria Isabel Sheraton were forced to leave the facility and the deposit they had paid for their rooms was confiscated. At the press conference, a legal expert from the foreign ministry, Joel Antonio Hernandez, said that Mexican sovereignty was not violated and US law was not applied in Mexico because the US government did not directly sanction a firm established in Mexican territory. He said that the US government demanded that the hotel owner, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, order the expulsion of the Cuban delegation, which the establishment did. "There was a transnational act, but not a violation of sovereignty, because the capability of the Mexican state to exercise its laws on its territory was not damaged," Hernandez said. Derbez added that one of his aides currently on a visit to Washington delivered a verbal message to the US Treasury Department about the Mexican government's concern that "a US law could have been applied in Mexico." (*EFE*, 9/2/06)

February 9: Video of a Miami television reporter attacked by a guard outside a notorious Bahamian immigration jail is snowballing into a political crisis for the island government, as Cuban exile groups called for a tourism boycott. Univiación reporter Mario Vallejo said he received seven stitches just above his eyebrow after a jail guard slammed his head against a car bumper, knocking him unconscious for about two minutes. Among the witnesses was a Telemundo 51 reporter and Cubans who traveled from Miami to visit relatives kept at the immigration detention center. Vallejo was in the Bahamas to report on eight Cuban migrants found on the tiny, uninhabited Elbow Cay by the Coast Guard -- survivors in a group in which six others perished at sea and one man was taken to a Florida Keys hospital for treatment. The Coast Guard turned over the seven migrants to Bahamian authorities because Elbow Cay is Bahamian territory. The Bahamian consul in Miami, Alma A. Adams, said the government had launched an investigation into the incident, in which at least two other journalists were detained by jail guards. (*The Miami Herald*, 9/2/06)

February 9: Nobel peace laureate and former Polish President Lech Walesa expressed support for Cuba's internal dissident movement and said he expected a rapid transition on the island at the end of Fidel Castro's reign. The founder of the Solidarity Movement said Castro's communist regime "will not survive" and urged Cubans both on the island and in Miami to be prepared for the dictator's fall, "because there could be anarchy." Walesa made his remarks during a breakfast sponsored by Miami Dade College, whose president, Eduardo J. Padron, awarded the Pole his institution's highest honor, the Presidential Medal. (*EFE*, 9/2/06)

February 10: Thailand Foreign Vice Minister Virachai Virameteekul will begin a week-long visit to Cuba and Guatemala to boost political and economic ties. During the first leg of the trip to Cuba, Virachai will attend the second meeting of the Thailand-Cuba Joint Commission (JC) in Havana. He will discuss increased cooperation in trade, tourism, investment and bilateral ties. (*Thai News Swervice*, 13/2/06)

February 10: Cuba criticized the response of Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez to the action taken by the Sheraton Hotel in Mexico City against the group of Cuban officials who were expelled from the hotel under pressures from the US government. While Derbez's office filed the formal complaint against the hotel and the secretary himself said it should be hit with the maximum fine, he rejected calls to issue a diplomatic protest to the US government. "If there was anything missing in (Derbez's) declarations, it was to humbly seek pardon for the terrible trouble it would mean for the (U.S.) Department of State to dedicate a few minutes of its very busy time" to listen to his request to review the application of U.S. law in Mexico, Granma said. [[Un suceso verdaderamente penoso](#)] (*AP*, 10/2/06)

February 10: Chen Zhili, State Councilor of the People's Republic of China, reiterated her country's rejection of pressures against Cuba, and ratified her government's support of the island's government, the people of Cuba, and their revolution, shortly after her arrival in Havana for an official visit. The high-ranking Chinese representative was welcomed at the Jose Marti International Airport by the Minister of Higher Education Fernando Vecino Alegret, the Chinese Ambassador to Havana, Chao Rongxian, and other Cuban and Chinese officials. The State Councilor is in charge of overseeing Education, Science and Technology in her country, and has come to the island to attend the University 2006 Conference, where she will make a presentation during the inaugural session. (*Granma*, 10/2/06)

February 10: Cuba and Venezuela criticized the decision-making process of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), saying a few states are forcing through agreements despite opposition from many developing countries. In a document made public, the two countries said the adoption of a treaty at December's Hong Kong meeting was pushed through against the opposition of several of the WTO's 149 members and undermined the organisation's credibility. "A number of procedures were implemented to seek consensus, which did not have the support of all members, and in many cases received the manifest disagreement of a majority of developing countries," said the statement, which was distributed to other delegations. "However, with the support of some members, they were imposed by decision of the secretariat, which thus exceeds its functions," Cuba and Venezuela added, noting that only two formal, on-the-record meetings were held during the six-day conference. (*Jamaica Gleaner*, 10/2/06)

February 12: A group of 23 Cuban rafters arrived at the village of Sangrelaya, in Honduras, with the intention of travelling to the United States. The Cubans said that they built a boat themselves and left Cuba on February 2 from the port of Santa Cruz de Camagüey, on the south of the island. (*AFP*, 15/2/06)

February 13: Gennady Novitsky, chairman of the National Assembly's Council of the Republic, announced that Aleksandr Lukashenko plans to visit Cuba this year in his second trip to the country in five years. In addition, he said, Mr. Lukashenko and Fidel Castro may hold another meeting during a summit of the Non Aligned Movement in 2006. The parliamentary speaker noted that the Belarusian leader's first visit to Cuba had resulted in a number of agreements that laid the foundation of long-term cooperation between the two countries. (*BelaPan*, 13/2/06)

February 13: Pakistani victims of the devastating October 8 quake arrived in Cuba to end a rehabilitation treatment started at field hospitals, *Granma* newspaper reported. The group, made up of six children, two girls and six men, will receive their prostheses in the island. Meanwhile, a specialized workshop is being stationed at a Cuban medical facility in the Pakistani village of Abbottabad to expand care for more people. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/2/06)

February 13: A Vatican cardinal is heading to Cuba, saying he will stress Pope Benedict XVI's recent message that the Catholic Church cannot remain on the political sidelines in the fight for social justice. Cardinal Renato Martino, who heads the Vatican's pontifical council for justice and peace, leaves for Havana to present a compendium of the church's social doctrine. In a statement, he said he hoped to have a meeting with Cuban leader Fidel Castro, though there was no confirmation. In his first encyclical released January 25, Benedict said the church had no interest in taking the place of government in creating a more just social order. But he wrote that the church can't remain on the sidelines in the search for justice, either. Martino said that message would be the "leit motiv" of his visit to Cuba, as well as his subsequent travels to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. (*AP*, 13/2/06)

February 13: The French Socialist Party (PS) criticized the attacks against Cuban opponents that have taken place recently, and called on Cuban authorities to put an end to this situation. "The Socialist Party is outraged about these actions which constitute an attack on freedom of expression, and urges Cuban authorities to correct this situation as soon as possible", said the French PS in a communiqué. (*EFE*, 14/2/06)

February 13: The sixth group of Panamanian patients traveled to Havana under the sponsorship of Panama's First Lady, Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos, in coordination with Cuban authorities. Over 700 Panamanians from the Kuna Yala and Gnohe Bugle ethnic groups had already benefited from the Operation Miracle, and patients from Panama and Colon provinces were on their way. (*EFE*, 13/2/06)

February 13: Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez indicated that if in 2006 a new resolution is presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights urging Cuba to allow the visit of a special rapporteur to verify the situation in the matter, Mexico will vote in favour as it has done in recent years. The diplomat emphasized that Mexico has endorsed these resolutions while refraining from "judgments on the human rights situation in Cuba". (*AP*, 13/2/06)

February 13: Relations between Mexico and Cuba would complicate if the Mexican government votes in favour of the visit to the island of a commission to verify human rights, warned Cuba Ambassador to Mexico, Jorge Bolaños. Regarding the statements by Mexican Foreign Minister, Bolaños said: "I am not surprised, that has been the position of the (Mexican) Government on the issue and that is not well received (...) such a vote would complicate relations". (*EFE*, 13/2/06)

February 13: Mexican president, Vicente Fox, said that relations with Cuba are "normal" and relations with the US are "moving well", denying allegations by the opposition that links with Havana and Washington have deteriorated in the wake of the expulsion of an official Cuban delegation from a hotel in Mexico City. "We work very well with Cuba (...) what exists are deep ideological differences, which I fully respect", said Fox. (*EFE*, 13/2/06)

