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Highlights

Domestic Affairs: A Cuban vaccine protecting children against four diseases is being used for the first time, under the National Immunization Program. During a meeting in Havana in honor of International Women's Day, Fidel Castro announces the distribution of 100,000 rice steamers and pressure cookers. Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister justifies two incidents of public harassment of Cuba's opponents, saying they were "mercenaries" on the US payroll who deserved to be repudiated.

Economy: Canadian resource company Sherritt International (S.TO) and Cuba sign an agreement in Havana to increase nickel plus cobalt production and refining. Fidel Castro announces the second revaluation of the island's currency in a month. Cuba approves Canada as a source of live cattle. Fidel Castro announces a 50 percent increase in pensions and social security benefits for 1.5 million Cubans.

Foreign Affairs: Uruguay's new president restores full diplomatic ties with Cuba. Personal Representative to the UN High Commissioner presents her annual report on Cuba's human rights situation to the UN Human Rights Commission. Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, says that Cuba will not cooperate with the UN Human Rights Commission's designated Representative to investigate the situation of human rights in the island. A dozen European Union legislators hold talks with Cuban authorities. EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel arrives in Cuba on a crucial visit to rebuild ties between Brussels and Havana. The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee passes a resolution criticizing the "sudden change of direction" of the EU's policy toward Cuba.

US-Cuba Relations: Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco meets with Fidel Castro. The US circulates a draft resolution in Geneva that seeks to keep Cuba on the list of systematic violators of human rights.



Domestic Affairs

March 1: A Cuban vaccine protecting children against four diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and hepatitis B has been used for the first time, under the National Immunization Program. The highly efficient vaccine,

which reduces the number of shots and visits to vaccination centers, is the result of a joint project between the Finlay Institute and the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center. Professor Miguel Galindo, head of the Public Health Ministry's National Vaccination Program, pointed out that all children born from last January on, except those whose mothers are infected with hepatitis B, will be immunized with the new vaccine. Children from mothers carrying hepatitis B will be vaccinated against the same diseases but under another plan. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/05)

March 1: Differences between anti-Castro groups in Cuba have erupted into the open, with dissident leader Osvaldo Payá accusing others of trying to discredit his movement. Payá told the press that Martha Beatriz Roque, Felix Bonne and René Gómez Manzano, leaders of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society, were engaged in a "systematic, permanent and very aggressive" campaign against his Christian Liberation Movement. He said that Roque and some "minority" exile groups in Miami were trying to pressure his group into attending a May 20 gathering organized by Roque's movement, which also has invited figures like former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and former Czech President Vaclav Havel. Payá said he would not take part in the encounter. (*The Miami Herald*, 3/3/05)

March 3: More than ten Cuban pediatric hospitals now possess a computer science program linking them to education and research centers. The Alianza Vital software, core of the National Pediatric Surgery Network, will expand the use of computing in this speciality in the first stage, to be followed later by usage of adults. The system ensures the monitoring of hospitalized patients and collects details of operations and surgical reports. The system enables access to statistical information, gives the opportunity to contact the leading authorities in the specialty directly, allows case discussions online and has a virtual library. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 3/3/05)

March 3: Reporters Without Borders applauded the release of independent journalist Carlos Brizuela from a Cuban prison after serving a three-year sentence. Brizuela Yera, who was released the day before, according to the group, worked at an independent news agency in the eastern city of Camagüey before his arrest. He was sentenced to three years in prison in April of 2002 for disobedience and irreverence toward Fidel Castro. (*AP*, 3/3/05)

March 7: After praising the achievement of the International Book Fair in Cuba, Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto launched a challenge to keep it open throughout the year. Extended to 35 cities for a month, the 14th Fair sold more than 4 million books and closed in Santiago de Cuba, 843 kilometers from Havana. The effort to increase the Cuban access to literature on its widest meaning should be maintained, as well as the boost and vigor displayed during those days, should be maintained, Prieto stated. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/3/05)

March 7: The 6th International Documentary Festival Santiago Alvarez In Memoriam closed in Santiago de Cuba with the announcement of the awards for which 80 works from 20 countries compete. Argentina brought the highest number of documentaries, followed by Cuba, Brazil, Spain and Mexico, and also productions from Algeria, Germany, Belgium, Bolivia, the United States, Colombia, Italy, Peru and Uruguay. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/3/05)

March 8: Cuba's "culture of fear" is the biggest hurdle people living under the communist government must overcome to prompt peaceful political change and a free market on the island, Cuba's best-known dissident told the press. Osvaldo Paya said he hopes to push Cubans into action with the National Dialogue, his latest effort to bring democracy to Cuba. "It's like therapy, so people will understand the origin of their fear, the origin of their status," Paya said of the project. "It's therapy where Cubans discover their dignity (...) and discover that life can be different." Unlike other regimes that have used force to control citizens, Cuba relies on people's fear of punishment -- ranging from ostracism to imprisonment -- to maintain order, Paya said. The promoter of the Varela Project said that his latest pursuit, the National Dialogue, is even more threatening to the Cuban government. It goes to the heart of the regime, he said, by prompting people to voice their concerns and complaints and actively create a blueprint for change in Cuba's centralized political and economic systems. "When Cubans are capable of saying that, beyond our fear, we want change, that hits the nucleus of power," he said. "If the people don't have fear, the regime no longer exists." (*The New York Times*, 8/3/05)

March 8: Fidel Castro addressed a meeting of over 1,000 women in Havana's Convention Center in honor of International Women's Day. The Cuban leader spoke about a number of issues affecting women directly on the island today - even to the extent of discussing pressure cookers, and the provision of cooking fuel across the country. He touched on the need to preserve energy explaining, with a remarkable grasp for the technical details of the subject, the difference between cooking with electricity and cooking with gas. Electricity takes twice as much energy to produce the same amount of black bean soup, said Fidel Castro, so efforts should be made to acquire gas pressure cookers and not electric ones. During a 5 1/2-hour speech broadcast on state TV, Castro said 100,000 pressure cookers would be made available each month, an announcement that underscored the communist country's continued retreat toward greater political and economic centralism. The program could wipe out what has become a popular, and in most cases legal, private business that uses molds to make pressure cookers from cheap aluminum. Although imported cookers are sold in stores for about \$25 -- more than the average Cuban earns in a month -- homemade ones cost about \$5.50. Distribution of the cookers is part of an offensive against "the errors, deviations and confusions" in economic planning of the more recent past, Castro said. (*Reuters, Sun Sentinel, Radio Habana Cuba, 9/3/05*)

March 8: The administration of Pharmacy #674 of the Boyeros municipality, in Havana, fired from his job the human rights activist Dalgi Salgado Gomes, a member of the Pro Human Rights Party of Cuba. "They fired me after 12 years of working at the pharmacy, alleging I did not fulfill the requisites for the job", Salgado said. "A few days later, an employee revealed that the firing took place due to express orders of the State Security," she added. (*Puente Informativo, 8/3/05*)

March 9: A dozen leading members of the Young Communist League (UJC) were arrested on corruption charges. They were accused of buying large quantities of domestic appliances to foreign companies based in Cuba and of receiving benefits from the purchases; also of using official cars for private affairs. They were all involved in the so-called "Battle of Ideas" and had control over large amounts of financial and material resources. Among those arrested was the former President of the University Students Federation and member of UJC's National Executive, Alejandro Pérez. Also arrested was Eduardo Vázquez, a member of UJC and a close aide to former UJC Secretary General, Otto Rivero. Rivero was under investigation by State Security as well, but has been released. (*El Nuevo Herald, 9/3/05*)

March 9: More than 30 dissidents in Cuba have been sent to jail in the last year, according to the illegal Cuban Foundation for Human Rights. The Foundation released a "Report of Human Rights Violations in Cuba in 2004" in which it criticizes the "worrying" prison conditions and the "political repression, terror and misinformation" on the island. (*EFE, 9/3/05*)

March 10: Cuban dissident Oswaldo Payá responded to statements by the head of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcón, who had said dissidents were allowed to become candidates in the April elections. Payá noted that Alarcón's statements were not published in Cuba, but rather reported in the international media. "Mr. Alarcón should say so here and in a clear way so that all citizens will believe him", said the dissident who also added his fellow countrymen live in fear of losing their privileges or employment if they express their opinions. Payá also requested airtime on Cuban television to express his opinions. (*El Tiempo, 10/3/05*)

March 11: Cubans form a "monolithic block" that will resist attempts to push the island toward political and economic change, Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro said. Castro, his brother's designated successor, spoke at a ceremony in eastern Cuba honoring combatants of Frank Pais Eastern Front II who died in the Cuban revolution. "In these times of growing threats and aggressive charlatany about 'transitions' and the 'restoration of capitalism,' it is opportune to remind those staying up all night (plotting) that the People, the Army, and the Party form an invincible monolithic block," Castro said in remarks published in Granma, the Communist Party's daily newspaper. (*The New York Times, 12/3/05*)

March 12: The wives of jailed dissidents known as the "Women in White" because of their dress, are preparing vigils and meetings March 18-20, to mark the second anniversary of the first summary trials. Gisela Delgado, wife of Hector Palacios, sentenced to 20 years, has not lost hope after two years of "total anguish, immense sorrow." Laura Polla, wife of Hector Maseda, also serving a 20-year sentence, is convinced the government will not engage in a "mass release." "I am not political, but I have always thought you cannot keep innocent men in prison for more than two years," Polla said, urging other dissidents' wives "not to give in to despondency." (*EFE*, 12/3/05)

March 13: The president of the Jose Marti Cultural Society, Armando Hart, has called on Cuban intellectuals to scientifically develop the Cuban and Latin American philosophical thinking, the local media highlighted. Addressing the closing ceremony of the 31st Jose Marti National Studies Seminar, held in the Central province of Cienfuegos, Hart emphasized the need to carry out researches on humanism, justice, and ethics as well as work for the unity of the Cuban people. Hart, who is also director of the National Jose Marti Program Office, said his country is claiming the presence of people with higher cultural knowledge to deal with the new challenges of the scientific, political and social thinking in the region. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/3/05)

March 13: A troupe of young Mississauga singers jettied off to Cuba, hoping to be ambassadors of Canadian and world music while soaking up lots of Cuban culture and a little sunshine. The Mississauga Festival Youth Choir performed a farewell concert at the University of Toronto, and 26 members departed for a week of cultural and musical exchanges. The group, which includes singers 12 to 17 years old and a handful of chaperones, will use Santiago de Cuba as its base while visiting other parts of Cuba for performances and cultural outings. (*The Toronto Star*, 13/3/05)

March 14: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque referred to the Congress for Democracy in Cuba, which the Assembly to Promote Civil Society (APSC) is organizing on the island, as a "provocation". He also said that the Cuban government will "respond appropriately" to that initiative of the internal opposition. Pérez Roque accused the organizers of this meeting of receiving funds from the US government. (*Encuentro en la Red*, 14/3/05)

March 15: The President of Cuba's National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón, criticized the treatment given by Miami airport immigration authorities to Cardinal Jaime Ortega. "It is an unacceptable act; the least that the US government should have done was to offer apologies and reprimand the officials who committed this act", said Alarcón. (*Notimex*, 15/3/05)

March 15: Human rights activists Antonio and Enrique García Morejón were released from prison after serving their sentences. The García Morejón brothers had been sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison under alleged charges of contempt of Fidel Castro, resisting arrest, disobedience and public disturbances. (*Cubamet*, 17/3/05)

March 16: Arco Progresista, a coalition of Cuban dissident groups who define themselves as social-democrats, said it will not participate in the Congress convened by the Assembly to Promote Civil Society (APSC) scheduled to take place in Havana on May 20. In a communiqué signed by Arco's spokesman, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, the coalition states its decision to "not join the activities of the Assembly". (*AFP*, 16/3/05)

March 16: A former revolutionary commander who returned to Cuba after decades of exile to head a "moderate" dissident movement says 90 percent of Cubans do not believe in the Communist regime, which he describes as rife with corruption. The appraisal was made by Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, leader of Cambio Cubano (Cuban Change). "Some 90 percent of people in Cuba are reformists and don't believe in the system, not even at the highest levels," he said. Reformists "are not in the dissident movement; they are everywhere, asking for change, and have not been able to achieve it because there is no voice to speak for them," Gutierrez Menoyo said. (*EFE*, 16/3/05)

March 17: Cuba is likely to eliminate tuberculosis in the near future, according to AIN News Agency. To achieve that goal, the island will have to lower the incidence to five cases per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2004 the rate was 6.6 on the

island, said Maria Josefa Llanes, an official with the National Tuberculosis Control Program of the Cuban Health Ministry. The healthcare specialist said the nations with the lowest incidence in the region are Chile, Uruguay and Cuba. In Cuba's case, over 100 of its 169 municipalities have a rate under five. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 17/3/05)

March 17: During a press conference with Cuban independent journalists and foreign media representatives the creation of the "Carlos J. Finlay" Alternative Medical Association of Cuba (AMAC) was announced. Young dissident doctor Francisco Pijuán Rodríguez, whom the government has outcast from the national public health system, said the objective of the new institution is to offer an alternative health model to the current system. (*Cubamet*, 25/3/05)

March 18: The month-long period during which Cuban election voter lists have been open for public review concluded. The electoral rolls have been on public display in neighborhoods across the country since February 15 so that all Cuban citizens with the right to vote could check their individual information for any mistakes, and request correction if necessary. The final voter registration lists will be made public on April 6. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 18/3/05)

March 18: Nearly 30 wives of political prisoners marched to the headquarters of the government's journalists' union to demand their plight be publicized in Cuba's state-run media, marking the second anniversary of the crackdown that put their spouses behind bars. Wearing all-white clothing and sashes that said "amnesty," the women dropped off a letter to the union president that harshly criticized those working for Cuban newspapers, magazines and television stations. "Journalists for the state media keep silent. They don't see," the Cuban wives said. "They don't know what's happening in their times. They wear ear muffs, and march on the only road that the state lets them." "We are here to demand our page, our space," continued the letter from the prisoners' wives, "because although they don't like it, they can't deny our existence." The women also passed out copies of the letter to passers-by. (*AP*, 18/3/05)

March 19: The use of acupunctural analgesia in some 60 caesarean sections and 400 cataract operations is a success in Santiago de Cuba, the pioneer province of the nation in terms of natural and traditional medicine. Carlos Falcon, promoter of that technique in the territory, told the press, that the millenary act of inserting needles into specific parts of the human body offers huge advantages, being a harmless technique without secondary effects. For such operations smaller doses are needed than other anesthetics or drugs, that is why it is convenient to use it on people with reactions to conventional methods, he said. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 19/3/05)

March 19: A disturbance at a Havana prison that houses thousands of inmates was controlled by authorities hours after it broke out, according to relatives of prisoners who visited their loved ones later in the day. Elsa Morejon told the press that she learned of the disturbance when she traveled to the Combinado del Este Prison for a scheduled visit with her husband, well-known dissident physician Oscar Elias Biscet. There was no official report on the incident from Cuba's government and it was unknown how the disturbance began or if there were any injuries or deaths. (*AP*, 19/3/05)