February 13: An exhibition of Iranian art and handicrafts opened at the Asian House in Havana, the Persian service of the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported. The two-week exhibition features Iranian cultural works including paintings, antiques, earthenware dishes, hand-woven carpets, kilims, traditional women's costumes, and photos of ancient monuments. Iranian Ambassador Ahmad Edrisian delivered a speech during the opening ceremony, which ambassadors, diplomats, and cultural attachés based in Cuba also attended. (*IranMania.Com*, 15/2/06)

February 14: Haiti's election results have been obviously and shamelessly manipulated, "amid an evident attempt to conceal candidate Rene Preval's win in the February 7 elections," Cuba's Granma daily denounced. In its editorial "Yankee Government Has Ordered a Second Round: Blue Helmets Suppress the Haitian People," Granma sustains that two of the Electoral Council (EC) members have condemned the manipulation of the vote counting. [[El Gobierno Yanqui Ha Ordenado Segunda Vuelta](#)] (*AFP, Prensa Latina*, 14/2/06)

February 14: A Cuban doctor has illegally crossed the Indonesian border from East Timor and refused to be sent back either to East Timor or to his own country, an Indonesian military officer said. Ramon Ballesteros Escobar, 39, had been walking for two days from East Timor's Suai district when he was detained by soldiers manning the border post in Indonesia's Belu district, said army Colonel Noch Bola. Bola, the local military commander, told the press that Escobar refused to be returned to East Timor or to Cuba and requested deportation to the United States instead. (*AFP*, 14/2/06)

February 14: Shortly after stepping off the plane at the airport in Havana, Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, told the Cuban press that, "the Operation Miracle eye treatment program is fantastic." The prime minister said that thanks to this program, since July 21 of last year, 1,092 patients from his country received operations in Cuba and another 670 are on waiting lists to come to the island and receive the same care. He pointed out that the main difficulty the program has faced in his country has been transportation, as Saint Vincent and the Grenadines doesn't have an international airport, so only small, 37-passenger-capacity planes can land. In this respect the PM noted that a project is currently underway with the cooperation of Cuba and Venezuela to build an airfield that will be completed by 2011. (*Granma*, 15/2/06)

February 14: Puerto Rican Rangers Corps' agents spotted eleven Cubans who reached Mona Island illegally, said the police. The group of five women, four men and two girls, had sailed from the Dominican Republic. Mona Island is used by immigrant smugglers as a drop-off point for Cuban nationals, as once they land on American territory they are granted asylum automatically. (*EFE*, 14/2/06)

February 14: The governments of Switzerland and Cuba are planning a cooperation strategy on scientific research, announced in Havana the Swiss State Secretary for Education and Research, Charles Kleiber. Kleiber met with the Cuban Minister for Higher Education, Fernando Vecino Alegret. (*EFE*, 14/2/06)

February 15: Pope Benedict XVI urged Cubans in a letter to the Communist-ruled island's top bishop to "trust in one another, despite differences in ways of thinking or beliefs." Benedict delivered his message in a letter - made public by the Vatican - that was sent to the head of the Cuban Bishops Conference, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, on the 20th anniversary of the Cuban national ecclesiastical conference. The pope said that God was with all Cubans, believers and non-believers alike. The Roman Catholic leader also said it was worth remembering the words used by the late Pope John Paul II on his visit to the Caribbean nation in January 1998: "Cuba needs to open herself to the world and the world must open itself to Cuba." [[Carta del Santo Padre](#)] (*AGI, AFP, EFE*, 15/2/06)

February 15: The government of the Bahamas rejected accusations of alleged mistreatments of immigrants detained in its territory and confirmed it will soon decide on the fate of two Cuban doctors whose custody the United States requests. Nassau authorities indicated that the case of doctors, Marialys Darias Mesa and David González Mesa, detained for almost ten months in the Carmichael detention centre despite having American visas, "is being reviewed

and a decision will be made as soon as the requirements of the case allow it". Darias and González fled Cuba in a raft due to Cuban authorities' refusal to grant exit permits to public health personnel. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 16/2/06)

February 15: Reporters Without Borders called for the immediate release of José Ubaldo Izquierdo Hernández, jailed since the March 2003 crackdown, and whose prison doctors have said his state of health is incompatible with imprisonment. "The condition of José Ubaldo Izquierdo Hernández requires care that cannot be provided in jail, the prison doctors have recognised it themselves", said the press freedom organisation. "The journalist's recovery calls for him to be freed immediately, or failing that, to be granted a release on licence for health reasons. We hope that the Cuban authorities will respond favourably to this humanitarian request", it added. Doctors meeting in Havana on February 9 confirmed that Izquierdo Hernández's condition in Guanajay prison in Havana province had seriously deteriorated over the past nine months. (*RWB Press Release*, 15/2/06)

February 16: The president of Cuba's National Assembly (Parliament) Ricardo Alarcon warmly welcomed Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Speaker of the Islamic Republic Consultative Assembly of Iran, at Havana's Jose Marti International Airport. Alarcon offered support to his visiting Iranian counterpart in an escalating international dispute over the Middle Eastern nation's use of nuclear power. "No one has the right to monopolize any source of energy fundamental for humanity," Alarcon said at the start of a meeting with Gholam Ali Haddad Adel. Led by the United States, some countries and international organizations are voicing concerns that Iran is using its nuclear power program to develop weapons of mass destruction -- something Iran denies. Haddad Adel expressed Iran's respect for the Cuban government and people but did not address the debate. Haddad Adel's agenda includes meeting with his Cuban counterpart Ricardo Alarcon, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and Vice President Carlos Lage. (*Prensa Latina, CNN*, 16/2/06)

February 16: The value of a community based university system that breaks with the model imposed since colonialism was discussed in Havana at the first International Meeting on the Universalization of the University. The event — considered one of the most significant within the Fifth International Meeting on Higher Education— allowed for reflection and the sharing of experiences on the social impact of extending university access to the local level in both Cuba and Venezuela. Fernando Vecino Alegret, Cuban minister of Higher Education, said Cuba believes that everyone should have equal access to education. He noted that the country has 712,000 university graduates with a total population of fewer than 12 million. He said that in the near future the figure will reach a million. Samuel Moncada, Venezuelan minister of Higher Education, said his country is also making an unprecedented effort in education. He said the founding of the Bolivarian University System in mid-2003 has proven an alternative to the traditional model. Both the Cuban and Venezuelan ministers of Education, Luis Ignacio Gomez and Aristobulo Isturiz, agreed on the need to create educational models that match up to the political and social needs of their time. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/2/06)

February 17: The 12th session of the Angola-Cuba Joint Bilateral Commission for Economic, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation will be held on February 20-24, in Havana, Cuba, an Angolan official source announced. The meeting of experts will happen on February 20-21, whereas the Ministerial session is scheduled for February 22, 23 and 24. The Angolan team to the gathering will be led by the Minister of Education, Antonio Burity da Silva, in his capacity as co-chairman of the mentioned joint commission. (*Angola Press*, 17/2/06)

February 17: A cruise ship sailing near Cancun, Mexico, rescued 22 Cubans who became lost in international waters while attempting to reach the United States. The Carnival Cruise lines ship made the afternoon rescue and dropped the Cubans off on the nearby island of Cozumel, where immigration authorities were discussing their fate. Plucked from a makeshift boat were three children between the ages of 5 and 8, as well as eight women and 11 men. Those onboard were treated for dehydration but were otherwise in good health, according to officials at the National Institute of Immigration's Cozumel office. The Cubans told investigators they left Havana aboard a homemade boat several days ago and had hoped to reach the US. (*AP*, 17/2/06)

February 17: Fidel Castro has invited Pope Benedict to visit the Caribbean island, a source at the Cuban bishops' conference has revealed. Castro issued the invitation during a meeting with Cardinal Raffaele Martino, who spent two days in Cuba as part of a regional tour to present the Catholic Church's new 'Compendium' on social teaching. News of the invitation follows a call by Benedict for the Communist nation to "open its heart" to God and the world. That call came in a message to the head of the Cuban bishops conference, which was celebrating the 20th anniversary of the first meeting of bishops allowed following the Cuban revolution. Cardinal Martino, who heads the Vatican's Justice and Peace department, was in Cuba primarily for the celebrations marking the anniversary of what was a milestone for the country's Catholic Church. (ANSA, 21/2/06)