March 19: A mob attacked the home of dissident doctor, Darci Ferrer, after he placed photos and posters of imprisoned Castro opponents in front of his house. Ferrer was slightly injured and his protest trashed. "This could be the start of a new wave of political repression by the government using all means at its disposal, including these brigades, which typically are connected to security forces. I know, they attacked me four or five times," said veteran human rights activist, Elizardo Sanchez, head of the illegal but tolerated Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation. (*Reuters*, 19/3/05)

March 20: Some 200 women supporters of Fidel Castro laid siege to a march by 30 female relatives of imprisoned dissidents in an attempt to intimidate them. The women, members of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) waving Cuban flags and chanting "Fidel, Fidel" and "down with the worms" intercepted the wives and other relatives as they quietly marched, dressed in white with flowers in hand, down 5th Ave., the main thoroughfare in Havana's Miramar district. Some 50 men, who appeared to be from the Communist party and security forces, stood by across the street and later were seen telling the women what to do. The dissidents' female relatives have gathered every Sunday for two

years at the Santa Rita Church for Mass, then walked a few blocks outside along the avenue without incident, staging brief rallies in a nearby park. After 30 minutes of harassment from the FMC crowd, the opposition members sat on the steps of the Santa Rita church and began praying and singing. The Palm Sunday march marked exactly two years since the government ended a round up of 75 pro-democracy activists, independent journalists and others. (*Reuters, EFE, 20/3/05*)

March 20: Oswaldo Paya, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), said that the incident between the FMC crowd and the "Ladies in White" "is something premeditated to quiet the voices of these women and part of a wave of repression of a fascist and abusive character on the part of the government." Marta Beatriz Roque, the only woman among the so-called "Group of 75" dissidents arrested two years ago and one of the 14 later released, told EFE that the counterdemonstration "is nothing more than an example of the brutal way in which the government acts against the opposition." On March 18, 2003, Cuban authorities began arresting members of the opposition, many of them backers of Paya's Varela Project, a democratic initiative now bearing more than 25,000 signatures that was presented to Cuba's National Assembly in 2002. (*EFE, 20/3/05*)

March 21: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister justified two incidents of public harassment of Cuba's opponents, saying they were "mercenaries" on the US payroll who deserved to be repudiated. During a press conference held in Havana, Felipe Pérez Roque said that those who demonstrate in the island, even peacefully, on behalf of dissidents should not be surprised at being hounded in the streets. "In Cuba, the streets belong to the revolutionaries (... and) it's legitimate for our people to defend their streets and to oppose those who work for the U.S. government," Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said. "It's legitimate for the people to impede, within norms that include neither excesses nor violations of physical or moral integrity (...the) provocations (of) mercenaries," as the Cuban government calls the dissidents, he added. "Anyone who commits a provocation should know that these things happen," the foreign minister said, adding that the Saturday attack on another dissident in his own home was also justified. "If some whiner provokes his neighbors, he should know that at some point they will lose patience and respond to the provocations," Pérez Roque declared in his first press conference after returning from a trip to Europe. The central theme of the news conference was the human rights situation on the communist island. Acts of "popular repudiation" were regular and normal at the beginning of the 1980s, when demonstrations were organized against citizens who wanted to leave the country via the port of Mariel. (*The Globe and Mail, EFE, 21/3/05*)

March 22: According to an official statement to the press, the Social Democratic Party has decided to pull out from the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba. (*Cubanet, 29/3/05*)

March 23: Political prisoner Angel Moya Acosta, sentenced to 20 years in prison during the 2003 crackdown, sent a letter from prison in reply to Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque's statements at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. In the letter, Moya reminds the Minister of the disappeared passengers aboard the "13 de Marzo" tugboat which was sunk by government agents, and of the 20 children among them. He also recounts the humiliation he was subjected to when he was transferred, naked and handcuffed, to a punishment cell. Moya criticizes the abuses against his relatives in Pedro Betancourt, province of Matanzas, from government supporters who threw lit torches and eggs and yelled insults at them in an act of condemnation. (*Cubanet, 24/3/05*)

March 23: The National Coordinator of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR), Juan José Rabilero Fonseca, called upon all Cubans to fight against "all actions or situations that may jeopardize the future of the revolution" and to engage in demonstrations in support of Fidel Castro. (*BBC, Reforma, 23/3/05*)

March 25: With a first-time blessing from Fidel Castro's communist government, a Roman Catholic Way of the Cross procession went through Havana streets on Good Friday. Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, prayed for the fast recovery of Pope John Paul II together with hundreds of devoted Cuban Catholics who attended the procession in Old Havana. Every priest from this part of the Cuban capital petitioned the government for permission to lead the

procession, unlike in previous years when only one priest would make the request, said Father Juan Miguel of the Christ of the Good Journey church. Catholic processions were also planned to take place on Good Friday and Easter Sunday in Havana's municipalities of Santa María del Rosario, Santiago de las Vegas, Jaruco and Bejucal. The government granted permission for the procession in five of Cuba's 14 provinces, the first time it has done so since the Castro-led guerrillas took power in the 1959 revolution. (*AFP, EFE, 24/3/05*)

March 25: Wives of imprisoned dissidents urged Fidel Castro to respect their right to peaceful protest, calling a government-sponsored interruption of their weekly march "an act of provocation." The Ladies in White delivered at government offices of the Ministry of the Interior and the National Assembly a letter addressed to Castro complaining of the lack of "tolerance" for the exercise of their demands, because "we are exercising and claiming a constitutional right." They were not allowed to deliver the letter at the Council of State office in charge of claims by the population (Oficina de Atención a la Población). In the letter, the "Ladies in White" said they will hold top members of the government responsible for any harm done to them in future standoffs. "We do not discard the possibility that our blood will shed on the streets as we peacefully fight for the freedom of our men," said the letter, signed by Laura Pollan, wife of Hector Maseda, who is serving a 20-year sentence, Dolia Leal, wife of Nelson Aguilar, sentenced to 13, and three other wives of jailed dissidents. (*The New York Times, EFE, La Jornada, 26/3/05*)

March 27: One week after being confronted by a group of pro-government counter protesters, the wives of jailed dissidents marched peacefully after Easter services to demand the release of their husbands. Some 30 wives of jailed dissidents dressed in white and carrying flowers, attended Mass at Santa Rita Church, in the Miramar neighborhood, and marched peacefully down 5th Avenue, as they have been doing every week since the spring of 2003, when 75 peaceful dissidents were given long prison sentences by the government following a crackdown on the opposition. The scene, however, was much different from last weekend, when some 200 members of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) blocked the weekly march by the so-called "Damas de Blanco" (Women in White), chanting pro-government slogans and screaming insults. Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque defended the federation's actions last week, saying that "in Cuba, the streets belong to the revolutionaries." "We are revolutionaries, because revolution means change," Marcela Sanchez, wife of dissident Marcelo Lopez, said. Marcelo Lopez was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2003 and released last November for health reasons. The women responded to Lopez's statement with shouts of "change, change." The lack of problems "could be an attempt by the government to present this as an act of tolerance as the time for debate in Geneva nears," Gisela Delgado said, referring to the upcoming 61st annual session of the UN Human Rights Commission in the Swiss city. (*The New York Times, EFE, 27/3/05*)

March 29: Public spats between dissidents are weakening the opposition movement and playing into the hands of the Cuban government's "repressive forces," veteran activist Vladimiro Roca said in a statement. Roca, who served a five-year prison sentence for his political activities, called on fellow dissidents on and off the island to stop fighting and unite in their shared cause to prompt political and economic change in Cuba. All opponents of the island's communist government should "impede, with resolute action, manifestations of sectarianism, intolerance and marginalization (...) to create a climate of trust and respectful debate." (*Sun Sentinel, 29/3/05*)

March 29: The President of the National Assembly of People's Power or Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcon, highlighted the genuinely democratic nature of elections in Cuba, following his participation in an internet debate on the issue. For two hours the top Cuban lawmaker directly answered 47 questions by people from all over the world in a debate entitled Democracy and Elections in Cuba, sponsored by the Cuban Foreign Ministry website on the internet. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 29/3/05*)

March 30: A top Cuban election official charged that "anti-Cuba international press campaigns" are meant to distort the democratic nature of the island's electoral system. The president of Cuba's National Election Commission, Roberto Diaz Sotolongo, told the press in the eastern city of Camaguey, that many people abroad are unaware that Cuba holds elections. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 30/3/05*)

March 31: Cuban dissident Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leiva has declared himself on a hunger strike, along with several other activists. Gonzalez Leiva is protesting the arrest of members of his family by the Cuban political police. Gonzalez Leiva's cousin, Santiago Santoyo Gonzalez, member of the Cuban Foundation for Human Rights, was arrested for possessing a DVD donated to the Foundation by the US Interest Section in Havana. State Security refused to acknowledge the papers presented by Gonzalez Leiva, which proved the DVD's lawful origin. Andres Gonzalez Leiva, brother of Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leiva, was removed from his home and arrested because he had a radio provided by the US Interest Section in Havana. The arrests took place after a meeting of the Human Rights Foundation at Gonzalez Leiva's home. Gonzalez Leiva has refused to accept the unlawful arrest of his family members and declared himself on a hunger strike in front of the Central Police Station in Ciego de Avila. (*Netfor Cuba*, 31/3/05)

Economy

March 1: Cuba's music industry unveiled a new venture to plug into London's cigar and cocktails scene and show it has more to offer than the veterans of Buena Vista Social Club. Cuba's main state-owned label EGREM said top musicians will play at a festival to be sponsored in May in London by Havana Holdings Ltd, owners of the Floridita bar, cigar lounge and restaurant. The up-market version of Hemingway's favorite daiquiri bar in Havana opened in London's Soho in October, offering premium Cuban cigars and rum cocktails, food by the prestigious Conran Group of restaurateurs and live Cuban music and dancing on the site of the legendary Marquee Club. (*Reuters*, 1/3/05)

March 2: Cuba's worst drought in many years will cut Cuban sugar exports to Russia, and Brazil will scoop up most of the lost Cuban business, trade sources said. The Caribbean island, a traditional sugar exporter to Russia, the world's biggest raw sugar importer, is facing its worst prolonged dry spell in 64 years. Cuban analysts forecast 2004/05 output at no more than 1.8 million tonnes of raw sugar, down from the previous harvest's 2.53 million. Some experts believe output from the harvest, which began in December and ends in May, will be as low as 1.5 million tonnes. "Cuba will supply less to everybody than last year," one trade source said. "Brazil is the alternative." (*Reuters*, 2/3/05)

March 2: In a report, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calls for urgent help to deal with crises stemming from wars and natural disasters. The report warns of potential future threats in four countries: Botswana, Cuba, Ecuador and Peru, due to meteorological conditions. [[Foodcrops and Shortages: Cuba](#)] (*El País*, 2/3/05)

March 2: The leftist Uruguayan government has taken steps for a rapprochement with Cuba by signing a draft agreement with Fidel Castro's government to increase trade. The Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez and the foreign ministers of the two countries signed an accord to exchange Uruguayan agricultural products and services in return for Cuban pharmaceutical products and medical technology. (*Reuters*, 2/3/05)

March 2: Uruguay's new foreign minister, Reinaldo Gargano, said in Montevideo that the Cuban government had requested to formally join the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and that the Uruguayan government would analyze its position on the matter. (*AFP*, 2/3/05)

March 4: Canadian resource company Sherritt International (S.TO) and Cuba signed an agreement in Havana to increase nickel plus cobalt production and refining, state media said. "This expansion will allow production at the Pedro Sotto Alba plant to increase by 16,000 tonnes per year," an official communique said. Fidel Castro and Sherritt International President Ian Delaney were on hand for the signing. The plant, in Moa, eastern Holguin province, is a joint venture with state-owned Cubaniquel and currently produces 34,000 tonnes per year. The statement said the \$450 million expansion project would be completed in 30 months and included retooling a joint venture refinery in Canada to handle the increased output, and mining rights that would supply the Moa plant for 25 years. (*Reuters*, *Granma*, 4/3/05)

March 4: Legal advisors informed Uruguay's new foreign minister, Reinaldo Gargano, that Cuba could not become a member of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), according to statements from the Minister himself. The Minister did not comment on whether the reason had to do with the democratic clause of a protocol signed by the members of MERCOSUR in July 1998 in Ushuaia, Argentina. (*El País*, 4/3/05)

March 4: More than 150,000 pink flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber ruber*), also known as Caribbean flamingos, gather the Máximo-Camagüey wetland, in northern Camagüey province, 500 km southeast of Havana. They arrive from other points on this and other islands of the Caribbean, and from Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The pink flamingo management plan of the government's National Flora and Fauna Protection Agency is "exquisite" in the opinion of Mayra González, director of the province's environmental department. "Twenty years ago we had no idea what was happening in the marsh. Nobody knew. Now it is the best protected area that we have in terms of implementing management plans," she said. In 2002, the Máximo-Camagüey marsh was added to the list of internationally important wetlands of the Ramsar Convention. The Cuban wetland covers 22,000 hectares and serves as a resting area for migratory birds flying to and from North, Central and South America. (*IPS*, 4/3/05)

March 5: Representatives from over 400 firms from 10 countries are scheduled to participate in the 10th International Food Fair to be held in Havana from March 8 to 12. According to Humberto Cabezas, president of the event's organizing committee, the Expocuba exhibition hall will host business executives and producers from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Spain, France, Italy, Mexico, Switzerland, Chile and Cuba. For the first time, Valencia's Institute of Foreign Trade from Spain will attend the event, exchanging samples of products with Cuba, and will sign import-export agreements with Cuban

companies. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 5/3/05)

March 6: A shortage of sugar cane and industrial breakdown, rather than drought, are the main causes of poor yields of the sugar harvest, said an official with the Cuban Sugar Ministry (Minaz). The head of the Institutional Communications Department at Minaz, Oscar Almazán, explained to the local press that breakdowns are the main cause of time wasted during production which together with the decline in sugar cane crops are among the main factors that limit the use of the industrial capacity to the fullest. (*EFE*, 6/3/05)

March 7: Cuba's coffee harvest was reported all but over with output estimated down more than 10 percent at less than 180,000 60-kg bags, based on local media and source reports. Eastern Cuba, home to 85 percent of the crop, is in the grips of its worst drought in close to a century. The remainder of the crop and the best beans, mainly for export to Japan, are grown in central Cuba, where output was similar to last year. "The drought did us in. This was the worst year anyone can remember," Manuel Payes, a coffee farmer in eastern Santiago de Cuba's mountains, said in an interview. Eastern Guantanamo and Santiago provinces account for around 66 percent of the crop and both reported the harvest came in well below expectations. "No one around here is even talking about this year's coffee harvest," said a mid-level government functionary in eastern Guantanamo province, asking his name not be used. Reuters estimated the 2003/2004 crop at around 200,000 60-kg bags, one of the lowest in 50 years. (*Reuters*, 7/3/05)

March 8: Fidel Castro said that this year's sugar crop would weigh in at no more than 1.7 million tonnes of raw sugar, and perhaps less, the lowest level since 1909. "It is possible this year's harvest will not reach 1.7 million tonnes, no, perhaps 1.5 million tonnes," Castro said in a televised speech marking international women's day. Castro blamed "the worst drought in our history" for the disastrous harvest. Cuba produced 2.52 million tonnes of raw sugar last year. Castro also said Cuba is and will always be economically and militarily indestructible, thanks to "the social programs carried out by the Revolution for the benefit of its people" In his five-hours-speech Castro reiterated his optimism with the country's economic future. (*Reuters, Prensa Latina*, 8/3/05)

March 10: The eventual accession of Cuba as an associate or full member of the South American trade bloc Mercosur divided the current members of the bloc. Mercosur is comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay as full members. The Foreign Affairs Minister of Cuba, Felipe Perez Roque, who led the Cuban delegation to Uruguay to attend the inauguration of Tabaré Vázquez, reiterated the interest of Cuba to sign various agreements with Mercosur and eventually to become member of it in the future. The Foreign Affairs Minister of Uruguay Reinaldo Gargano accepted the idea. Yet, the regulations of Mercosur impede the accession of a country that does not respect the democratic system and principles, the legal advisors of Gargano said. The so-called "democratic clause" is not valid if the country's goal is to become only an associate member of the bloc, the legal advisors of the minister added. Marco Aurelio Garcia, a special advisor on foreign relations of Brazil, said that a country of Mercosur should not make such decisions on its own. It is the whole bloc which should consider this issue and this should happen under the interim presidency of Paraguay, Garcia added. (*Latin American News Digest*, 10/3/05)

March 11: China and Cuba held the XVII session of their Joint Commission where they reviewed the main issues of their bilateral agenda, said sources of the Chinese Trade Ministry (Mofcom). "During the meeting both governments examined their bilateral trade exchanges which include Cuban crude sugar and nickel and Chinese beans, television sets, hi-tech and light industry products, and textiles. (*EFE*, 11/3/05)

March 11: Cuba's worst drought in a century has left one in six Cubans without running water and will get worse, a Cuban official warned, calling on the nation to save water. The prolonged drought has hurt the Caribbean island's sugar and rice production and led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of head of cattle in the parched eastern provinces of Las Tunas, Camagüey and Holguín. "It is the worst drought our country has faced since 1901," Aymee Aguirre, vice president of the National Water Resources Institute, said in statements published by the ruling Communist Party newspaper Granma. The situation has deteriorated since January, when officials reported that 700,000 people were collecting water in buckets from tanker trucks. Losses to agriculture had exceeded \$830 million, they said. (*Reuters*, 11/3/05)

March 11: Cuba's sugar minister said the worst drought in a century has not just ravaged this year's sugar crop, but was killing cane scheduled for cutting in 2006, official radio reported over the weekend. "During the current drought we have witnessed something never recorded in our history, the loss of cane plants, not just lower agricultural yields, and for us that is extraordinary," Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro said. Rosales, speaking to local sugar reporters, said the industry had gone through three droughts in the last 50 years, losing on average 25 percent to 30 percent of estimated output, but the decline this year had been "violent." "Next year could be almost as bad, even if the drought ends in May with the rainy season," a local sugar expert close to the sugar ministry, said. "The damage to next year's crop is already serious. The ministry is purchasing millions of dollars more fertilizer than in recent years in hopes of improving the situation," he said. (*Reuters*, 14/3/05)

March 12: Andorra's Foreign Minister Juli Minoves and Cuba's Foreign Minister Felipe Ramon Perez discussed opportunities for strengthening the economic relations between the two countries. The ministers discussed possible education cooperation, as well as tourism and economic cooperation. Andorra and Cuba examined possibilities of enhancing the bilateral trade. High-quality Cuban tobacco, which currently represents 2.0 pct of the Andorran tobacco imports, could increase its share in imports. Andorra will popularise Cuba as a tourist destination among its local citizens. (*Andorran News Digest*, 12/3/05)

March 15: At the world's biggest tourism industry fair underway in Berlin, Cuba complained that "enemies of the revolution" seek to undermine the island's crucial hospitality sector but also boasted that such efforts fail to stem an ever-rising tide of visitors. The island's tourism sector is robust and still growing despite "smear campaigns" orchestrated by foes of the Communist regime, Cuban Deputy Tourism Minister Oscar Gonzalez told the press in the German capital. Gonzalez, head of the Cuban delegation to Berlin's huge ITB international tourism fair, said tourism

"is at the center of the United States's policy against Cuba, and hurting the sector means hurting a major source of income." (*EFE*, 15/3/05)

March 17: Fidel Castro said that the sugar industry— which traditionally had been the first industry in Cuba— “is today the ruin” of the island’s economy due to its high fuel consumption. “The price of sugar has increased a little, but I know this country will never again depend on sugar to survive. That was the case in times of slavery and when this country was full of semi-illiterates, 30% were complete illiterates, and many were unemployed and they worked like animals”, said Castro. During a speech to Cuban leaders, Castro reminded participants that sugar production this year will not exceed 1.5 million tonnes— the worst in a century. (*EFE*, 17/3/05)

March 17: Fidel Castro spoke against corruption, reminding citizens the socialist state was reining in control and promising it would respond to basic needs of the population. Reflecting continuing reports of an economic strengthening and the weakening of the US dollar on the island, Castro said the Cuban peso would strengthen today from 27 to 25 to the dollar. The increase -- a 7 percent gain by the peso -- is the first since 2001. "With this measure, we move in the strategic direction of strengthening the national currency and continue to boost the extraordinary confidence of our population," Castro told a large audience of Communist Party leaders, military and Interior Ministry officials and members of the federation of Cuban women. "The currency of a Third-World country, a blockaded country, begins its upward journey and will go, in a consistent manner, as far as it's necessary," said Castro, 78. ". . . The fate of the empire's currency is to devalue; the fate of the currency of Cuba, the blockaded country, the currency of the revolution, is to gain in value." During much of the nearly three-hour address, aired live on Cuban television and radio, Castro stressed a need to rid the country of the black market, saying illegal sales compromised a system meant to benefit all Cubans. (*AP*, 18/3/05)

March 17: Fidel Castro announced a 7 percent revaluation of Cuba's currency, which will make the Cuban peso slightly stronger against the US dollar. In 1989, the peso was valued at 7-to-1 against the dollar. Five years later it tumbled to 95 pesos to the dollar, said Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a leading Cuba expert and professor emeritus of economics at the University of Pittsburgh. "Really a reduction from 27 to 25 is not a big deal because [the Cuban peso] has essentially been fluctuating two or three points [in recent years]," Mesa-Lago said. "This is sort of symbolic." In the early 1990s, when Cuba's economy crashed, Castro was forced to implement modest reforms, from legalizing limited self-employment to luring foreign investors and tourists. But as the economy has gradually recovered, many reforms have been turned back. Mesa-Lago said Castro feels emboldened because he is backed by his close ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. "He's depending on Chavez and the question is how long can he continue doing this?" Mesa-Lago said. (*Sun Sentinel*, 18/3/05)

March 18: As a result of a Central Bank of Cuba decision, one CUC (equivalent to one US dollar) now fetches 24 regular Cuban pesos, as compared to 26 at the previous rate, while it now costs 25 Cuban pesos instead of 27 to buy one CUC. "The fact that the dollar costs less doesn't mean that people are going to have more money. We've had the same amount of business here today as any other day, with no more sales than usual," a cashier in a store that sells goods in hard currency -- formerly US dollars, then CUC -- told the press. (*IPS*, 18/3/05)

March 18: Cuban government minister Ricardo Cabrisas and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong, have reiterated their commitment to expand bilateral relations. In a meeting in Beijing, the two government officials expressed satisfaction over the results of the China-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission for Economic and Commercial Relations. During Cabrisas' visit to China, he met with a Chinese business executives who are economically and commercially linked with Cuba. He also met with the presidents of the SINOPEC and CNPC oil companies. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 18/3/05)

March 20: The purchase of Cuban convertible pesos with Cuban pesos quadrupled on the island after a recent measure which increased the value of the Cuban peso by 7% against the US dollar, according to preliminary figures. The Vice-

President of the Central Bank of Cuba (BCC), Mercedes López, told the press that the new exchange rate "received immediate support from the population". (*EFECOM*, 20/3/05)

March 21: The number of foreign tourists who visited Cuba in January 2005 rose 10.5 pct year-on-year, a report of the local Ministry of Tourism showed. The number of tourists from the Netherlands rose by 80 percentage points and the number of Spanish tourists to Cuba rose by 41 pct. The tourists from Argentina went up 26 pct and the tourists from the UK increased by 30 pct. A total 2,048,572 tourists visited Cuba in 2004. (*Italian News Digest*, 21/3/05)

March 22: Chinese oil drilling equipment has begun arriving in Cuba as state-run Cubapetroleo (Cupet) and its foreign partners prepare to significantly increase drilling along the northwest coast, industry sources said. "Four service units and a small rig have arrived and we are waiting for more," said a Cuban oil service manager, asking his name not be used. There are currently five rigs operating along the northwest heavy oil belt, an 80-mile (128-km) stretch of coast in Havana and Matanzas provinces from whence come all of Cuba's 70,000 to 80,000 barrels per day of heavy crude at 8 API to 18 API and with a high sulfur content. The poor-quality oil is burned in modified power plants and factories. Cuba imports a similar amount of oil and derivatives, with preferential financing from Venezuela. Canadian companies Sherritt International (S.TO) and Pebercan Inc. (PBC.TO), in conjunction with Cupet, account for 60 percent of the output, plus 2 million cubic meters of natural gas per day. (*Reuters*, 22/3/05)

March 24: Lack of rainfall, waste, leaks, saving measures and efficient use of water were discussed during a meeting of Cuban officials from the largest water consumers companies in Havana. According to Prensa Latina News Agency, Havana receives 723 liters per capita every day while a great amount is unnecessarily wasted and the local government has decided to step in with some new measures. These include reorganizing the water supply hours, installation of lock valves to ration water in factories, schools and hospitals and alleviate demand in residential areas. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/3/05)

March 24: Speaking to an audience of Communist Party and government leaders for the third time this month, Fidel Castro described a gradual economic recovery following Cuba's post-Soviet crisis in the 1990s. He focused on the need to reduce electrical consumption and offered energy-saving tips for homemakers along with pledges to decrease power blackouts. At least two prominent billboards have sprouted in Havana in recent weeks showing a smiling Castro next to the words, "We are doing well." But some diplomats and experts question the strength of the economy and said Castro's measures may have more to do with shoring up political support than improving Cubans' living standards. One diplomat noted that prices at hard-currency stores where many Cubans buy consumer goods were raised last year by 10 percent to 30 percent, more than wiping out any gains to Cubans from the currency revaluations. (*Sun Sentinel, Chicago Tribune*, 25/3/05)

March 24: Fidel Castro announced the second revaluation of the island's currency in as many weeks, increasing the value of the Cuban convertible peso by 8 percent against the US dollar. The revaluation will strengthen the convertible peso to 92 cents to the dollar, though the local currency is worthless outside Cuba. Castro also said a fixed exchange rate for both sales and purchases of the convertible peso would be implemented on April 9. The revaluation follows last week's 7 percent increase in the value of the Cuban peso, from 27 to 25 to the US dollar. "We are defending our resources, our economy," Castro told an audience of Communist Party leaders, government officials, military and members of various other state-sponsored organizations. Economists expected the new measure will lead Cubans to sell off more dollars, adding to the government's improved liquidity. "We know what we are doing and we have faith in what we are doing. We've entered a new era." "If they want mercenaries, let them have to pay more," Castro said, referring to dissidents who receive dollars from American supporters. (*AP, Reuters*, 25/3/05)

March 25: Cubans who supplement their meagre state salaries and pensions with cash from relatives abroad will bear the brunt of a new banking decree, which is likely to boost the government's hard currency reserves while skimming profits from remittances, analysts said. "They're loosing 17 cents for each dollar they change into a convertible peso,"

Mesa- Lago said. "These measures are geared to get more hard currency for the Cuban government, which they desperately need. It's also a symbolic political statement to say that while the dollar is devaluating [Cuban] currency is appreciating." About 60 percent of Cubans have access to hard currency from remittances. Most of the money comes from Cuban Americans. Estimates on the amount sent annually vary widely from about \$400 million to more than \$1 billion. (*Sun Sentinel*, 26/3/05)

March 26: The revaluation of the Cuban convertible peso (CUC) to the dollar and other foreign currencies, recently announced by Fidel Castro, benefits the population, Francisco Soberon, president of Cuba's Central Bank, explained. The measure is linked to last October's decision to stop the circulation of the dollar in the country, fix a 10 percent surcharge on its change, and the recent revaluation of the Cuban peso, Soberon stated in the daily radio-TV broadcast "Mesa Redonda". The three decisions are part of the Cuban State's coherent policy, "in accords with the interests of the population and objectives of the Revolution," he indicated, highlighting Fidel Castro's statement that the new move represents monetary independence for the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/05)

March 26: Malaysia and Cuba agreed to foster their bilateral ties in all spheres, it was reported after winding up the 2nd Session of the Joint Inter-governmental Meeting held during four days in Putrajaya city. Malaysian Foreign Minister Hamid Albar and Cuban Informatics and Communication Minister Ignacio Gonzalez Planas were in charge of the negotiations. The document reflects possibilities of cooperation between both nations, including information and technology of communications, biotechnology, health, agriculture, fishing, investments, trade, transportation, education and culture, among others. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/05)

March 28: Vietnam said it will sell 100,000 tonnes of better-quality 15 percent broken rice to Cuba this year as part of a government deal originally for 425,000 tonnes of 25 percent broken rice. Vietnam maintains a close relationship with fellow communist Cuba, but the sale of the better quality grain is also part of a rice export strategy aimed at raising turnover to \$1 billion this year from \$941 million in 2004. Cuba made the change recently to take the better quality grain as part of the deal which allows deferred payment in 540 days, an official of the Vietnam Food Association said. "Shipment for this lot of 15 percent broken rice will take place later this year," the official told the press. (*Reuters*, 28/3/05)

March 28: During a recent visit to the eastern province of Bayamo, Cuban Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez stated that the island is going through an extraordinary moment with huge possibilities of economic and social advancement in 2005. When addressing the 13th ordinary session of the Provincial Assembly of Granma province, Rodriguez stated that the nation will advance with hard work and and efficient use of resources. A strengthening of the national currency, a projected increase in electric generation and domestic oil production, as well as improved transportation and agriculture were included in the promising news recently announced by Fidel Castro. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 28/3/05)