February 19: Fidel Castro reiterated Cuba's firm support of Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful means during his talks in Havana with Dr. Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Iranian Parliament president. During the meeting, the Cuban president and the Iranian Parliament president reviewed the state of bilateral relations and stressed common viewpoints in regard to the world state-of-affairs, as well as both countries' potentials to further expand bilateral economic ties. (AIN, 19/2/06)

February 19: Archbishop Andrew Hutchison, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, his wife, Lois, and Archdeacon Michael Pollesel, the national church's incoming general secretary, traveled to Cuba from January 31 to February 5. While in Cuba, the primate chaired a meeting of the Metropolitan Council of Cuba (MCC), attended the annual synod of the Episcopal Church of Cuba, and the extraordinary synod. The MCC is the official body that ties the Episcopal Church of Cuba to the Anglican Communion. It was created in 1967 when Cuba lost provincial status in the Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA) due to the break in relations between the US and Cuba after the Communist takeover in 1959. The Canadian primate is president of the MCC, which also includes Archbishop Drexel Gomez of the Church of the Province of West Indies and Bishop Lloyd Allen of the diocese of Honduras, who is also an ECUSA episcopal appointee (*Anglican Journal*, 19/2/06)

February 20: Pedro Aníbal Riera Escalante, Cuban ex-consul in Mexico, who is on a parole in Cuba, has launched a suit against the government of Mexico before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (CIDH) of the Organization of American States (OEA), blaming Mexican authorities for his arrest in broad public view and forced return to Havana on October 4, 2000, when he was trying to request political asylum. In the document he identifies former Mexican officials and accuses them, together with Cuban authorities, of conspiracy against him. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 20/2/06)

February 20: The Spanish government considered "completely inappropriate" a statement by Cuban ambassador to Spain, Alberto Velazco, alleging that Florida Senator and president of the USA-Spain Council, Mel Martínez, is a "representative of the terrorists of Miami". Mel Martínez is on a visit in Spain. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will make sure to explain to the Cuban diplomat that his statements on Martínez are "out of place". (*EFE*, 21/2/06)

February 20: Over 20,000 Ecuatorians will benefit from the Operation Miracle during 2006, according to statements made by Venezuelan Ambassador to Quito, Oscar Navas. Cuba and Venezuela are planning to offer that service to six million Latin American patients in ten years, Navas said. (*EFE*, 20/2/06)

February 20: Cuba warned that it would not be an accomplice or silent spectator in the face of what it called the "evident pretension of imposing the creation of a Human Rights Council under the conditions of the United States and its allies." The Cuban warning, contained in a press communiqué from the Cuban mission to the United Nations, takes place on the eve of the presentation of a draft resolution for the creation of such a council. "Cuba will defend truth and reason to the final consequences and work to vindicate the right of the nations of this planet to have a Human Rights Council that will respond to their interests and expectations of a better future," it affirms. [[Comunicado de Prensa](#)] (*Granma International*, 21/2/06)

February 21: Argentine writer and historian Jose Ignacio Garcia Hamilton accused Cuba of barring him entry to the country where he was set to make a presentation. Hamilton has met with dissidents on previous visits to the island, which, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP) could have created some tensions with Fidel Castro and the Cuban government. El Clarin on the other hand points to Hamilton's close friendship with anti-Castrist Carlos Alberto Montaner as the main reason for his expulsion. Argentina's Foreign Affairs Ministry has submitted a formal demand for explanation to Cuban authorities since, it argues, Hamilton had all the right documents needed to enter the country. Cuba has not yet made any formal comments on the affair. Argentine-Cuban relations are far from being under stress at this stage. However, the event is seen as an illustration of the deterioration of freedom of speech on the island. In comments repeated in La Nacion, Hamilton said that he felt "as if he was in a country ruled by Hitler or Stalin". (*Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 22/2/06)

February 21: Another group of twelve Cuban immigrants arrived in Mona Island on a boat from the Dominican Republic, according to Puerto Rican police. All the members of the group were in good health. And another group of seven Cubans on a small boat en route to the United States was rescued off the Honduran coast in the Caribbean, reported a spokesman for the Immigration Department in Tegucigalpa. (*CubaEncuentro*, 22/2/06)

February 22: The Open Democracy Club (KOD), a group of Czech senators, has supported the call by Cuban dissidents to the international community to help stop repressions against leaders of the opponents of Fidel Castro's regime and create a special international committee for this purpose. KOD member Jaromir Stetina (unaffiliated, for the Greens), paid "a semi-illegal visit" to local dissidents in Cuba. He also handed an appeal by the Cuban opposition to Rene van der Linden, head of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, in Prague. The authors of the Cuban request point out that Fidel Castro's regime has recently intensified its pressure against people voicing their disapproval of the economic and political situation in the country. The 13-member KOD group comprises senators from the junior ruling Freedom Union (US-DEU) and several small parties that are not represented in the lower house. (*CTK*, 22/2/06)

February 22: Prague's Langhans gallery opened an exhibition of more than 20 photographs that Czech top model Helena Houdova made in Cuba under rather dramatic circumstances. Houdova was shortly detained during her stay in Cuba in January, over having photographed slums. "It is neither an artistic exhibition nor documents depicting Cuba. It is rather a gesture pointing out that there exists a reverse face of Cuba which normal tourists cannot see. If they try to spot it, the Cuban police arrest them," Nikola Horejs, coordinator of the Cuban programme of the People in Need humanitarian organisation, told the press. He said the exhibition is a benefit event aimed to collect money for the SOS Kuba account that People in Need established in support of the families of Cuban political prisoners. The money will be handed over to the families of the Cuban dissidents who accompanied Houdova during her stay in Cuba, he said. (*CTK*, 22/2/06)

February 23: The Education Minister of Angola, António Burity da Silva Neto, reiterated in Havana the Angolan Government's political desire to strengthen the co-operation with Cuba in various sectors. Speaking during the opening ceremony of the 12th session of the Angola-Cuba joint commission in his capacity as co-chairman, Burity da Silva highlighted the efforts of Angolan authorities in the economic, social and financial development. After praising Cuba's contribution to the training of Angolan cadres, Burity da Silva said that he observes with great satisfaction that at the moment 45,000 Cuban experts co-operate with Angola in various areas, highlighting to education and health. (*Angola Press*, 23/2/06)

February 22: Mexican intellectuals and activists denounced in Havana the way their government has been "excessively eager to obey the US and the extraterritorial application of the Helms-Burton law". Invited to take part in the panel discussion titled Intellectuals in Favor of Sovereignty and Against the [US] Empire, which took place at the Jose Marti Anti-imperialist Plaza, a group of Mexican intellectuals criticized what they considered to be an obsequious and servile reaction from the highest authorities of their country to the aggressive policy of the Bush administration, not only against Cuba but also against the Mexican people. Former Mexican diplomat Gustavo Iruegas was categorical

when he said, "If Mexico doesn't apply its laws, it is surrendering independence." The panel pointed out that the United States is attempting to use Mexico as a platform to support its efforts of suffocating Cuba. Uruguayan journalist Carlos Fazio, who writes for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, cited precedents to the Sheraton scandal such as the cancellation by this same hotel chain of business ties with Cuban tourism companies in 1992 and the cancelling of a contract with Cuba by the Mexican branch of the Goodyear Tire company in 1993. Fazio noted that both cases were frightened responses by Mexico to the then recently approved Torricelli Law. (*Granma*, 22/2/06)

February 23: Dominica's prime minister, Roosevelt Skerritt, arrived in Havana for a working visit, his fourth time on the island since taking office. This visit "is an expression of the deep friendship between the two Caribbean states," reported the *Granma* newspaper. Cuba and the Commonwealth of Dominica established diplomatic relations on May 18, 1996. As examples of the cooperation between the two nations, fifteen Cuban professionals are currently providing services in Dominica, while 238 young people from that island nation have graduated in Cuban schools to date. (*AIN*, 23/2/06)

February 23: Bolivia's President Evo Morales thanked Cuba for its solidarity with his country at a meeting with Cuban physicians who attended a ceremony for victims of last January's flooding rainfalls. During the meeting with representatives of the Cuban medical team, the Bolivian head of state expressed his firm friendship with the island. "We could never pay for the support given by the Cuban government and people," said Morales in the gathering held at the residence of the Cuban ambassador, alluding to the medical service provided by the doctors. At same time Morales thanked Cuba for the scholarships to study medicine granted to thousands of Bolivian students, as well as for Operation Miracle, a project that treats Bolivian low-income patients with eye afflictions. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/2/06)

February 23: US Representatives Connie Mack IV and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen sought to increase pressure on the Bahamas to release two Cuban dentists who have been detained there since April despite having prior clearance to migrate with their families to the United States. The two Florida Republicans said that unless the Bahamian government acts soon to free David Gonzalez-Mejias and Marialis Darias-Mesa, they would begin pushing in Congress for economic sanctions. Gonzalez-Mejias and Darias-Mesa have been detained in the Bahamas since April, when a boat carrying them and 16 other Cuban migrants stalled out in Bahamian waters. The US Coast Guard picked them up and turned them over to Bahamian officials, who have an agreement with Cuba calling for repatriation of Cuban nationals. Bahamian Ambassador Joshua Sears said his government worries that releasing the men could encourage Cubans and Haitians to try to get to the United States through the Bahamas. (*AP*, 24/2/06)

February 24: Costa Rican ambassador to Cuba, José Maria Penabad, criticized that in February seven Costa Ricans who visited the island to marry Cuban nationals, were detained by Fidel Castro government authorities and accused them of "trafficking in persons". Some Cubans see wedding Costa Ricans as an opportunity to leave the country, a situation that lawyers in Costa Rica take advantage of without warning their clients that they must obtain a visa from the Costa Rican Immigration Department. (*Bitácora Cubana*, 24/2/06)

February 24: The Cuban medical staff serving in Pakistan has assisted, up to date, more than a million patients, at least half women, *Granma* daily published. According to Doctor Juan Carlos Dupuy, chief of Henry Reeve International Medical Contingent, 439,894 people have been cared for at field hospitals, including 10,920 operations and over 5,000 admissions. Dupuy said that Cuban doctors have satisfactory communication with the people, especially with victims of the devastating October 8 quake. He also highlighted the support of the Pakistani Army to the doctors and nurses working in that country. The Caribbean group is currently made up of 2,386 professionals, including doctors, paramedics plus support staff. (*Prensa Latina*, 24/2/06)

February 24: A media watchdog condemned the Cuban authorities for harassing independent journalists and failing to provide adequate medical treatment for those in prison. The Committee to Protect Journalists cited the example of journalist Jorge Olivera Castillo, who was released from jail in December 2004 on medical parole. Olivera was ordered

by a Havana municipal court to work at a state-controlled office that the court would select. He also told CPJ that he was barred from attending public gatherings and leaving Havana. Olivera was sentenced in March 2003 to 18 years in prison in a massive crackdown on the independent media. While on medical parole he has contributed to the Miami-based news web site Cubanet and other international publications. "It is outrageous that Cuba, which jails more journalists than any other country in the world except China, should continue to harass journalists even after they have left prison," said CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper. "Cuba now has 24 journalists behind bars solely for exercising their right to free expression. Some of them are not receiving the medical treatment that they need, Cooper said. "We call on the authorities to release these 24 prisoners immediately and to stop harassing all journalists," she added. (*AFP*, 24/2/06)

February 24: Presiding Episcopal Bishop Frank Griswold embarked on a five-day visit to Cuba. He will be hosted by La Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba, a diocese governed by a Metropolitan Council in matters of faith and order. Council members of the Diocese of Cuba include the Primate of Canada, the Archbishop of the West Indies, and the President Bishop of the Episcopal Church's newest Province, the Anglican Church of the Central American Region. Griswold will be accompanied by Alex Baumgarten, international policy analyst in the Office of Government Relations; Barbara Braver, the Presiding Bishop's assistant for communication; Brian Grieves, director of Peace and Justice Ministries; Juan Marquez, Latin America and Caribbean partnerships officer in the Office of Anglican and Global Relations; and Bob Williams, director of communication. (*Episcopal News Service*, 24/2/06)

February 25: After surviving a shipwreck and being stranded in Cuba for almost two weeks, a Canadian couple received a tearful welcome from family members at Pearson International airport. Kelly Aitchison and her husband, Rob, were sailing a 25-metre yacht, the *Downtown*, to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, from St. Martin when it sank about three kilometres off the coast of Cayo Coco, along Cuba's northern shore, on February 13. When the Kingston couple and two Canadian crew members reached the beach in a dinghy, Cuban officials picked them up, seized their passports and refused to let them leave the country. Officials wanted to make sure the boat owner's insurance would cover the cost of salvaging the boat and demanded the Aitchisons retain a lawyer. The couple signed a contract with a law firm and booked a flight out of Cuba. "It was harrowing but we got out," Ms. Aitchison said. She said they still don't know what caused the ship to sink. She said she would not recommend Cuba to travellers. "There are a lot of beautiful islands down there. I'd pick a different one." (*National Post*, 27/2/06)

February 26: Cuba continues expanding its solidarity throughout the Caribbean and encouraging regional interchange, so it stands as one of the most active promoters of integration, Cuban local press highlighted. Local papers underlined that on his visit to the island to review plans for joint cooperation, Dominican Commonwealth Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit met with Fidel Castro and referred to the initiatives encouraged by both nations in the fields of education and public health. Skerrit praised Operation Miracle, a project created by Cuba and Venezuela to offer ophthalmologic assistance to poor people in the region, and appreciated the Cuban people's support and solidarity. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/2/06)

February 27: The Mexican Navy rescued a group of Cuban migrants that was sailing adrift close to Isla Mujeres, in Cancun. The group, comprised of eighteen men, sailed from the Cuban western province of Pinar del Rio ten days ago. They were all transferred to the Mexican National Institute of Migration, where they will be deported to Cuba. (*EFE*, 27/2/06)

February 27: Thirteen Argentine parliamentarians condemned the acts of repudiation ("actos de repudio") organized by Cuban authorities against the dissident movement in the island. In a draft presented to the Argentine Chamber of Representatives, with the number 7017-D-05, the group of parliamentarians "condemn all manifestations and acts of harassment and aggression organized and promoted by Cuban authorities against activists of human rights, dissidents and their relatives". The draft was signed by, Federico Pinedo, Eugenio Burzaco, Pablo Tonelli, Alicia Comelli, Jorge

Vanossi, Paula Bertol, Nora Ginzburg, Guillermo Alchouron, Omar De Marchi, Esteban Bullrich, Hugo Martini, Eusebia Jerez and Esteban Jerez. (*Noticias Pro Cuba Libre*, 1/3/06)

February 28: Colombia's Deputy Foreign Minister Camilo Reyes and Cuba's Rafael Daussa highlighted in Bogota the good state of relations between the two countries. At the end of the annual inter-ministerial meeting, Reyes told the press that current relations are excellent and said that Havana and Bogota respect differences and links that could benefit the future of both nations. (*Prensa Latina*, 28/2/06)

February 28: Fidel Castro received the head of the Episcopal Church USA and members of his delegation, local media reported. A photo on the front page of the Communist Party daily Granma shows Castro shaking hands with Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold, who arrived in Cuba at the invitation of the island's Episcopal Church. The newspaper described the atmosphere as "cordial and respectful." (*AP*, 1/3/06)

February 28: Cuba has said that the United States and the European Union had again joined forces to weaken the United Nations by opposing a draft resolution for a new Human Rights Council. "We are witnessing a new blow to multilateralism and the United Nations," the Cuban Foreign Ministry said in a statement, a day after UN Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton rejected the proposed council. "Our country will not be a part of the silent political chicanery in the making by Washington and its chief Western allies against the interests of the developing world", the statement added. [[A New Blow to Multilateralism](#)] (*AFP*, 1/3/06)

February 28: Reporters Without Borders said it feared that court summonses issued to independent journalists Oscar Espinosa Chepe and Jorge Olivera Castillo mean they will be sent back to jail. The two men, who were imprisoned in the March 2003 crackdown, were released on health grounds at the end of 2004. They then both sought and were refused permission to leave Cuba. "These ill-timed court summonses look like a judicial farce", said the press freedom organisation. "What is the point of trying to get independent journalists to give up their work, knowing full well that they will never do so?" asked the press freedom organisation. "If the Cuban authorities are so determined to silence Oscar Espinosa Chepe and Jorge Olivera Castillo why don't they grant their request to leave the country? The repression of dissident voices is in any event doomed to failure", it added. (*RWB Press Release*, 28/3/06)