March 28: Cuban Minister for Foreign Trade Raul de la Nuez is in Ankara, Turkey, heading the Sixth Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation. The island's delegation to the Cuban-Turkish talks is comprised of the Deputy Transportation Minister Roberto Ricardo Marrero, officials of the Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Ministry, representatives from the iron and steel industry and members of the Agricultural and Tourism ministries. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 28/3/05)

March 29: Unusually hot and dry weather is robbing Cuba of what little sugar cane it has, as the worst harvest in a century enters its final month, official sources said. Cuba planned to produce 1.5 million tonnes of raw sugar from January into May, the lowest since 1909, but that goal now appears out of reach. "The drought continues and is getting worse. The amount of raw material for milling continues to decompose and turn bitter," Cuba's top sugar reporter and virtual voice of the Sugar Ministry, Juan Varela, said. Temperatures of over 100 degrees fahrenheit (38 C) were

reported in eastern, and parts of central, Cuba. Local experts said the heat reduced cane sugar content and combined with a lack of humidity could turn it into something like vinegar, rendering it useless. (*Reuters*, 29/3/05)

March 29: Cuba's central bank chief said that the country's economy registered its first surplus in a decade in 2004 and expects another surplus this year as the communist government reasserts economic control after dumping the US dollar and strengthening its own national currency. Central Bank President Francisco Soberon told the press that high international prices for the nickel the island produces and an improvement in tourism contributed to creation of the first surplus since 1994. "We have to keep an eye on the price of petroleum," Soberon allowed, saying that higher crude costs would affect the Cuban economy, "but we are optimistic" about another surplus in 2005. Soberon declined to quantify Cuba's surplus, saying that and other numbers such as reserve figures were confidential information that could be used against the island by the US government and other enemies of Cuba. He also expressed optimism about recent moves to strengthen both the Cuban peso and the convertible Cuban peso. Soberon said those most likely to be affected by the latest measures are Cubans who receive US dollar remittances from relatives in the US. "It will all depend upon what their family abroad does," the bank chief said. "If their relatives increase what they send, it won't affect them. It really isn't that much more they have to send." Soberon said the measure would affect foreign entities operating on the island, such as embassies and international firms, requiring them to pay 8 percent more on many monthly bills, most of which are now charged in convertible Cuban pesos. (*AP*, 29/3/05)

March 29: Montreal based PEBERCAN Inc. announced that a new well in the Northern coast of Cuba, SEBORUCO 9, was successfully completed. This new well was drilled to optimize the drainage of the eastern part of the field. First tests show a good potential for this well with production ranging from 1200 to 1500 barrels per day. PEBERCAN Inc. is involved in the exploration, development and operation of oil reserves in Cuba. Its mining domain includes five concessions covering 6,055 km². (*CNW Group*, 29/3/05)

March 29: According to the official newspaper "Sierra Maestra", more than 15 km of electrical and telephone cables were stolen from the Cuban Telecommunications Company (ETECSA) and the Cuban Railway Company (FC) in Santiago de Cuba last year. The paper notes that in 2004 there were 147 cases of cable theft, 35 of which took place in Santiago, with a total of 15,675 metres stolen. According to the columnist, the Cuban Railway Company has had to bring circulating trains to a halt or cancel the departures of others because communication between stations has been cut due to the theft of the railroad service's phone cables. (*Cubanet*, 29/3/05)

March 31: The Canadian Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Andy Mitchell, announced, after meeting with Cuban Minister of Agriculture, Alfredo Jordán Morales, that Cuba has approved Canada as a source of live cattle. This follows Cuba's decision to re-open its border to a wide range of beef and beef products from Canadian cattle of any age, as well as petfood that does not contain ruminant meat or bone meal. Canadian exporters will now have access to Cuba for shipments of live cattle, goats and sheep, meat from these animals, as well as bovine semen and embryos. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has worked closely with Cuban authorities for a number of months to re-open this market to live cattle and beef from Canada. (*Wuta International*, 31/4/05)

March 31: Fidel Castro announced a 50 percent increase in pensions and social security benefits for 1.5 million Cubans in a new effort to help the most deprived of Cuba's 11 million people. In a four-hour speech, Castro read out complaints about the failings of his 45-year-old government and cited a report that painted a dismal picture of rural communities where people cook with wood or coal and have no television. The average monthly pension of 120 pesos (\$5) will increase to 179 pesos (\$7.50) on May 1, and those receiving less - as little as 55 pesos (\$2) a month - will get bigger raises, Castro said. Some 1.5 million Cubans with pensions of under 300 pesos (\$12.50) will benefit from the raise, he said. The higher pension and social security payments will cost 1.0 billion pesos (\$41.6 million), he said in a rambling speech to ruling Communist Party, military and labor officials. (*Reuters*, *AP*, 31/3/05)

March 31: In the fourth of a new series of weekly talks broadcast live on Cuban television, Fidel Castro dealt with complaints, from bad housing to the lack of aid in drought-stricken eastern Cuba. "Not only is there a housing shortage, we are short of many things," the 78-year-old leader said, promising that funds were arriving in the country and corrections would be made to keep Cuba's socialist system going. Castro announced that household appliances and essential furniture will soon be provided to the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including the bedridden and mothers of children with severe disabilities. Noting that corruption will not be tolerated, Castro insisted that the population and its community organizations keep a watchful eye on the delivery of energy efficient household appliances, spare parts and new food products to guarantee their correct distribution. (*Reuters, AP, Radio Habana Cuba, 31/3/05*)

March 31: During a live broadcast on Cuban TV, Fidel Castro referred to a concern that the weaker dollar could reduce family remittances. Castro said that it is the Bush administration that is punishing Cuban-Americans with its restrictions on the amount of money they can send relatives on the island. He noted that the sovereign Cuban decision will affect the so-called "dissidents" who receive money from Washington to undermine the Revolution, but not those people who live by working and enjoy the guarantee of a decent existence from the State. "The money belongs to the people, the monetary system belongs to the people," he added, pointing out that a further strengthening of the local currency could be in the works. (*Radio Habana Cuba, 31/3/05*)

Exile Community

March 2: In Miami, representatives of Cuban exile groups said there exist "democratic disagreements", not campaigns against the leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) Oswaldo Payá. The activists rejected the accusations made from Cuba the day before by Payá that an organization from the internal dissident movement and some "minority" groups in Miami have tried to discredit and pressure him. "There is no campaign against Payá from the exile community. Instead, what there has been are open and democratic disagreements, as it should be, regarding his strategies", said Ninoska Pérez Castellón, director of the Cuban Liberty Council. (*EFE, 2/3/05*)

March 3: An international coalition called Cuba Democracy Now comprised of Cuban exiles announced congress plans at an event in Madrid, where it displayed a copy of the letter that the Asamblea para Promover la Sociedad Civil in Cuba sent to Fidel Castro informing him of their meeting in Havana on May 20. Speaking at the headquarters of the Fundacion Hispano Cubana (Spanish-Cuban Foundation) in Madrid, coalition president Rigoberto Carceller said such personalities as Mikhail Gorbachev, former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Poland's Lech Walesa would be in attendance. In Spain, the group has invited Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and his conservative predecessor, Jose María Aznar. (*EFE, 3/3/05*)

March 2: Members of the Cuban Democratic Directorate and the Cuban-American Bar Association testified before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS) to condemn the situation on the island. The presentation at the Commission follows a series of previous denunciations on the imprisonment, in 2003, of 75 Cuban dissidents sentenced to up to 28 years in jail. Blanca González, mother of independent journalist, Normando Hernández, who is serving a 25 year sentence, appeared before the Commission. (*AFP, 2/3/05*)

March 4: Saying that Governor Kathleen Blanco will give legitimacy to a "dying monster," a group of Cuban Americans called on Louisiana's chief executive to cancel a planned trade trip to Cuba. George Fowler, the New Orleans head of the Cuban American National Foundation, said there is very little real trade to be had with the impoverished island nation and Blanco stands only to give Fidel Castro a propaganda coup that can be used against US interests - and the Bush administration, which has adopted a harder line against Cuba. "Castro is a dying monster and if

the governor goes over there, she will tie Louisiana to this dying monster forever," Fowler said. Blanco is leading a state delegation to Cuba for four days. (*Dateline Alabama*, 4/3/05)

March 8: Despite the Bush administration's crackdown on exiles' trips back to Cuba, there are still ways to travel to the island without restriction. Religious groups can get licenses with little trouble. And the head of at least one group that says it practices the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria acknowledged that his congregation has exploded in size since the new travel restrictions kicked in. Jose Montoya, head of the Sacerdocio Lucumi Shango Eyeife in Miami, said between 1996 and July 2004, he took about 60 people to Cuba under his religious travel license. Since the restrictions took effect in July, he has taken about 2,500, he said. Exiles who support the restrictions - which cut exile trips to Cuba from once a year to once every three years - say the Santeria groups are abusing their religious privilege. (*The Miami Herald*, 8/3/05)

March 11: For the first time, the Cuban American National Foundation is encouraging its directors to travel to Cuba -- to participate in a meeting of dissidents, diplomats and journalists in Havana in May. CANF is urging other Cuban exile organizations to do the same in a show of solidarity with Cuba's budding dissident movement. But its request was immediately rejected by CANF's archrival, the more conservative Cuban Liberty Council. CANF's declaration came in response to an invitation from dissidents planning the Assembly to Promote Civil Society on May 20. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/3/05)

March 11: Brothers to the Rescue founder José Basulto, a longtime opponent of Fidel Castro, said that he had complained to the FBI about what he said was a death threat from the Cuban government. The alleged threat came last month on the Cuban television program Mesa Redonda Informativa. On the program, which was aired on the anniversary of the 1996 shutdown of Brothers to the Rescue planes, a panelist said: "Impunity won't be eternal, José Basulto León. Even though the White House accepts you as a son, be careful, like a hunter of terror, that your own arrow doesn't kill you." Basulto takes the comments seriously. "It is well known that there are many Castro operatives working under the direct control of the Cuban Intelligence in the US," he said. FBI spokeswoman Judy Orihuela said the Miami FBI office was aware of the comments on Cuban TV. "There's nothing actionable," Orihuela told the press. "We're aware of it, but we don't have any information, based on our sources, of an actual threat." (*The Miami Herald*, 14/3/05)

March 11: The Cuban American National Foundation has announced its members are free to travel to Cuba for a historic gathering of dissidents on the island. The announcement breaks a longstanding foundation policy that required members to resign if they traveled to Cuba and responds to an invitation sent last month by Cuban dissidents. Prominent Cuban dissidents including Martha Beatriz Roque are organizing the first general meeting of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society scheduled for May 20, Cuban Independence Day. Foundation executive director Alfredo Mesa said he did not know who from the foundation might go, but said the group's announcement could force the Cuban government to recognize the dissidents' reunion. (*Sun Sentinel*, 12/3/05)

March 19: The funeral of two Cuban rafters who perished in Mexican waters was held in Mexico City. Lourdes Plasencia, 41, and Eddier Tamayo, 30, died in their boat in an attempted crossing from Cuba across the Gulf of Mexico to Florida. The Mexican Navy recovered their bodies on February 27 but the government only handed them over to the families on March 18. The bodies of Juan Manuel Alcala Pavón, Novadhít García Betancourt and Carlos Lopez Ávila, who made the trip together with Plasencia and Tamayo, are still missing. Cuban authorities did not respond to reports made by Mexican authorities informing of the finding of the corpses. Cuban exile and president of the Washington-based Cuban Movement of Democratic Unity, spoke during the funeral at the Panteon Cemetery in Mexico City. (*Netfor Cuba, Reuters*, 20/3/05)

March 22: Cuban dissidents told Miami congressional representatives that the government of Fidel Castro "has never been as weak as it is now." The chat via speakerphone energized the crowd of Bay of Pigs veterans meeting in Little

Havana at Brigade 2506 headquarters to express support for a planned meeting of dissidents in Cuba on May 20. US Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario Díaz-Balart crowded around the phone emitting the voice of a man who identified himself as Felix Antonio Bonne Carcasses, one of the Cuban dissidents organizing the Assembly to Promote Civil Society. "If it weren't for the 53,000 barrels of oil that Hugo Chávez sends every day to Cuba, it would be over," Bonne Carcasses said. "You can be sure that we won't betray the confidence which Cubans have placed in us. "The Bay of Pigs Veterans, also known as Brigade 2506, declared their support for Carcasses and the May 20 meeting. They are the latest exile organization to say that they plan to support the dissidents in Cuba that day. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/05)

March 31: Six of the world's most repressive regimes are on the United Nations panel that is supposed to uphold human rights, the US campaign group Freedom House said. China, Cuba, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Zimbabwe, which have "dire human rights situations," work in concert to prevent the 53-nation UN Human Rights Commission from combatting abuses, said a statement by the private group, which is based in Washington, D.C. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/3/05)

Foreign Affairs

March 1: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque arrived in Montevideo as head of a delegation attending the inauguration of Uruguay's president-elect Tabaré Vázquez. Vázquez, an oncologist and former Montevideo mayor, is expected to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba. He had said that Castro would not attend the ceremonies because of "health reasons." The 78-year-old Castro is still recovering after falling down and shattering his left kneecap and breaking his right arm during a public appearance in October. Pérez Roque was met at Military Air Base Number 1 by Uruguay's Foreign Minister-designate Reynaldo Gargano and future presidential secretary Jorge Vázquez. (*The New York Times*, *Prensa Latina*, 1/3/05)

March 1: Uruguay's new president restored full diplomatic ties with Cuba in one of his first acts, more than two years after a diplomatic row divided the two Latin American countries. President Tabaré Vázquez was joined by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque as he made the announcement only hours after being sworn in as Uruguay's first leftist president. (*AP*, 1/3/05)

March 1: Cuba has reasserted its willingness to help improve education throughout Latin America. Cuba's higher education minister, Fernando Vecino Alegret made the statement during the 14th Congress of the Latin American Students Organization, known by a Spanish acronym (OCLAE), which is currently underway in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Brazilian Education Minister, Tarso Genro, is also attending the meeting. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/05)

March 1: Cuba expressed support for Nepal's new regime that is fighting Maoist insurgents, saying the recent political developments in the Himalayan kingdom were Nepal's "internal matter". Cuba's Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Abelardo Moreno is in Kathmandu on an unofficial visit, at a time when the international community has been condemning Gyanendra's actions and several high-level delegations have put off their visits. Moreno, who handed over a letter from Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque to Nepal's newly appointed Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey, said Cuba supported Nepal's efforts to establish peace, the state media reported. (*Times of India*, 1/3/05)

March 2: French solidarity with Cuban organizations and individuals denounced Washington's anti-Cuba actions in the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva and urged the French government and the rest of Europe to stand up to the United States. Activists published a document in Paris entitled: "France and Europe must not join anti-Cuba measures at the United Nations". (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 2/3/05)