Terrorism

February 5: Amnesty International called for closing the US Guantanamo prison for terror suspects and the release of nine British residents the rights group says are held by US authorities at the Cuban camp. Nine British citizens have been freed from the Cuban camp for terrorist suspects after pressure from the British government, but Amnesty said another nine with ties to Britain were still being held. (*The New York Times*, 5/2/06)

February 9: US military officials at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, strapped hunger-striking prisoners into restraint chairs for hours to feed them through tubes and isolated them in cold cells, *The New York Times* said. A Pentagon official said there was no one immediately available to comment on the report. *The Times*, citing unnamed military officials, said tougher measures came in recent weeks after authorities concluded some of the prisoners were determined to kill themselves. The apparent result has been a sharp drop in the number of inmates refusing to eat. Only four hunger strikers remain, down from 84 at the end of December, the chief military spokesman at Guantanamo, Lt. Col. Jeremy M. Martin, told the newspaper. (*Reuters*, 9/2/06)

February 14: A UN investigation has concluded that the United States committed acts amounting to torture at Guantanamo Bay, including force-feeding detainees and subjecting them to prolonged solitary confinement, according

to a draft report obtained by the press. US officials rejected the report, saying it was riddled with errors and treated statements from detainees' lawyers as fact. The report from five UN human rights experts also recommended the United States close Guantanamo Bay and revoke all special interrogation techniques authorized by the Department of Defense. (CNN, AP, 14/2/06)

February 16: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the United States should close the prison at Guantanamo Bay for terror suspects as soon as possible, backing a key conclusion of a UN-appointed independent panel. White House spokesman Scott McClellan rejected the call to shut the camp, saying the military treats all detainees humanely and that "these are dangerous terrorists that we're talking about." The report, released in Geneva, said the United States must close the detention facility "without further delay" because it is effectively a torture camp where prisoners have no access to justice. (*Toronto Star*, 17/2/06)

February 17: A British Cabinet member has urged the United States to close the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay and said he believed Prime Minister Tony Blair shared that view. Blair was more cautious, calling the detention center an "anomaly" during a news conference in Berlin, Germany. "I said last year that it's an anomaly, and sooner or later it has got to be dealt with," Blair told reporters after meeting German Chancellor Angela Merkel. (CNN, AP 17/2/06)

February 17: Colombia and the country's second-largest Marxist rebel group met for a second round of exploratory peace talks that as yet have no agreed agenda. Colombian peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said a first meeting held in Havana in December with commanders of the National Liberation Army, or ELN, had "unfrozen" ties and created what he termed a "precarious" trust. "There is a mutual will for peace and the important thing now is to generate confidence in the process (...) so that we can find a way to end the violence that has caused so much pain to our country," he told reporters. Cuba is hosting the talks between the Colombian government and the ELN, a 5,000-strong force that has fought a bloody insurgency since it was founded in 1964 by radical students and Roman Catholic priests inspired by Fidel Castro's revolution. (*Reuters*, 17/2/06)

February 23: A federal judge ordered the Pentagon to release the identities of hundreds of detainees at Guantanamo Bay to the press. The move would force the government to break its secrecy and reveal the most comprehensive list yet of those who have been imprisoned there. Some of the hundreds of detainees in the war on terror being held at the U.S. military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been held as long as four years. Only a handful have been officially identified. (CNN, 23/2/06)

February 24: Colombia agreed to suspend capture orders for two leaders of the country's second-largest Marxist guerrilla group in an effort to build trust in peace talks hosted by Cuba. The Cuban-inspired National Liberation Army, or ELN, which was founded in 1964 by radical students and Roman Catholic priests, said the provisional legal status given to its commanders, Antonio Garcia and Ramiro Vargas, cleared the way for formal negotiations. "Our delegation had not been recognized politically until now," Garcia, top military commander of the 5,000-strong rebel force, said at a news conference during a second round of exploratory talks in Cuba. "The talks were unstable because it was not clear whether the government was dealing with criminals or guerrillas," he said. Colombian peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo said the government, which considers the ELN a terrorist organization, was opening a political space for the ELN to lay down its arms. (*The New York Times*, 24/2/06)

February 27: Exploratory peace talks between the Colombian government and the country's second-largest Marxist guerrilla group ended with no agreement other than to meet again in April. Colombian peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo and leaders of the Cuban-inspired National Liberation Army, or ELN, said they would hold a third round of preliminary talks in Havana at the beginning of April. (*Reuters*, 27/2/06)

Security

February 24: "The prospects of the country, which are being achieved mainly due to energy savings, demand even greater attention be paid to defense tasks. We cannot forget that the enemy will take advantage of any oversight, because they also are preparing and improving their weaponry and ways of engaging in war," said Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro. Under this premise, the Military Council of the Western Army convened by its chairman, Army Corp General Leopoldo Cintra Frias, conducted a thorough and critical assessment of the results achieved during the Combat Readiness Year 2005. The important meeting, held at the Military Council's headquarters in Havana, was attended by Political Bureau Members, Commander of the Revolution Juan Almeida Bosque, and Pedro Saez Montejo, Communist Party Leader in the Cuban capital. General Raul Castro congratulated the members of the Army when he said "a noticeable leap forward has been made." This, he said, is confirmed by the progress made in combat capacity and readiness, and the training of personnel, including the updating of knowledge about our defense conceptions provided to reserve and territorial militia officers, and Party and Government cadres of the territory. (*Ahora*, 24/2/06)

US-Cuba Relations

February 2: US oil executives and government representatives met with Cuban officials to get a firsthand idea of the oil and gas potential of that country's offshore, in spite of a 45-year-old US embargo. The three-day meeting in Mexico City is aimed at building awareness in the US of the energy potential of Cuba, in case of an eventual softening of the embargo. "For the first time Cuba has something the US needs (...) We can do without rum and cigars but the US needs new sources of oil," said Kirby Jones, president of consulting firm Alamar Associates, which is organizing the meeting. (*International Oil Daily*, 2/2/06)

February 2: Assistant secretary of state for Western Hemispheric affairs, Thomas Shannon, said in Paris that "no one can impose a political model in Cuba", but he was confident that democracy will eventually emerge on the island. Shannon discussed the issue of a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba with European Union officials in Brussels, prior his departure for Paris, where he met high-ranking French officials as part of a tour of European capitals. (*EFE*, 2/2/06)

February 3: Several scholars at the University of Miami role-played a possible scenario in Cuba following Fidel Castro's eventual death, one in which Fidel's brother, Raul Castro, was seen as taking over and there was no instant, dramatic change on the island. "There will be a succession and not a transition in Cuba. This is one of the possible scenarios, not the only one, but it's the one we think is most probable," Jaime Suchlicki, the director of UM's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, told the press. Suchlicki played the role of the head of the general staff of the Cuban armed forces, General Julio Casas Regueiro, in the simulation performed at the campus in Miami. (*EFE*, 4/2/06)

February 3: United States government officials said that they had asked the owner of a hotel in Mexico, which is part of an American corporation, to expel a Cuban delegation that was meeting with American oil executives. The request was made by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which told Starwood Hotels, the owner of the Sheraton Maria Isabel in Mexico City, that American law prohibited it from supplying services to Cuban individuals or companies. The move is the latest in what seems to be a hardening by the Bush administration of the trade embargo against Cuba. A spokeswoman for the Treasury Department, Molly Millerwise, said, "The hotel acted in accordance with US sanctions." A spokeswoman for Starwood Hotels, Nadeen Ayala, confirmed that the Treasury Department had asked the hotel "to have the Cuban nationals leave." (*The New York Times*, 4/2/06)

February 4: The eight Cuban migrants found alive on Elbow Key on February 2 had been afloat for seven days in the Florida Straits, their food and water supply gone. Then the sea turned on them, slamming their makeshift vessel against

a jagged reef, and sending them all tumbling into the water, said Manuel Felipe Prieto, who lives in Miami and is the uncle of one of the victims, Yuley Parra, 22. Prieto's account comes from his conversation with Raidel Martinez Chavez, the migrant taken to a hospital in Marathon to treat an infected thumb and lacerated arm. Prieto said Martinez lost part of his finger as he swam toward land through the razor-sharp reef, and that many of the other migrants were injured. The survivors told Coast Guard officials that six others had died while attempting to reach shore after their homemade vessel broke apart. This group of Cubans was not the group of 15 that the Coast Guard had searched for last week. "The two had no correlation," said Coast Guard spokeswoman Gretchen Eddy. "That other group is still missing." (*The Miami Herald*, 4/2/06)

February 4: A meeting between Cuban officials and US energy executives was moved to another hotel after the Sheraton Hotel in Mexico City, under pressure from the US government, asked the Cubans to leave, the event's organizer said. Kirby Jones, president of the US-Cuba Trade Association, said the US government called Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc., and pressured the chain to ask the Cubans to leave, arguing that the US company was violating a 45-year-old US trade embargo against Cuba. Sheraton Hotel officials in Mexico City declined to comment. The meeting was the first private-sector oil summit between the two countries. It resumed at the Colon Mission Reforma Hotel. (*AP*, 5/2/06)

February 5: A leading Cuban newspaper lambasted Washington for allegedly pressuring a US-owned hotel in Mexico to kick out Cuban energy officials who were meeting with US oil executives. "It's obvious that the Bush administration has taken a further step with this new provocation against Cuba," said an editorial in *Juventud Rebelde*, the newspaper of the Communist Youth Union. The article -- which was not an official statement but likely reflected the Cuban government's stance -- was published after a Mexico City meeting between Cuban oil officials and US business executives was briefly disrupted, allegedly by pressure from Washington. *Juventud Rebelde* asked rhetorically whether the incident was the result of "arrogance or impotence," and suggested that US President George W. Bush's administration was tightening sanctions because it feared the island's strengthened alliances with leftist governments in the hemisphere. "Those from the North are not only -- and with good reason -- worried," the paper said. "They are also ornery." (*AP*, 5/2/06)

February 6: Cuba complained about the expulsion of a group of Cuban officials from a Sheraton hotel in Mexico City, calling the move a "mean action" against Cuba and a "trampling" of the sovereignty of the Mexican people. "The tentacles of the blockade and the criminal economic war of the government of the United States against Cuba are ready to extend to any corner of the planet, to the detriment of the sovereignty and legislation of other states," the official daily *Granma* said in an editorial. [[Editorial de Granma](#)] (*EFE*, 6/2/06)

February 6: Cuba hoisted 138 huge black flags bearing a white star in front of the US diplomatic mission in Havana, blocking an electronic sign streaming news and political messages. After the flags were raised, Cubans began a 24-hour vigil in front of the mission, during which they vowed to hold huge posters with the faces of victims of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, a 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner, a string of Havana hotel blasts in the late 1990s, and other events they blame on the United States. "The flags represent the nation's mourning for over 3,400 Cubans killed by US-sponsored violence since the 1959 revolution," said Carlos Alberto Cremata, son of the co-pilot of a Cuban airliner downed by a bomb blast, killing all 73 aboard. "They are white stars over a black background, representing the light of a people that are in pain and mourning for their children and families," Cremata said at the flag-raising ceremony, attended by Castro, other leaders, relatives of the dead and selected young people. (*Reuters*, 6/2/06)

February 7: Florida's two US senators, Republican Mel Martinez and Democrat Bill Nelson, have radically different views about the increasingly controversial wet-foot, dry-foot policy for Cubans coming in the US by boat. Martinez says he favours going back to policy from more than a decade ago, when virtually all Cuban migrants were rescued by the Coast Guard and brought ashore. Nelson supports keeping the 1994 policy that usually returns Cubans caught at sea but wants it more "fairly" enforced so Cubans who reach any portion of the United States, even an unconnected bridge,

are allowed to stay. Martinez, who is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, hopes to persuade colleagues to hold hearings on the US-Cuba migration accords, which stopped a raftier exodus and led to the wet-foot, dry-foot policy. (*The Miami Herald*, 7/2/06)

February 7: A group of American Catholic activists, who staged a protest outside the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba in December, said they had been warned by a government agency that they might face penalties for breaking the US travel ban to Cuba. The group of 24 activists from Witness Against Torture, included a priest and a 79-year-old nun who marched 50 miles (82 km) to the Guantanamo base to protest against the treatment of foreign terrorism suspects held there. They prayed and fasted for four days outside the base while trying, unsuccessfully, to visit detainees. (*Reuters*, 7/2/06)

February 8: In his recent State of the Union address, US President George Bush cited his concerns about threats by such outlaw nations as North Korea, Syria and Iran, but never mentioned a longtime nemesis - Cuba. This omission bothered a former Bush cabinet member and one of the president's most ardent supporters in the Senate - US Senator Mel Martinez (Republican—Florida) – who expressed his dismay in letters to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the president's national security advisor, Stephen Hadley. Moreover, the President never even mentioned the Western Hemisphere in the address, wrote a surprised Martinez, a Cuban-born refugee from Fidel Castro's dictatorship. With constant anti-US squawking from Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and newly elected Bolivian President Evo Morales – both of whom are closely aligned with Castro – Martinez hopes to prevent Latin America's socialist-communist influence from encroaching upon American interests, while our collective attentions are drawn to other regions of the world. (*NewsMax.Com*, 8/2/06)

February 9: Two men accused of smuggling 14 Cuban migrants into the United States have been charged in federal court, authorities said. Umberto G. Gonzalez and Larry A. Mitchell are charged with illegally bringing aliens to the United States, the US Attorney's Office said. A 38-foot boat driven by Gonzalez ran on Little Duck Key, an uninhabited island accessible only by watercraft, authorities said. Fourteen people on board claimed to be Cuban nationals, and were taken into US custody on the island. The boat was heading to the United States from Cuba, and refused to stop when approached by US authorities, the US Attorney's Office said. (*AP*, 9/2/06)

February 10: Cuba criticized the United States for exerting its "arrogant imperial power" in pressuring a US-owned hotel in Mexico to expel Cuban officials meeting with American oil executives. "We feel terribly bad for all that has happened, which has shown just how far the United States will go to assume the right to ignore the Mexican government and people," said an official note taking up most of the front page of the Communist Party daily Granma. [[Un suceso verdaderamente penoso](#)] (*AP*, 10/2/06)

February 10: A woman who tried to visit detainees at the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba last year has received a questionnaire from the US federal government about the trip. Sheila Stumph of Raleigh was one of 10 protesters who got the letter in January from the US Treasury Department. She and her husband, Scott Langley, were among 24 protesters who flew to Cuba in December and tried to visit the detainees. They were stopped at the gate of the base, but stayed there, fasting and camping for four days. The protesters could be charged with violating the travel ban to Cuba, which carries a maximum 10-year prison sentence and \$250,000 (euro208,850) fine. (*AP*, 10/2/06)

February 13: Defense lawyers and prosecutors are opening a new phase in the battle over five Cuban intelligence agents whose convictions were thrown out by a federal appeals court that found Miami was too anti-Castro to allow for a fair trial there. "There was too much going on the heels of the Elian Gonzalez saga. There was too much pressure on jurors to return a fair verdict," said defense attorney Paul McKenna, referring to the young Cuban castaway who sparked a high-profile custody battle in 2000 between his relatives in Miami and his father in Cuba. In a brief filed with the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, which was to rehear the case on February 14, prosecutors argue that there wasn't enough pretrial publicity to justify moving the trial out of Miami. They also write that the jury -- which did

not include Cuban-Americans -- was approved by the defense. The defense has argued that any juror living in a community so saturated with strong feelings couldn't be impartial, regardless of their background. McKenna had originally asked the trial be moved 23 miles north to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (AP, 13/2/06)

February 13: An organization of US businesses said the administration should rethink how it enforces the Cuban trade embargo following a recent incident in which a Mexico City hotel expelled a Cuban delegation attending an oil conference. William A. Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council, which represents hundreds of US businesses, said the threatened use of US sanctions "undermines government-to-government cooperation on important security and economic issues and damages the goodwill of the United States among the people of Mexico." "Given the wholly negative backlash from the extraterritorial application of US sanctions, I hope that OFAC will refrain from applying such measures in the future," Reinsch said in a letter to Treasury Secretary John Snow. (AP, 13/2/06)