March 2: A group of Brazilian congressmen from the ruling party and the opposition questioned an agreement between the governments of Brazil and Cuba to cooperate on intelligence issues. According to the daily "Folha de Sao Paulo" Congressman Fernando Gabeira, of the allied Green Party (PV), tabled a motion requesting an explanation from the director of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin), Mauro Marcelo de Lima e Silva. (*Notimex*, 2/3/05)

March 2: A special UN rights envoy has urged Cuba to free all political dissidents, grant freedom of expression and lift restrictions on travel. In her annual report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, French magistrate Christine Chanet said

Cuba had continued to arrest dissidents, while journalists had been "threatened and intimidated." She also accused Cuba of giving "disproportionate" sentences to those jailed for the mere expression of views, and repeated her alarm at the jail conditions some prisoners faced. Chanet, who was appointed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in early 2003 to probe allegations of abuse in Cuba, has been repeatedly refused permission to visit the Communist Caribbean state. "The personal representative of the High Commissioner is alarmed at the allegations of ill-treatment in detention submitted by families of prisoners," she said, repeating a concern she raised in her first report in February 2004. Chanet said that Cuba could point to many positive developments in the economic, social and cultural areas, particularly in health and education. It was also "impossible to ignore the disastrous and lasting economic and social effects" of the economic embargo enforced by the United States, and which had worsened in 2004. Far from encouraging the granting of more freedom, the tensions created by the embargo, which she noted had been condemned by the UN General Assembly, such acts "provide the Cuban authorities with an opportunity to tighten repression". (*Reuters, La Jornada, Notimex*, 2/3/05)

March 3: The government of Spain is inviting more than 200 elderly Cubans, most of them Spanish-born, on an all-expenses-paid trip to get reacquainted with the motherland. Spain's Labor and Social Ministry is picking up most of the transportation tab, though the travelers are paying \$26 apiece. Among the 225 elderly people flying to Spain this year are two who are over 90 and five over 80. (*EFE*, 3/3/05)

March 3: Deputy Foreign Minister of Cuba Alberdo Moreno called on Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in Islamabad. They discussed matters of mutual interest, including the forthcoming session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva and the reform of the United Nations. (*The News International Pakistan*, 4/3/05)

March 3: Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago have signed a joint declaration in Port of Spain, before winding up the 2nd Meeting of the Joint Commission between both member countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). The encounter was presided over by Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas and Trinidad and Tobago Foreign Minister Knowlson W. Gift, who signed the statement. Gift said both delegations deliberated on "matters related to the expansion of bilateral activity in areas of health, tourism, trade, culture and education". (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/05)

March 3: The first secretary of Cuba's Young Communist League, (UJC), Julio Martinez, is currently in Beijing, China, as part of the last stage of a tour which also took him to Malaysia and Vietnam. The Cuban youth leader is in China to inform his counterparts of the preparations for the 16th World Festival of Youth and Students to be held in Caracas, Venezuela, in August. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 3/3/05)

March 3: A Cuban swimming coach who fled his homeland will be tried on immigration charges for allegedly trying to sneak his Cuban wife into El Salvador, officials said. Jose Guillermo Herrera, 36, was hired as a swimming coach by El Salvador's National Institute of Sports in 1999, but announced three years later he was staying in San Salvador for good and instead of returning to his homeland. Investigators say that Herrera's wife Yusmara Alvarez, 32, fled from Cuba to the northern city of San Pedro Sula in neighboring Honduras and joined a group of Salvadoran swimmers in town for a one-day event. Herrera is accused of dressing his wife in athletes' clothing and placing her on a Salvadoran sports federation bus with other swimmers as a means of sneaking her into this country. (*The New York Times*, 3/3/05)

March 3: The director of Cuban Foreign Ministry's Multilateral Affairs Department, Juan Antonio Fernández Palacio gave a conference at the Autonomous University of Dominican Republic. In the presence of professors and students, Fernandez talked about complex international relations in the current single-option world and condemned the US economic blockade on Cuba. Fernández is Cuba's expert at sessions of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/05)

March 7: A former advisor to Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien reveals in a new book how in the late 1990s Canada unleashed intense secret diplomatic activities aimed at reforming the Cuban regime. James Bartleman, then Chrétien's diplomatic advisor, was tasked with presenting Fidel Castro with a program of political and economic reforms designed by Ottawa to foster a peaceful transition to a liberal democracy on the island. Bartleman explains in detail the process followed by Chrétien's government and Castro's reaction to the Canadian proposals in his memoirs "Rollercoaster"'. (*EFE*, 7/3/05)

March 7: Shocked by the death of Gladys Marín, president of the Chilean Communist Party, Cubans remembered the expressions of friendship and solidarity from the communist leader with the island. Although for the hour difference, it was not published by the morning papers, the sad news was immediately broadcast by local radio and TV and spread among the people that attentively followed the health situation of the tenacious fighter. Radio and TV broadcasts inserted obituaries on the death of Marín, passages of her life and notes on her special relationship with Fidel Castro. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/3/05)

March 7: Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell, the most senior British official to travel to communist Cuba since a lengthy freeze over EU support for dissidents, has used a visit to the capital for the freeing of political prisoners serving lengthy prison terms. "I will be talking directly to the Cuban government about the importance of the release of political prisoners and the need for international organizations such as the IRC (Red Cross) to have access to prisons," Rammell told the press at Cuba's Foreign Ministry. He was expected to meet Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque in the afternoon. Rammell, the minister responsible for Latin America, is the highest ranking official from a European Union state to visit Cuba since it lifted a 19-month diplomatic freeze over European support for Cuban dissidents. During his two days in Cuba, Mr Rammell will be attempting to improve relations. He will be reviewing a UK-funded anti-money laundering course. He will also be looking to increase sporting links between the two countries. (*Reuters, BBC*, 7/3/05)

March 7: Felipe Pérez Roque said that Mexico doesn't have reasons to vote against Cuba in Geneva. Responding to a question from a Mexican journalist as to the approach expected by the Mexican government of President Vicente Fox, on the Cuban case at the UN Human Rights Commission, Roque replied that Mexico didn't have a single reason to vote in favor of a plan fabricated by the US in accordance with its policy against Cuba, and against which almost every nation on the planet has spoken in the past - including Mexico. Should a vote in favor of a US supported resolution condemning Cuba be made by Mexico not only would it go against the majority of nations in Latin America, said Pérez Roque, but also be an act that the people and government of Cuba could not possibly understand. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 8/3/05)

March 7: The Cuban foreign minister said that a critical statement on the Commission by a group of experts brought together by the UN General Secretary, was very sound: "Cuba does not seek to reform the UN Human Rights Commission, it seeks to reform the world, to reform economic relations and international political relations (...) and a deep and wide-reaching reform and democratization of the United Nations. The criticisms of the Commission made by Cuba and other nations are valid (...) this Commission is the most politicized in the entire United Nations system", Felipe Pérez Roque said in an interview with the press in Havana. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 8/3/05)

March 7: Several of Air Transat's Airbus planes were temporarily grounded after the rudder on one of the aircraft flying to Quebec City from Cuba nearly fell off. The pilot reported mechanical difficulty about 30 minutes after taking

off from Varadero, Cuba, on March 5. He immediately returned to Cuba, where the plane landed safely. The airline then grounded three Airbuses in Toronto and two in Vancouver until they were inspected. No problems were found. There were no flight cancellations and the planes were back in operation. An investigation into the incident continues. (*The Globe and Mail*, 8/3/05)

March 8: Cuba has praised Spain, Britain, and Belgium as the main movers behind a recent thaw in relations with the European Union, but made clear the bloc's demands for the release of jailed dissidents were in vain. "We do not interfere in the internal affairs of members of the European Union, so why should we allow those countries to interfere in our internal affairs?" Cuban deputy foreign minister Abelardo Moreno told the press in an interview. Moreno, on a visit to London, singled out three nations for helping bring about what he termed the EU-Cuban "detente". "Several European countries have been much more realistic and objective than others," he said. "The UK, Spain, Belgium and a few other countries have been very constructive (...) The UK sensed what was happening was really a non-issue, that Europeans in general had made a mistake." (*Reuters*, 8/3/05)

March 8: Cuban Parliament Chairman Ricardo Alarcon is leading his country's delegation to the funeral of Chilean Communist leader Gladys Marin. "We bring a message of solidarity and affection from the Cuban people and government to her relatives, the Communist Party and Chileans," said Alarcon shortly after arriving in Santiago. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/05)

March 8: The highest ranking European official to visit Cuba since a diplomatic dispute over human rights erupted in 2003 said he urged the government to free all political prisoners and stop harassing dissidents. British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell, responsible for Latin America and human rights, said he had frank talks with members of Fidel Castro's government on the need to improve its rights record as part of a new policy of engagement with Cuba. "I have raised my concerns directly about the need to release all political prisoners within Cuba, especially the 75 that were imprisoned following the crackdown on the peaceful opposition in March 2003," Rammell said at a news conference shortly before his departure. Cuba last year released 14 of the jailed dissidents, leading to the temporary lifting of European Union diplomatic sanctions and a thaw in relations. But Rammell said: "We want to see all of them released." "I have urged Cuban ministers to accept international access to their prisons, to end the harassment of individuals by the state and take steps toward the abolition of the death penalty," he added. Rammell met with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque for two hours without reaching an agreement. (*The New York Times*, 8/3/05)

March 8: A group of Cuban dissidents asked British Secretary of State for Latin America, Bill Rammell, that the European Union continue to lobby for the freedom of Cuban political prisoners and the defence of human rights on the island. Hours prior to his departure from the island, Rammell met with several dissidents. He first met with Marta Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca and minutes later met with Oswaldo Payá, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL) and Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a member of the "group of 75" recently released from prison on health grounds. (*EFE*, 8/3/05)

March 8: A delegation of Canadian adolescents started an exchange visit to Cuba Tuesday, and met Cuban young people, as part of a friendly project now more than 10 years old. Colette Laveragne, president of International Cooperation -a non-governmental organization (NGO) which promotes such events- told the Cuban press that 30 youngsters from Toronto, Canada, between 15 and 18 years old, are in the city of Camaguey, 331.2 miles east from Havana. This friendly meeting sponsored by the Cuban Institute of Friendship with Peoples, the Ministry of Education and the Jose Marti Pioneers Organization, includes a program of visits to cultural and educational institutions, ecological places and others. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/05)

March 8: The General Secretary of the Federation of Cuban Women, Yolanda Ferrer, warned the United Nations on the worsening situation of women under the present unjust international order, while outlining the progress of Cuban women, comprising 45 percent of the total number of Cuban workers. Yolanda Ferrer who is heading a delegation from

the island to the UN session evaluating the Beijing platform, pointed out that the advances of Cuban women have taken place despite Washington's embargo against the island. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 8/3/05)

March 8: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque began his European tour in Strasbourg and met with European Parliament President Joseph Borrell. The Cuban diplomat delivered an invitation to visit Cuba to Parliamentary President, Borrell, on behalf of his Cuban counterpart Ricardo Alarcón. Pérez Roque held talks in Strasbourg with European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Commission chairman Elmar Brok and European Parliament's Socialist Group president Enrique Barón Crespo. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/05)

March 8: Luxembourg's deputy foreign minister, Nicolas Schmit, called on visiting Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque to engage in "constructive dialogue" with the EU and, at the same time, release all political prisoners. According to a communique released by the EU presidency, the ministers, who met in Strasbourg, France, exchanged viewpoints "on recent political and economic developments in Cuba." "The EU continues to be willing to engage in constructive dialogue with Cuban authorities with the goal of achieving tangible results in the political, economic, cooperation and human rights spheres," Schmit said. On the last point, Schmit reaffirmed "the EU's call for the release of all political prisoners in the group of 75" jailed in March 2003, as well as the other "political prisoners still in custody." The meeting was held during Perez Roque's visit to EU institutions following Cuba's decision to resume contacts with EU embassies in Havana and the EU's temporary suspension of diplomatic sanctions on the Cuban government. (*EFE*, 9/3/05)

March 9: Chilean candidate for Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, said that he is in favour of Cuba's reintegration into the Inter-American system. However, he will not allow the issue to create divisions within the regional entity. (*AP*, 9/3/05)

March 9: Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez denied rumours that his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Pérez Roque's statements are a veiled threat that Mexico should not vote against Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission to avoid repeating a crisis similar to last year's. He said Mexico will not promote any resolution against Cuba or any other nation at the UNHRC, but when such a resolution is presented by another country Mexico will analyze it and then cast its vote. (*Notimex*, 9/3/05)

March 9: Sixteen Cuban rafters rescued at sea by Yucatán fishermen were sent to Mexico City to initiate their repatriation to Cuba, said Yucatán's head of immigration, Guibaldo Vargas Madrazo. The stowaways had left from the port of Camagüey aboard a 23-foot-long boat. (*Notimex*, 9/3/05)

March 10: Argentina will maintain its position and abstain from voting on Cuba during the UN Human Rights Conference that will take place in Geneva next month. Argentina will maintain its position in favour of abstention as expressed last year and introduced by the Eduardo Duhalde administration that ended with years of voting against Cuba following the policy instituted by former Presidents Carlos Menem and Fernando de la Rúa. (*BBC*, 10/3/05)

March 10: The President of the Cuban Parliament Ricardo Alarcón arrived in Santiago de Chile and was welcomed by the president of the country, Ricardo Lagos. Also attending was Cuba's ambassador to Chile, Alfonso Fraga and member of Cuba's Communist Party Nestor Leon Sobral. Both sides discussed issues related to bilateral relations and general information on the international political situation, according to Prensa Latina News Agency. Alarcón travelled to Chile to participate in the commemoration service on the cremation of the secretary of the Chilean Communist Party, Gladys Marín. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/3/05)

March 10: Cuba will attend the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, Switzerland, with ten resolutions "of interest for the Third World and the rest of humanity". A draft on arbitrary detentions in the US Naval Base of Guantanamo will be submitted by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. The Cuban delegation will also

propose projects linked to the promotion of a democratic, fair world order, the right for food, and membership in the office of the UN top commission for Human Rights. Texts dealing with peace as an essential requirement for the full exercise of human rights, people's participation, non-discrimination as a basis for democracy, cultural rights, effects of structural adjustment policies, and foreign debt in this sphere will be also presented. (*Prensa Latina*, 10/3/05)

March 10: The competency of a Cuban doctor who amputated a woman's right arm after a car accident in 2001 came under fire in Pretoria High Court. Maria Zwane, 55, is claiming the money from the Road Accident Fund and the Mpumalanga health department. According to a medical report by orthopaedic surgeon Dr Corné Ackerman, there was "no obvious reason" to amputate the arm. The State and the Road Accident Fund are opposing the claim. (*News 24*, 10/3/05)