February 13: US Treasury Secretary John Snow has no plans to reconsider a decision by an office under his control to force a US hotel chain to oust Cuban diplomats from a hotel in Mexico City, his spokesman said. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which administers US economic sanctions against other countries, required a Sheraton hotel in the Mexican capital to evict 16 Cubans who were staying there for a conference with US energy companies earlier this month. Sheraton is owned by Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc. "The law is the law, and OFAC is an enforcement agency that is statutorily required to enforce the law," spokesman Tony Fratto told reporters at a briefing. "It's not a question for the secretary of the Treasury to rethink how the law is enforced -- that's not his role with respect to the activities of OFAC," he said. (Reuters, 13/2/06)

February 14: Government and defense lawyers sparred over whether five Cuban intelligence agents could have gotten a fair trial in Miami at the same time that the politically charged Elián González custody case was topping the headlines. The government argued that the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta should deny the agents' request for a new trial because there was no evidence the jurors had any prejudice about the guilt or innocence of the defendants. "Nothing indicates that any member of the jury was influenced by anything going on outside," said David Buckner, assistant US attorney for the Southern District of Florida. But two defense lawyers said the events surrounding the González case inflamed the community, making it impossible to be impartial about any case dealing with Cuban Americans. A three-judge panel of the 11th Circuit of Atlanta threw out all the convictions in August, ruling that pretrial publicity combined with pervasive anti-Castro feeling in Miami didn't allow for a fair trial. The government asked the full appeals court to reconsider. The five men have acknowledged being Cuban agents, but said they were spying not on the United States but on US-based exile groups planning terrorist actions against the Castro government. (Sun Sentinel, AP, 15/2/06)

February 15: Fifteen Cubans sent home after they landed on a former Florida Keys bridge should be returned to the US, their attorneys told a federal judge while dropping a request that he clarify the government's wet-foot, dry-foot policy. Relatives of the Cubans filed suit last month, calling the removal unlawful. They initially asked that the judge clarify the definition of US soil under wet-foot, dry-foot. Under that policy, Cubans who reach US soil are generally allowed to stay, while those stopped at sea are sent back. During the hearing, attorney Kendall Coffey urged US District Judge Federico Moreno simply to rule on whether the 15 migrants should be allowed to return to the United States. "I might as a lawyer, and as someone committed to these issues, prefer a broader ruling," said Coffey, a former US attorney. But sensing that Moreno was loathe to step into the political minefield of whether the US government's Cuban immigration policy should be revised, he urged the judge "to avoid the constitutional questions" and simply rule on whether the abandoned bridge counted as land. (AP, 15/2/06)

February 16: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Venezuela and Cuba "sidekicks" of Iran and dangers to Latin American democracies. Rice said there was a need to present "a united front against some of the things that Venezuela gets involved in," and hinted that Venezuela was linked to a recent political crisis in Nicaragua. "Frankly, one of the problems that we face is that you have a bit of a relationship, or quite a relationship, between Cuba and Venezuela (...)

which I think is a particular danger to the region," Rice told the House International Relations Committee, where she testified on the State Department's 2007 fiscal budget. (*The Miami Herald*, 17/2/06)

February 16: Cuba brought to the UN General Assembly the eviction of Cuban businessmen, under the United States' Helms-Burton Act, from a hotel in Mexico. The issue is part of Item 18 of the Assembly's agenda titled, "The need to end the US economic, commercial and financial blockade of Cuba." The document includes the February 8 letter by Cuban Permanent Ambassador to the UN Rodrigo Malmierca exposing the embarrassing incident as an example of the extraterritorial nature of the US blockade of Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/2/06)

February 17: Cuba submitted a provisional 60-player roster for the World Baseball Classic, making its participation in next month's international tournament official. The final 30-man roster must be submitted by March 3, five days before its first game, against Panama in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The provisional rosters for the other 15 teams were submitted on January 18. (*AP*, 17/2/06)

February 17: The Bush administration is reviewing the way it implements economic sanctions against Cuba after a US-owned hotel in Mexico ejected a Cuban delegation from its premises and triggered a diplomatic row, officials confirmed. Representatives from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, the State Department and the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide met to discuss Cuban sanctions. The meeting came a day after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told a House panel that "dislocations" caused by the sanctions would be looked at. She said the administration is seeking to enforce policies more effectively to ensure that the communist government of Fidel Castro is "not capable of replicating itself later on." "Where there are dysfunctions or dislocations, of course, we have to go and we have to look to see what some of the actual impact is," she said, noting that she had discussed the incident during a meeting with the Mexican foreign minister. (*Knight Ridder Newspapers*, 17/2/06)

February 18: Cuba has agreed to import more US corn as part of a memorandum of understanding signed recently with the US Grains Council (USGC) and has expressed interest in continued imports of distiller's dried grains with solubles (DDGS). Under the agreement, Cuba will buy 700,000 metric tons (27.5 million bushels) of US corn in 2006. The value of the agreement is estimated at nearly \$100 million based on recent corn prices. "This agreement represents a significant increase in the amount of US corn Cuba intends to import this year over previous years," said Davis Anderson, USGC chairman. (*Western Farm Press*, 18/2/06)

February 19: The Cuban government cooperates with backdoor travelers; customs officials generally do not stamp the passports of Americans when they enter. "All travelers are legal as far as we're concerned," said Miguel Alejandro Figueras, a Cuban tourism official. US sanctions limiting travel to Cuba have waxed and waned in the last four decades. Travel loosened during the Clinton administration; it has tightened during the Bush administration. US backdoor travelers risk penalties ranging from a warning letter to \$65,000 fines. (*Los Angeles Times*, 19/2/06)

February 21: Cuba said that a woman died in an attempt by people smugglers to get a group of emigrants into the United States and accused Washington of encouraging illegal immigration. The incident occurred on February 20 when Cuban authorities learned of an attempt to leave the island, organized with the help of people in the United States, from a point on the coast of La Habana province, the official daily *Granma* reported. Authorities found the body of a woman on the shore that was left behind by a group of 14 emigrants, among them women and children, aboard a Scorpion inflatable boat. *Granma* did not say what the woman died from, but it did report that a man and another woman who were unable to get on the boat were arrested. Cuban patrol boats were not able to catch the boat, which was intercepted several hours later by a US Coast Guard vessel some 35 miles north of the port of Mariel, which is 45 kilometers (about 28 miles) west of Havana. [[Granma Editorial](#)] (*EFE*, 21/2/06)

February 21: The US intelligence community has added Cuba to its classified list of nations at risk of instability in about two to five years because of growing concerns over the health of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, US officials have

confirmed. The National Intelligence Council, the community's main centre for middle and long range analysis, based at the CIA in Langley, Virginia, added Cuba to the three-part list during its last biannual update in October, the officials added. Cuba's inclusion in the classified list is the latest evidence that the US intelligence community is growing increasingly concerned over the consequences of Castro's advancing age and apparently deteriorating health after more than four decades of communist rule over the island. For more than a year, the CIA has been telling US policymakers that the 79-year-old Castro suffers from Parkinson's, a debilitating neurological ailment that could make it harder for him to govern. His brother and designated successor, Raúl, is only five years younger and is widely reported to be a lifelong heavy drinker. (*The Miami Herald*, 21/2/06)

February 21: The Republican Senator from Florida Mel Martínez, who took over last year as president of the US-Spain Council, was in Spain ahead of the Council's April meeting in Tampa, Florida to discuss ways to "increase the size and scope" of the organization. During a press conference, he was asked if it was time for a change of thinking on the US embargo against Cuba. "I think we are reaching a decisive moment in Cuba, given the age of the dictator Castro", Martínez said. "The Spanish model of the transition to democracy could be usefully applied to Cuba. I am an optimist, so I think that cooperation between Spain and the United States in this regard is very important", he added. "This is no longer about whether to maintain the embargo or not. We are almost in a post-Cuban embargo world." (*El País*, 21/2/06)

February 21: Chicken has become the top US product exported to Cuba. That's according to the US Cuba Trade and Economic Council in New York. And that trade in chicken benefits companies like Arkansas' Tyson, which sells some of its goods to traders who resell it to Cuba. Chicken sales to Cuba were worth 60 (m) million dollars in 2005. Meanwhile, US rice sales to Cuba declined 39 percent from the year before. The trade group says that's probably because Cuba can receive better financing from China and Vietnam, which are both communist countries. (*AP*, 21/2/06)