March 10: Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, told European Union Development Commissioner Louis Michel, that to truly make progress in relations with Cuba European countries "should move away from the futile affairs [that take place] in Geneva", where a new resolution against Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission will be voted in April. During their meeting, Michel told Pérez Roque "clearly" that the EU expects Cuba to make progress toward political openness and to release political prisoners. Pérez Roque said that the release of jailed oppositionists "is not the subject of political negotiations". (*ABC*, 11/3/05)

March 11: As part of a tour of several European countries, Cuba's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Felipe Pérez Roque was officially received by Belgium's Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt. The two statesmen analyzed the state of bilateral relations and issues of international politics in a mutually respectful and friendly atmosphere. In Brussels, Pérez Roque met with Flemish Socialist Party President Steve Stevaert and Belgian Francophone Socialist Party President Elio Di Rupo. The Cuban diplomat invited the Belgian Employment Minister Freya Van Den Bossche to visit Cuba. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/05)

March 11: The OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) announced that rights violations continue in the Americas despite "important progress." In one of its most notable resolutions at the close of its first session of 2005, the Organization of American States' CIDH said that the US economic embargo "on the Cuban regime has a serious impact on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights" on the communist island. Although it acknowledged that Cuba had freed some persons "who had been unjustly imprisoned," the commission said that no significant changes had occurred in that country's "systematic repression of dissidents, human rights defenders and independent journalists." [[Human Rights Situation in the Americas](#)] (*EFE*, 11/3/05)

March 11: Venezuela's permanent representative to the Organization of American States (OAS) Jorge Valero said that the organization needs Cuba as a fully-fledged member and added that Venezuela supported any initiative that would result in its return although that remained Cuba's sovereign decision. During a press conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he is attending a preparatory meeting for the Fourth Summit of the Americas to be held in Mar del Plata in November, Valero said the Venezuelan initiative presented in 2001 now has total support and expressed his conviction that his country's proposal for a Social Charter for the Americas will become a reality. "The only exception is the United States, but it has been isolated within the continental community, so it will eventually be forced to match other countries' views, he said. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 11/3/05)

March 13: Human rights will be a key feature of bilateral Spanish-Cuban talks, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said as he prepared to meet Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque. Moratinos told Spanish radio that "through dialogue, the situation in Cuba with regard to human rights can be improved," while stressing that Madrid had "consistently called on the Cuban government to free all prisoners of conscience." (*AFP*, 13/3/05)

March 13: UN Secretary General Kofi will issue a plan in the coming weeks for "a complete revamping of the human rights machinery" at the United Nations, said his chief of staff, Mark Malloch Brown. The goal of the plan would be "to

try and restore the credibility of this and have people on that commission who really are people of stature and reputation and record and come from countries of the same thing, with real human rights standing in the world," Malloch Brown told the press. Numerous governments with questionable rights records are among its current members, including Cuba, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Saudi Arabia. (*The New York Times*, 14/3/05)

March 14: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Perez Roque met with Spain's Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and with King Juan Carlos, whom he invited on behalf of Fidel Castro to visit the Caribbean island. No date was set for the visit, the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, said. Perez Roque also announced Castro's intention to attend the annual Iberoamerican summit, which this year will be held in the Spanish city of Salamanca. (*EFE*, 14/3/05)

March 14: Cuban's foreign minister called on the European Union for a renewed dialogue on the issue of human rights, but declined to say if there would be more releases of imprisoned government dissidents in his country. "Cuba's disposition is to advance with the European Union in a political dialogue on human rights" Felipe Perez Roque told a joint news conference with his Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos. He noted that the annual nation-by-nation vote at the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva routinely led to political tensions, and said Cuba asks the 25-nation European bloc to abandon its common stance to condemn the island's human rights record. "We ask the EU to leave the actual road of common position and replace it with a reciprocal and frank dialogue," he said. "The decision to release a prisoner (in Cuba) is for the courts to take. It's not a government decision," he said. "The prisoners that were released some months ago were released because of health problems." (*EFE*, 14/4/05)

March 14: The Committee to Protect Journalists issued its annual report, Attacks on the Press 2004. Most of the journalists jailed were locked up on vague "anti-state" charges, such as sedition, subversion and working against the interests of the state, the CPJ says. According to the report, Cuba accounts for 23 of the 122 journalists imprisoned around the world. [[Attacks on the Press 2004](#)] (*The New York Times*, 14/3/05)

March 14: In a moving farewell to the Cuban brigade of medical doctors, the President of Guyana, Bharrat Jagdeo, thanked them for the help given to thousands of people suffering from recent floods in that Caribbean country. The ceremony was held at the President's office in Georgetown, and was attended by members of the cabinet who also said goodbye to the 40 Cuban doctors and technicians. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 14/3/05)

March 14: About 200 intellectuals, activists and artists from Latin America and the United States issued a letter urging the top United Nations human rights watchdog to choose Cuba's side in an expected battle over the communist country's rights record. The letter said the US government has no moral authority to criticize Cuba's human rights record after its own scandals over treatment of terror suspects at prisons in Iraq and the Guantanamo naval base. "We urge the governments of the commission's member countries to not permit (the resolution) to be used to legitimize the anti-Cuban aggression of the administration of (US President George W.) Bush," the letter said. [[Detengamos una nueva maniobra contra Cuba](#)] (*AP*, 14/3/05)

March 14: Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki received and held talks with the Cuban delegation headed by the country's vice-president of the State Council, taking part in the third joint ministerial meeting. The president said that Eritrea highly values the contribution Cuba is making to train health professionals, especially through the teachers it had deployed to the College of Medicine. President Isayas further called for similar Cuban support to train Eritrean nationals in the College of Agriculture. (*BBC*, 14/3/05)

March 14: The Inter American Press Association concluded its midyear meeting with a statement that censured Venezuela for "restricting" freedom of expression and urged Cuba to free 25 journalists now behind bars on the Communist-ruled island. The imprisoned Cuban journalists, according to the IAPA, are suffering from harassment and

cruelty, are being held under unhealthy conditions, are receiving awful food and many of them are in punishment cells and are "intimidated by repressive measures against their families." (*IAPA Press Release*, 14/3/05)

March 15: The Bahamas government repatriated 29 illegal Cuban migrants, three months after they rioted at a detention center, officials said. The men were flown to Cuba without incident, Immigration Minister Vincent Peet said. The migrants had been held in a prison after a riot at Carmichael Road Detention Center in Nassau in December. The riot left 20 people injured, including 11 immigration officers. (*Latin American and Caribbean Briefs*, 16/3/05)

March 15: Cuba backed China's latest move to prevent Taiwan from seeking formal independence, saying that a new law passed by the Asian giant will help it maintain its territorial integrity. Cuba's Foreign Ministry, in a statement published in the Communist Party daily *Granma*, reiterated "its strict adherence to the principle of 'only one China,' with Taiwan as an inalienable part of it." The Cuba statement made no mention of the attack authorization, saying the law "promotes peaceful national unification, the maintenance of peace and stability in the Taiwan straits and ensures the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of China." [[Declaración del Minrex](#)] (*AP*, 15/3/05)

March 15: Cuba defended its rights record in a document prepared for an upcoming United Nations meeting, saying that giving medical parole to 14 of the 75 dissidents rounded up in a crackdown two years ago demonstrated its penal system's "profound humanism." The reference, contained in a text written for the UN Human Rights Commission meeting that opened in Geneva, was the government's first public reference to the early releases last year of 13 men and one woman for health reasons. Two new chapters of the book *Cuba and Human Rights* are "the latest contribution to the effort against lies and deceptions", President of the Cuban Parliament Ricardo Alarcon stated at the launching of the book. The volumes were launched in the former nursery school Le Van Than, target of a sabotage that jeopardized the life of 570 children and 156 workers on May 8, 1980. "Very few places are better than this, the target of one of the most abominable terrorist actions against our people, to present these books citing evidence of the US's long history of violence against Cuba and its desire to overthrow the Cuban Revolution," said Alarcon. [[White Book 2005](#)] (*AP*, 15/3/05)

March 16: In a speech to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said that Cuba will not cooperate with the Commission's designated Representative to investigate the situation of human rights in Cuba. "We will not cooperate with the representative of the High Commissioner, or with the spurious resolution behind her," Perez Roque said, referring to the commission's decision to ask the UN High Commissioner to appoint a special investigator. French magistrate Christine Chanet was appointed to the post in early 2003, but Havana has refused to let her visit. "Why is not such a prestigious lawyer appointed special representative of the High Commissioner to the Guantanamo Naval base," Perez Roque said. "Because it cannot be done. Because it is about the human rights violations committed by the United States and they are untouchable," he added. [[Statement by Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister](#)] (*Reuters*, 16/3/05)

March 16: More than 100 prominent writers, editors, and reporters throughout Latin America joined the Committee to Protect Journalists in calling on Fidel Castro to immediately release 23 jailed journalists, saying the two-year-long imprisonments violate "the most basic norms of international law" and represent "an affront to human dignity." The demand, made in a letter sent to Castro and signed by 108 writers from 18 countries, comes nearly two years to the day that Cuban authorities swept up dozens of independent journalists and dissidents in a massive effort to silence political criticism. Signatories of today's letter include Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, Argentine author Tomás Eloy Martínez, Brazilian journalist Geraldinho Vieira, and Venezuelan editor Teodoro Petkoff. (*CPJ News*, 16/3/05)

March 16: With an official welcoming ceremony at the Palace of Government in Havana, Sierra Leone's President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah started a four-day visit to Cuba, responding to an invitation of Fidel Castro, aimed at broadening bilateral relations. The African dignitary arrived at Jose Marti International Airport, where he was met by Foreign

Affairs Deputy Minister Jose Armando Guerra Menchero and Marta Lomas, Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/3/05)

March 16: Finnish Foreign Ministry Assistant General Director for Latin America, Matti Johannes Pullinen, highlighted in Havana the state of bilateral relations with Cuba and interest to further expand them. Cuban Senior Deputy Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez told the Cuban press that Mr. Pullinen's visit attest to the traditional and fruitful ties binding both countries. Havana and Helsinki established diplomatic relations in April 1929. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/3/05)

March 16: Former Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar said that his country's government was practicing "irresponsible" foreign policy, citing the coziness Spain is fostering with Cuba and Venezuela. Aznar said that under his administration, Spain stood proudly with the two strongest democracies in the world, the United States and Great Britain. And now, he said, Spain stands with Cuba and Venezuela, countries he called bedfellows in exporting trouble throughout Latin America. Aznar made his statements in a meeting with the Herald's editorial board. (*The Miami Herald*, 16/3/05)

March 16: Ricardo Alarcón, head of Cuba's parliament, traveled to Chile to represent his country at Gladys Marín's funeral, when he was interviewed by the conservative magazine *Qué Pasa*. In the interview, Alarcón touched on a number of topics, including José Miguel Insulza's candidacy for the Organization of American States. Alarcón was asked if Cuba would be pleased with a victory by José Miguel Insulza in the race for the OAS presidency. "I don't want to prejudge any candidate. But of the three candidates, I have only dealt with Insulza, and I like him. I have no doubt that he has the ability and qualities needed to help the OAS". About Mexican Foreign Affairs Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez, Alarcón said that "he is an outstanding person". In the case of the third candidate, El Salvador's ex-President Francisco Flores, Alarcón said that he was "supported by the United States". "We don't have any relationship with him. But the OAS has also been changing, as seen by the fact that there are three candidates. There was a time when there would only be one candidate – the one proposed by the North Americans – and so there was no doubt about who would be the secretary general of the OAS", Alarcón added. (*Santiago Times*, 16/3/05)

March 17: The Peruvian Congress requested President Alejandro Toledo to advise his Foreign Minister Manuel Rodriguez to abstain from any resolution condemning Cuba at the UN Commission of Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva. According to Prensa Latina News Agency, the Peruvian legislators said their country must defend the people's right to self-determination and express solidarity with Latin American and Caribbean nations. The initiative was promoted by opposition congressman Javier Diez Canseco, President of the Friendship with Cuba Parliamentary Group and was signed by 78 of 117 legislators of the single-chamber Peruvian Parliament. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 17/3/05)

March 18: The limitation of freedom of expression, association and assembly are serious human rights violations. They must stop immediately, said Amnesty International as it published a report on prisoners of conscience in Cuba on the 2nd anniversary of the 2003 crackdown. Amnesty International currently recognizes 71 prisoners of conscience imprisoned across the island for peacefully expressing their beliefs and opinions and calls on the Cuban government to immediately and unconditionally release all of them. (*AI Press Release*, 18/3/05)

March 18: Amnesty International urged a high-ranking EU official about to visit Cuba to pressure the Castro regime to release all political prisoners jailed in the Caribbean nation. Louis Michel, European Union commissioner for development and aid, is set to visit the Communist-ruled island as a step in a tentative rapprochement between the 25-nation bloc and the 46-year-old regime. "As dialogue with Cuba is renewed, the EU must reiterate its petition to authorities of that country for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience," said the international human rights organization. Cuba's outlawed Commission on Human Rights says the government has imprisoned some 300 people for political offenses. "The EU must pressure Cuba to put an immediate end to such violations," he said. "In Cuba, exercise of the freedom of expression is considered a crime, as is working with a human

rights organization or publishing articles and giving interviews to media considered critical of the Cuban government," said the communique. (*EFE*, 18/3/05)

March 18: Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya accused Fidel Castro's government of "systematically" violating human rights and challenged it to lay out the alternative projects sponsored by his organization before the United Nations' Human Rights Commission. In a message to the commission, currently meeting in Geneva, the leader of the Liberation Christian Movement said the Cuban government "does not respect the commission's resolutions and calls to stop violating the rights of its citizens." "On that commission, only those that surpass the Cuban government in the violation of those rights or those who are training for totalitarianism support the Cuban government," said Paya, winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Award for human rights. (*EFE*, 18/3/05)

March 19: Sierra Leone President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah concluded a three-day-visit to Cuba. The African leader held official talks with Fidel Castro and toured schools, hospitals and other places of social interest. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 19/3/05)

March 20: The 8th International Terry Fox Race in Havana registered a record participation of 10,000 people, Cuban press said. Nonetheless, taking into consideration the simultaneous races in the 169 municipalities of the island, the number of participants could reach one million. This athletic event was initiated by Canada's ambassador to Cuba, Alexandra Bugailiskis, in honor of the young Canadian who 25 years ago raced across his country after having been diagnosed with bone-cancer. Bugailiskis praised Cubans' passion for this race, which is the second largest in scale behind the race taking place in Canada to honor Fox. This year marks the race's 25th edition, and its celebration also marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Canada and Cuba. (*EastDay.Com*, 22/3/05)

March 21: The Republic of Burundi's foreign minister, Therence Sinunguruza, is in Havana in response to an official invitation from his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Pérez Roque. During his stay in Cuba, the visiting foreign minister will participate in official talks with Cuban government officials and tours of areas of historical and cultural interest, Granma newspaper reported. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 21/3/05)

March 21: The Group of 77 (G-77) started a meeting in Havana to discuss ways to boost South-South cooperation. Delegates to a meeting of the G-77 Inter-Governmental Committee for Coordination Among Developing Countries will meet in two working groups to examine the implementation and follow-up of the Action Program and the agreements of the First Summit of the South held in Havana in 2000, as well as to formulate cooperation plans and to decide on cooperation projects for the G-77. The two-day meeting is expected to reach a consensus prior to the Second Summit of the South, scheduled for June, in Doha, Qatar. (*Xinhua*, 21/3/05)

March 21: Cuba will send a 1,500-member delegation to the 16th World Youth and Students Festival to be held this summer in Caracas, Venezuela, according to the First Secretary of the Young Communist League (UJC), Julio Martinez. Martinez said that the participants -to include 500 Cuban workers currently in Venezuela and 115 Venezuelan students with scholarships on the island-will participate in this festival which is scheduled from August 7 to 15 under the theme "For Peace and Solidarity, we struggle against imperialism and war". (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 21/3/05)

March 21: Several Cuban dissidents met with the ambassadors of EU nations in Havana and asked them to include demanding the release of the regime's opposition prisoners on its negotiating agenda with the Fidel Castro government. Attending the two-hour meeting held at EU representative Sven Kuhn von Burgsdorff's residence were Christian democratic leader Oswaldo Paya, former political prisoner Martha Beatriz Roque, Todos Unidos leader Vladimiro Roca and progressive dissident figure Manuel Cuesta Morua. The EU was represented by the ambassadors or chiefs of mission of Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Great Britain, Sweden, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Hungary, the Czech

Republic, Poland and Belgium. After the meeting, Paya said that he asked the ambassadors to include lobbying for the release of imprisoned dissidents on its list of matters to discuss with Havana. "If the EU is going to have a dialogue with the Cuban government, it must include on its agenda (...) the freedom of the political prisoners, because that is something that cannot be postponed," he said. Roque, of the dissident Assembly to Promote Civil Society, said that the meeting "was very friendly and cordial," but she added that there had been "no kind of commitment (made) by the EU." (*EFE*, 21/3/05)

March 21: Days before the first visit of a high-ranking EU official in the context of a tentative rapprochement, Cuba described as "disgraceful" the bloc's intention to back a US resolution against Havana in a UN rights forum, "The European Union can't talk with Cuba, on the one hand, and vote with the United States, on the other. That will make (Europe) lose credibility," Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister asserted. The US resolution, the preparation of which was discussed with the press by the Cuban government, invites the personal representative of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to report to the UNCHR regarding compliance with similar past resolutions and keeps the issue on the table for the Commission's 2006 meeting. (*EFE*, 21/3/05)

March 21: Cuba's education system is a non-stop educational revolution and has progressed far beyond the old learning methods used in many other countries, said Congo's Education Minister, speaking in Havana. Minister Rosalie Kama - in a meeting at the Education Ministry with her Cuban counterpart Luis Ignacio Gómez - went on to rank the island's educational system as one of the best in the world. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 21/3/05)

March 22: A dozen European Union legislators started four days of meetings with Cuban authorities as the EU pursues invigorated ties with the communist-run island. The delegation, representing 10 European countries, met with Cuban Parliament Speaker Ricardo Alarcon. The group, led by Spanish lawmaker Miguel Angel Martinez, was also scheduled to hold discussions with Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, Vice President Carlos Lage and Foreign Investment Minister Marta Lomas throughout the week. (*AP*, 22/3/05)

March 23: A top UN investigator clashed with Cuban officials over her report criticizing human rights conditions on the communist-ruled island. Cuban Ambassador Jorge Mora Godoy told the UN Human Rights Commission that Christine Chanet was playing into the hands of the US campaign against Havana. "This document, based on lies and slander, only serves as a platform to justify the anti-Cuban campaign of the United States (...) which has submitted my country to aggression for 45 years," said Mora Godoy. But Chanet, a French legal expert, slammed Cuban authorities from banning her from the country, making it "almost impossible" to prepare a balanced report. The clash occurred when Chanet presented her report on human rights in Cuba to the 53-nation commission, which is part-way through its annual six-week session. (*AP, Reuters*, 24/3/05)

March 23: The new Argentinean Ambassador to Cuba, Darío Alessandro, presented his credentials to the Cuban government, after the situation created by the case of Hilda Molina, a Cuban physician who was denied permission from Cuban authorities to visit her grandson living in Argentina. The appointment of Alessandro was approved by Argentina's Congress in a special session called by the Executive. (*Diario Hoy*, 23/3/05)

March 23: Representatives of 132 underdeveloped nations making up the Group of 77 (G-77) concluded a conference in Havana: the 11th Meeting of the Intergovernmental Follow-Up and Coordination Committee on Economic Cooperation Among Developing Countries. During the three-day meeting, delegates from member-countries analyzed alternatives for promoting South-South cooperation in various fields. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/3/05)

March 23: Cuban foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque said relations with Vietnam are excellent. Speaking after meeting with Vietnamese deputy foreign minister LeVan Bang, in Havana, the Cuban official said that Vietnam is a sister nation for which the Cuban people have profound affection and gratitude. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/3/05)

March 23: Cuba's top diplomat said that a pending visit to Havana by the EU development and cooperation chief showed that the communist-run Caribbean nation's relations with the European Union were back on track. "I think it is important, it's an important visit. It is a testimony to the new course bilateral relations between Cuba and the EU are taking," Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told reporters, referring to Louis Michel's visit. (*AFP*, 23/3/05)

March 23: Venezuela's Bolivarian News Agency and Cuba's Prensa Latina (PL) News Agency signed a cooperation agreement in Caracas during a ceremony attended by Venezuelan Communication and Information Minister Andrés Izarra. The accord, signed by PL President Francisco Gonzalez and ABN's Freddy Fernandez, will not only allow for rapid exchange of information but will facilitate complementary work between the two agencies. Gonzalez stressed that Prensa Latina has been working for over four decades on an editorial policy to expose and correct the misinformation of the powerful mass media. Fernandez said his country is seeking integration among people in all economic, political and cultural aspects, and one of the first steps is through information. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/3/05)

March 24: Sierra Leone's Information Minister, Prof. Septimus Kaikai stated that President Kabbah's visit to Cuba couldn't in any way annoy the United States or Britain despite their opposition to Fidel Castro's regime. "The American Ambassador and British High Commissioner were aware about his visit to that country," Prof. Kaikai said, adding that President Bush had even sent an Edul Adah congratulatory message to President Kabbah before he left for Cuba. "This is a clear manifestation of the good relationship existing between the two countries," Prof. Kaikai said, adding, "President Kabbah visit to Cuba should not annoy anybody because he is a president of a sovereign country visiting another sovereign state." He said Sierra Leone stands to benefit a lot from Cuba in the area of sports, tourism medical and youth empowerment. (*All Africa.Com*, 26/3/05)

March 24: EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel arrived in Cuba on a crucial visit to rebuild ties between Brussels and Havana after a two-year rift over human rights abuses. "This is a highly charged visit that will show to what extent a rapprochement is possible in the coming months or whether we return to a new ice age," a EU diplomat based in Havana said. Michel's three-day visit is the most senior by a EU official since Fidel Castro's communist government locked up 75 pro-democracy dissidents in March 2003, just days after the EU opened an embassy in Havana. Western diplomats said they saw little scope for advance, doubting Havana would make any concessions. Cuba has released only 14 of the jailed dissidents on health grounds and has balked at EU demands the remaining 61 be freed. "The political prisoner issue is the main obstacle," a European ambassador said. "We are getting nowhere." (*AP*, 24/3/05)

March 24: The five Cuban prisoners incarcerated in the US sent a message to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. According to AIN New Agency, from their respective prisons where they are serving harsh sentences, Gerardo Hernandez, Rene Gonzalez, Ramon Labanino, Antonio Guerrero and Fernando Gonzalez reminded the forum that this is the second consecutive year that the violations that keeps them from receiving visits from their families is brought before the forum. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 24/3/05)

March 25: The European Union commissioner Louis Michel urged Cuba to turn the page on past tensions and start a new dialogue with the European Union. "In my opinion, I don't think it is necessary to spend more time on past difficulties. I think that the important thing is that today there already are several specific elements, and there is an expression of a very strong will to see our relations consolidate, relaunched," Michel said with Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque looking on. Michel and six other members of an EU delegation began the round of meetings with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. The EU commissioner said he addressed the political prisoner issue in meetings with some of Cuba's top officials but reached no agreements on their fate. "I think there is an acceptance on the Cuban side to discuss these very sensitive issues," Michel said after meeting with parliament speaker Ricardo Alarcon. "I really have the impression there is space to make progress and that my visit is a milestone." The EU has asked that Cuba release all political prisoners, and in particular 61 dissidents who remain behind bars after a roundup of 75 government opponents two years ago. The other 14 activists were later released on medical parole. "These past few

years have been difficult ones in our relationship, for many reasons," Michel told Perez Roque in initial remarks open to the news media. "The important thing today is for there to be various concrete elements and an expression of very strong determination for us to be able to strengthen our relationship." Perez Roque told Michel, "We receive you as a friend," and said he hoped the visit would represent "a new opportunity to give continuity to our discussion." Michel was expected to meet with Cardinal Jaime Ortega, academics and dissidents, dissident sources said. (*The News International, Seattle Post, The New York Times, 26/3/05*)

March 26: Fidel Castro met with European Union Development and Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel, the first high-ranking EU official to visit since relations with the island were normalized. Castro shares the European Union's interest in strengthening ties and tackling sensitive issues such as human rights and the island's political prisoners, EU commissioner Louis Michel said after four-hour talks with the Cuban leader. Castro, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, Michel and non-resident EU Ambassador Dino Sinigallia spoke of issues of bilateral interest, the officials said. "We spoke together about all the issues, even about the difficult issues, and sensitive issues, and there is of course a common interest to relaunch a political dialogue," Michel said as he entered a meeting with Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the Roman Catholic Church's top prelate on the island. The meeting with Castro was not on Michel's agenda, though it had been mentioned as a possibility. (*EFE, AP, 26/3/05*)

March 26: Miguel Angel Martinez, a member of Spain's Socialist party who serves as spokesman for a EU delegation of lawmakers visiting Cuba said he found "great pluralism" among the different groups of Cuban dissidents, though they all agree in calling for the release of the jailed dissidents. "All the other postures were divergent in almost every case," said Martinez, who met with Oswaldo Paya, Manuel Cuesta Morua, Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo and Vladimiro Roca. "Most of those with whom we met, I would put by head on the block and say they have nothing to do with the United States. On the contrary, they are critical of the blockade and condemn US policy," he said. Martinez, who said he considers the EU's common policy toward Cuba an "encumbrance," condemned the US embargo on trade with the island and argued for Europe's need to dissociate itself from Washington's Cuba policy. (*EFE, 26/3/05*)

March 26: Members of the Friendship and Solidarity with Cuba Group in the European Parliament called on the Cuban government to release jailed dissident and allow political breathing room on the island. The legislators concluded a visit to Cuba in which they met with high-ranking government officials and dissidents alike. Miguel Angel Martinez, a member of Spain's Socialist party who serves as the delegation's spokesman, said the group communicated to Cuban authorities "the need to release the prisoners." The imprisoned dissidents "pose no threat whatever to the nation's security" and should be "at home peacefully." Releasing the 61 dissidents still behind bars out of the 75 who were sentenced in the spring of 2003 "would markedly facilitate our activity in favor of normalized relations between Cuba and the European Union," the group said. In addition, Martinez said at a press conference, the group told the Cuban government it is "essential" to leave "political room" for the participation of people who think differently. (*EFE, 26/3/05*)

March 27: European Union Development Commissioner Louis Michel has urged Cuban Fidel Castro to release imprisoned dissidents during a visit to Cuba to reopen talks between Brussels and Havana, an EU spokesman said. The Cuban leader expressed interest in mending relations with Europe during the four-hour meeting, Michel's spokesman Amadeu Altafaj Tardio said. "Michel repeated to Castro the unvarying position of the EU in favour of the release of all political prisoners on the island," the spokesman said. "The meeting was cordial and very constructive," he said. (*Reuters, 27/3/05*)

March 28: The pilot of a Cuban airliner carrying 93 people aborted his takeoff when an engine caught fire, sending the craft swerving off the runway and crashing. Officials said 16 people were injured but none seriously. The Cubana de Aviacion Ilyushin 18 was leaving Venezuela's main airport near Caracas when an undetermined mechanical problem caused the fire, said Jose Cabello, the airport's director. "The plane never took off. It could not reach the required speed for takeoff, forcing the pilot to try to keep the plane on land. But the runway ended," said Cabello. (*AP, 28/3/05*)

March 28: A conference on Latin America's social and political reality was opened in Cuba's Varadero beach resort by the Russian non-governmental organisation (NGO) World Dialogue of Civilizations. The three-day event opened with the colloquium "Latin America in the 21st Century: Universalization and Originality," attended by Cuba's Culture Minister Abel Prieto and Carlos Marti, president of the National Union of Writers and Artists (UNEAC). Vladimir Yakumin, co-president of the Russian organization, pointed out that the awakening of social and progressive movements in Latin America is the result of current evolution of the continent. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 28/3/05)

March 29: More than 18,000 children with health problems believed linked to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine have received treatment in Cuba over the last 15 years, officials said. The children receive treatment at a coastal sanatorium at Tarara, east of Havana. Cuba pays for all medical treatment, room and board. The average stay is 2 1/2 months. About 250 children are at the sanatorium at any one time. They live in houses surrounding the medical facility, often with their parents. When the program began, most of the young patients suffered from leukemia, other forms of cancer and cerebral palsy - health problems doctors believe are related to the radiation. (*Canadian Press*, 30/3/05)

March 29: Reporters without Borders (RSF) said that independent Cuban journalist Oscar Mario Gonzalez was being persecuted by the government. "A Cuban journalist is yet again being harassed by the political police for the sole reason that he refuses to conform to the 'code of conduct' imposed by the government," RSF said in a statement. According to the group, Gonzalez was summoned and questioned for two hours by state security agents in Havana who threatened him for criticizing the government too much. "They told me I criticized the government too much and that they would not allow this to continue," Gonzalez told Reporters Without Borders. (*EFE*, 29/3/05)

March 30: The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution criticizing the "sudden change of direction" of the EU's policy toward Cuba and the provisional lifting of diplomatic sanctions agreed on by the European Council at the request of Spain. The resolution had been passed by a vast majority at the Commission and is expected to be ratified by the European Parliament. (*Europa Press*, 30/3/05)