February 21: An award in the field of health, given by the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California, was presented to the Hib Vaccine Team at a ceremony held at the University of Havana. The awards are presented annually to educators, scientists and social entrepreneurs who use technology to benefit humankind. The team developed the first vaccine containing an antigen produced by chemical synthesis, states the award. The members of the Hib Vaccine Team are Dr. Vicente Verez-Bencomo and Dr. Violeta Fernandez Santana from the University of Havana, Professor Rene Roy from the University of Quebec in Montreal, Dr. Eugenio Hardy from the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, and Dr. Maria Eugenia Toledo from the Institute for Tropical Medicine Pedro Kouri. Roy, a Canadian professor from the Faculty of Chemistry and Biochemistry, was the only member of the research team who could assist the gala at the museum headquarters in San Jose last November 9. The group of Cuban scientists that developed the vaccine was denied visas by the US government. The Canadian scientist handed the trophy to Dr. Vicente Verez, the project's leading researcher and director of the Center of Synthetic Antigens at the University of Havana. (*Granma*, *AFP*, 22/2/06)

February 21: A group of 25 lawmakers sent a letter to the Treasury Department criticizing an order to evict a Cuban delegation from a US-owned hotel in Mexico as a potential "overreaching application of US law that could have significant worldwide implications." The bipartisan congressional letter was the latest fallout from a February 3 decision by the Sheraton María Isabel hotel in Mexico City to evict 16 Cubans attending an energy conference with US executives, following a warning by the Treasury Department that it might be violating US laws. The congressional letter said the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control may be setting a dangerous new precedent. "Is OFAC setting a new standard that no American-owned hotel or other commercial enterprise can ever provide services to a Cuban national?" the letter said. The letter was signed by members of Congress usually critical of US policy toward Cuba, including Representatives Howard Berman (Democrat-California); Jeff Flake (Republican-Arizona); Jim Kolbe (Republican-Arizona); Jo Ann Emerson (Republican-Missouri), and William Delahunt (Democrat-Massachusetts). (*The Miami Herald*, 22/2/06)

February 21: US Senator John McCain joined the growing debate over the government's wet-foot, dry-foot policy for Cuban immigrants, saying it's time the policy was re-examined. "I've been talking to many in the Cuban-American community and others, including Governor Bush, who are more knowledgeable than I," the senator told reporters during a conference call. "I think it needs to be reviewed." McCain (Republican-Arizona), spoke in advance of a town meeting he will hold at Miami-Dade College's Wolfson Campus to promote his immigration reform bill. The proposal, co-sponsored by US Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat-Massachusetts), would permit illegal immigrants to obtain work visas for up to six years, with the opportunity to apply for permanent residency. It does not include any reference to the wet-foot, dry-foot policy. (AP, 21/2/06)

February 22: Lawyers in the United States are turning their thoughts to a new type of Cuba: one without Fidel Castro. While it's impossible to predict what system of government or economy will form in a post-Castro Cuba, US firms are getting ready. "[Castro's death] is an inevitability," said Pedro Freyre, a partner at Akerman Senterfitt and the co-chairman of the Florida-based firm's international practice group. "It will happen, and it will happen much sooner than much later. But that having been said, the what-ifs and the scenarios are complex." Among US lawyers, there are at least two sources of interest in Cuba. Some, mostly Cuban-American attorneys with sentimental ties, want a hand in shaping the country's legal system when the communist regime falls. Others view the island as a lucrative source of business, from tourism and infrastructure to oil and other industries. Legal work in Cuba will include "everything under the sun," said Jose Sirven, a partner in Holland & Knight's Miami office and a member of the firm's Cuba action team. "That country's been in limbo since 1959, so you have roadwork, water and sewer, refurbishing of buildings, basic needs of consumers, from toilet paper to soap. Everything's in short supply (...) US companies are going to want to enter the market immediately." (*Miami Daily Business Review* , 22/2/06)

February 24: Two groups of Cuban immigrants landed on Mona Island in Puerto Rico, reported officer Jonathan Matías. According to Matías among the detainees there were three minors, including a five-month old baby. (EFE, 24/2/06)

February 24: Fidel Castro saluted solemnly as cannon fire reverberated across Havana Bay and a forest of huge Cuban flags were raised outside the American mission to remember Cuba's 1895 War of Independence. The commemoration of the 111th anniversary of the start of the battle led by independence hero Jose Marti was the latest in a series of gatherings the communist government has organized outside the US Interests Section amid worsening Cuba-US relations. But rather than Castro, it was Parliament Speaker Ricardo Alarcon who addressed the hundreds of high-ranking Cuban officials assembled in the Anti-Imperialist Plaza built several years ago to host protests outside the mission. Alarcon said the flags symbolized the "struggle and sacrifice, but also the dreams and victories" of the Cuban people in their ongoing battle for independence from foreign control. He went on to praise the island's socialist system in a message that seemed aimed largely at US officials, whose blueprint for aiding a post-Castro government assumes that Cuba will become a US-style democracy with a free market economy. (AP, 24/2/06)

February 25: American food sales to Cuba fell by 11 percent in 2005, the first drop since renewed agricultural commerce was approved by Congress in 2000, relaxing trade sanctions against the island that had been in place for more than 40 years. The private US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council released Cuba-US trade figures for 2005 this week showing US agribusiness exported \$350 million, down from \$392 million the year before. The cause of the decline was in dispute. The Cuban government blamed the Bush administration for increased red tape in obtaining export licenses. Others said the government of Fidel Castro had turned to other friendlier sources, including China and Venezuela, for food shipments. John S. Kavulich, senior policy advisor at the Council, predicted 2006 food sales could also fall as Cuba increases its reliance on allies for food and aid. "The government of Cuba is focusing all commercial, political and economic activity toward Venezuela and China due to the largess of those countries," Kavulich said. "If it can be purchased from those countries, they will purchase it from [them] because they are likely to not have to pay for it," Kavulich said. (The Miami Herald, 25/2/06)

February 27: The state of Nebraska will send a third trade delegation to Cuba to sell agricultural commodities to the communist nation. Governor Dave Heineman said that Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy and Nebraska Agriculture Director Greg Ibach will lead a delegation on the April 17-20 trip. The trip follows two visits in August and November, when nearly \$30 million in Nebraska dry edible beans, wheat and soybean meal were sold to communist-run island's food import company, Alimport. (*AP*, 27/2/06)

February 27: The presiding bishop and primate of the US Episcopal Church, Frank Griswold, issued a forceful criticism of Washington's trade embargo against Cuba, calling it "inhumane". Griswold, who is visiting Cuba, said he was saddened to see the "suffering caused by the policies of my country's government". "The US embargo has helped fuel inhumane poverty among your people," Griswold said during an address at Havana's Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, according to a text of the speech released by the Episcopal Church. "The Episcopal Church in the United States strongly opposes the blockade against Cuba." The senior American bishop also said the embargo had "brought large parts of your magnificent cities and infrastructure to ruins, and cut off Cuban families from the support, financial and otherwise, of their loved ones in the United States". (*AFP*, 27/2/06)

February 28: A South Florida legislator's proposal would restrict state-run universities from travel to Cuba and other 'terrorist states,' but some academics have dismissed it as a grab for political attention. State Representative David Rivera wants to make it impossible for state-run colleges and universities to sponsor or promote trips to Cuba, even for legitimate research -- a move slammed by several professors as an attack on academic freedom. Rivera said the recent arrests of Florida International University professor Carlos M. Alvarez and his wife, Elsa, an FIU counselor -- both accused of being agents for Cuba for more than two decades -- compelled the Cuban-American legislator to draft the bill. (*The Miami Herald*, 28/2/06)

February 28: A Miami federal judge ordered the US government to make arrangements for 15 repatriated Cubans to be brought back to the United States after the judge ruled they landed on US soil when they reached an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys. US District Judge Federico Moreno found that the Cubans "were removed to Cuba illegally" in January after the US Coast Guard wrongly concluded the old Seven Mile Bridge was not connected to the United States. Moreno's decision marks the first time the government has been ordered to allow Cubans into the United States after they've been repatriated to Cuba under the "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy. Moreno gave the government a March 30 deadline to consider the Cubans' eligibility to obtain the appropriate federal documents to enter the United States. (*The Miami Herald*, 1/3/06)