March 30: A spokeswoman for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the press that the European Union as a whole has decided "to support" a resolution against Cuba from Washington. Several diplomatic sources have referred to the US document as "lacking in content" since it only reminds of previous resolutions and calls for a visit to the island by UN Human Rights Commissioner, Louise Arbour. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands have expressed their intention to co-sponsor the resolution, regardless of whether there is consensus among the 25 or not. (*Europa Press*, 30/3/05)

March 30: Participants from the Canadian ARO Solidarity Brigade were in the eastern Cuban province of Camagüey discussing democracy in Cuba with members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). Hundreds of members from the CDR attended the various meetings, where the Canadian visitors learned in detail about the Cuban election process and the upcoming municipal elections. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 30/3/05)

March 30: The Cuban government said it is ready to assist Nigeria in order to ensure the rapid development of the nation's collapsing education system. Speaking at the National Teachers Institute (NTI) Kaduna, Cuban Deputy Minister of Education, Mr. Edvardo Cruz said cooperation between the two countries in the area of education will bring about growth of the sector in the two countries. (*All Africa*, 30/3/05)

March 30: Fidel Castro has asserted that the human race must have values to survive and warned that it has never been as endangered as it is now. When addressing the closing ceremony of the Latin American International Conference in the 21st Century: Universality and Originality, Fidel Castro said that mankind is a wonder that deserves to survive. After having received lethal doses of barbarism and ignorance, the world needs to spread education as a means to instill human values, he noted. The Cuban leader praised the recent meeting of the Venezuelan, Colombian and Brazilian

presidents with the head of the Spanish government, in which Washington's foreign policies were criticized. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/05)

March 31: The government of Uruguay announced that it will not invite Cuban dissidents to its embassy in Havana. After a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Uruguayan Parliament, Uruguayan lawmaker Jaime Trobo told the press that Foreign Minister, Reinaldo Gargano, said at the meeting that, "the chancellery is not allowing Cuban dissidents, or representatives of dissident organizations to enter into Uruguay's diplomatic mission in Cuba". According to Trobo, the minister said that the current government in Uruguay does not want any "prickly" relation with Castro's government. (*AFP*, 31/3/05)

March 31: Cuba's Defense Minister Raul Castro will pay a working visit to Russia in the middle of May, diplomatic sources said in Moscow. The visit is not due to the festivities to be held in the Russian capital on the 60th anniversary of Victory in World War II, the source said. "Invitations to the festivities on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Victory in the second world war have been sent, from among the countries of the Western Hemisphere, to only the United States and Canada, which have participated in routing Nazism", the source said. (*Novosti*, 31/3/05)

Terrorism

March 11: The US is seeking to cut the number of Guantanamo Bay detainees by more than half by transferring them to jails in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Yemen. Hundreds of terror suspects could be handed over, according to senior officials quoted in the New York Times. There are currently about 540 detainees in Guantanamo. (*BBC*, 11/3/05)

March 21: Video footage of the treatment of prisoners by the US military at Guantanamo Bay would reveal many cases of substantial abuse as "explosive as anything from Abu Ghraib", a lawyer said. Adelaide lawyer Stephen Kenny, who represented Australian David Hicks during the early part of his detention at the military prison in Cuba, told a law conference today 500 hours of videotape of prisoners at the US base existed. Mr Kenny said the full story of abuse at Guantanamo Bay would not be told until the tapes were released, but they could be as damaging as the images of Iraqi prisoners being abused by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. (*The Australian*, 21/3/05)

Security

March 8: Cuba is invulnerable from the military point of view and is able to withstand a US aggression, Fidel Castro stated addressing a festive meeting devoted to International Women's Day. "Cuba cannot be intimidated" by the new threats, which some officials of the US administration had recently voiced. He assured the meeting in the course of his almost 6-hour speech that the aggressor would sustain tremendous losses if he dared attack Cuba. They will be comparable only to the losses the United States had sustained during "its aggression against Vietnam", Castro stressed. He spoke very highly about the combat readiness of the Cuban army, noting that the country's military command had achieved notable successes in its preparations to rebuff a possible foreign attack. An aggressor "will never be able to occupy the country's capital," he stressed. (*Itar Tass*, 9/3/05)

US-Cuba Relations

March 1: San Diego port officials have hired a leading government ethicist to look into the newest commissioner's recent trip to Cuba, where he signed a trade agreement without the port's authorization. Port Commission Chairman Bill Hall said Bob Stern will evaluate whether Kourosh Hangafarin's actions in Cuba posed any ethical problems, including whether he stood to gain financially. The agreement Hangafarin signed is not binding without approval of the San Diego Unified Port Commission at a public meeting, but port officials moved quickly to resolve the matter. Hall said the federal departments of Treasury, State and Commerce had been contacted to see if they have concerns. (*Union Tribune*, 1/3/05)

March 2: The United States should view with "concern" the advance of leftist movements in Latin America, the head of the Cuban National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, said in an interview with the press. "The least the United States should do is to look with concern upon the changes in Latin America," Alarcon said, emphasizing the importance of the coming to power in Uruguay of the Broad Front headed by Socialist Tabare Vazquez. Alarcon said that Latin America "is the region of the world that is the vanguard in the alternative struggle to globalization." He called US President George W. Bush "ignorant, with an insurmountable arrogance, but with bombs and the means to destroy." The legislative chief also referred to recent measures announced by the US Treasury Department to force Cuba to pay in advance and in cash for purchases of US agricultural products. "The objective is obvious: to try and oppose the sale of U.S. agricultural products to Cuba," Alarcon said, adding that "the only loser" with that policy is the US exporter. (*EFE*, 3/3/05)

March 3: The transition to a democratic Cuba is already under way, said the US State Department's Roger Noriega. In a prepared testimony before a US House of Representatives panel reviewing the situation in Cuba, Noriega said that compared to just a few years ago -- "despite the brutally repressive nature" of the Cuban regime's tactics -- "there are now more opposition activities" occurring throughout the island nation. Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said that although these activities are "in many ways limited and fragile, I believe that we will be able to look back at them years from now and see that they were indeed significant and the precursor to a Cuban future free of misery and repression." The official said that during the previous week, he told a group of Cuban-American supporters of a free Cuba that each of them knows something that most of the rest of the world does not: "the transition [to democracy] in Cuba is already under way." [[Testimony of Roger Noriega](#)] (*USINFO*, 3/3/05)

March 3: During a hearing by two House International Relations Committees US Congress was sharply divided over policy to Cuba. Farm state lawmakers from both parties and liberal Democrats say more than four decades of US embargoes have failed to end Castro's dictatorship and that policies of engagement are more likely to produce changes. But Cuban-American lawmakers and Republican congressional leaders favor Bush's hard line. Bush, seeking to deny Castro US dollars, has tightened the embargo, making it harder for Americans to travel to or do business with Cuba. Democrats charged the Bush administration has failed to develop a coherent Latin American policy, and said its effort to isolate Cuba while engaging with other non-democratic government was inconsistent. Representative Diane Watson of California suggested initiating "strategies to talk with Fidel Castro," and said the United States needs "to clean our act up" in dealing with many other non-democratic countries. (*The New York Times*, 3/3/05)

March 3: Three Cuban dissidents addressed a congressional committee by telephone from Havana, praising President Bush's policies and denouncing Fidel Castro. The dissidents at the hearing endorsed Bush's approach. They were Martha Beatriz Roque, an economist, Rene Gomez, an attorney, and Bonne, an electrical engineering professor. Roque rejected suggestions by Democratic lawmakers that the United States negotiate with Castro. "He only hears what he wants to hear," she said. Roque also said visits by American tourists wouldn't help ordinary Cubans and would lead to more prostitution and drug trafficking. The hearing was aimed as much at an international audience as a domestic one. US officials have been disappointed that the European Union recently lifted a suspension on high-level contacts with Cuba that was imposed after the 2003 crackdown. (*The New York Times*, 3/3/05)

March 3: The White House is intent on waging yet another campaign of provocations against Cuba, warned panelists on Cuban television and radio current events program, "The Round Table." AIN News Agency reported that the sign of the new escalation came in a report issued by the US State Department on the situation of human rights around the world in which it alleges that the Cuban government is "a stain on the hemisphere's democratic process". Cuban journalists charged that the document seeks to condition public opinion to accept a condemnation of the island during the forthcoming session of the Geneva-based United Nations Human Rights Commission. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 3/3/05)

March 3: The Roman Catholic Church in Cuba said that US immigration authorities rudely treated its top prelate, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, during a visit to Miami. A US official said only routine procedures were followed. "During the exchanges with immigration officials, the treatment received by Cardinal Jaime Ortega was brusque and discourteous," read a communique issued by Cuba's Catholic Bishops Conference. "Nevertheless, it must be clarified that there was no type of reference made to the cardinal's beliefs about the political situation in Cuba or in the United States," said the statement about the prelate's February 25 arrival. It added that US immigration officials never mentioned a "deportation order," as was suggested by some media at the time. Ortega was traveling on a diplomatic passport issued by the Vatican and a multiple entry American visa from the US Interests Section in Havana. (*AP*, 3/2/05)

March 4: The president of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcón, has asserted that Cuba will defend its sovereignty in the April elections amidst US plans geared to destroy the island's electoral system, the local press highlighted. Alarcón made his statement while talking to a group of young Cubans, who will exercise for the first time their right to vote in the April suffrage to elect deputies to municipal assemblies (local governments). (*Prensa Latina*, 4/3/05)

March 4: The US government denounced that although the Cuban government has taken "a much more aggressive posture with respect to all activities deemed illegal, including narcotics trafficking, since 2003", the primary focus of this stepped-up activity has been "the repression of political activities, including the continuing arrest and detention of civil society activists". The statement was made in the latest report by the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs of the State Department. [[International Narcotics Control Strategy 2005: Caribbean](#)] (*El Nuevo Herald*, 4/3/05)

March 7: Cuba's foreign minister rejected a recent U.S. State Department report criticizing the island's human rights record, saying that the United States has no moral authority to judge other countries after its own scandals over treatment of terror suspects. "We exhort American authorities to worry about their own problems," Felipe Perez Roque told a news conference. "Cuba recognizes that there are violations of human rights in our country, but they are at the Guantanamo Naval Base, in territory occupied against Cuba's will," Roque said of the U.S. base used as a giant prison for terror suspects. The February 28 US report on rights practices in Cuba acknowledged there had been no extrajudicial killings or disappearances of opponents on the island last year. But it took Fidel Castro's government to task for violations of civil and political rights such as freedom of speech, press, assembly, as well as the imprisonment of dissidents. The news conference was called to discuss the annual spring meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, where a U.S.-backed resolution to condemn Cuba's rights record is presented every year. (*The New York Times*, 8/3/05)

March 7: The main US cities will stage demonstrations on March 19 demanding the release of the five Cubans incarcerated in US prisons. Participants at the Global Day of Action will carry Cuban flags and banners in support of the groups defending Gerardo, Ramón, Antonio, Fernando and René, whom the FBI arrested in 1998. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 7/3/05)

March 8: Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco arrived in Havana for a three-day trade mission aimed at boosting food sales to Cuba at a time when the Bush administration is tightening sanctions and seeking to limit trade with the island. Louisiana's ports rank first in shipping commodities such as wheat, soy and corn that make up the bulk of exports to

Cuba. But most of that food is not grown in Louisiana. State officials and local agribusiness executives are hoping a visit from their chief executive will help cash in on lucrative sales that have made Cuba the United States' 25th largest export market. [See also Exile Community] (*Sun Sentinel*, 8/3/05)

March 9: Easing a tension that had built up in the days leading to her Cuba visit, Governor Kathleen Blanco met with State Department officials who had requested she spend time with them to get "the other side of the story." Blanco and a small group accepted an invitation to join Chief of Mission James Cason for a private meeting in his sumptuous residence in Havana. Blanco's nod to Cason did not extend to accepting the Interest Section's invitation to meet with Oswaldo Paya, a soft-spoken dissident whose vision of a new Cuba has inspired supporters to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize. "I think any elected official coming here should have some basic knowledge of how the situation in Cuba really is," Paya said after dropping in on Cason earlier in the day. "It's important they hear an alternative voice to the government." (*Times Picayune*, 9/3/05)

March 9: Kourosh Hangafarin ended a short but stormy tenure on the Port Commission by submitting his resignation to San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy, who accepted the offer. Hangafarin, 45, was sworn in February 1 and became embroiled in controversy February 25 when he went to Cuba and struck an unauthorized trade agreement with a Cuban import-export company on behalf of the port. At a Port Commission meeting, Hangafarin said he was confident that the investigation would show he was only trying to find a new revenue source for the port and did nothing wrong. (*Union Tribune*, 10/3/05)

March 10: Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco met with Fidel Castro for two hours just before her trade mission's departure from the island nation. "Out of respect for the president, the governor accepted the invitation," Blanco spokeswoman Denise Bottcher said. Blanco, speaking upon her return to New Orleans, said she weighed the perception of her meeting with Castro after being criticized by anti-Castro activists for making the trip but thought going to the meeting was in the state's best interest. "We had just signed agreements with Cuba by \$15 million of our goods, food and fiber products," she said. "We didn't want to jeopardize that by perhaps insulting the president of the country," she said. (*Times Picayune*, 10/3/05)

March 10: New restrictions on trade with Cuba imposed by the US government will mostly punish small and medium-sized US businesses exporting food to the island, the chairman of Cuba's food import agency said. A recent move to reinterpret how Cuba pays for American farm goods allowed under an exception to the embargo says the Caribbean nation must make full payment before the cargo leaves US ports. "These new measures go directly against American business people, and especially punish small and medium-sized businesses," Pedro Alvarez, chairman of the food import company Alimport, said while accompanying Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco on her final day of a visit to boost trade with the island. Alvarez said before the goods leave U.S. ports, Cuba will now have to extend letters of credit guaranteeing payment and send the cash once the goods are on their way. "We have no other alternative left to us," he said. (*AP*, 10/3/05)

March 10: The defense team of the five Cuban prisoners incarcerated in the US presented their appeal for a retrial outside Miami to three judges of the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, Atlanta one year ago. The Appeals process usually takes three months but the judges explained last March 10th that due to the complexity of the case against the Five, this appeals process would take longer to give a response. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 10/3/05)

March 11: The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has presented "an additional \$1 million award to the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies to continue the vital work of the Cuba Transition Project" now under way at the university, according to a press release. The newly authorized funding is an amendment to an existing cooperative agreement between USAID and the University of Miami. It will support a project described by USAID as "a pioneer academic program that examines the complex issues surrounding Cuba's eventual transition to democracy". (*USAID Press Release*, 11/3/05)

March 16: Thirty-three US agriculture export firms and groups representing farmers exporting to Cuba petitioned the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control to allow existing contracts with the Cuban government for agriculture and food deliveries to proceed under the terms that were written before OFAC issued a rule February 22 to tighten up financial regulations on trade with Cuba. US firms have been selling agriculture and food products to Cuba since 2001 under a 2000 law that allows cash-only sales. (*DTN*, 16/3/05)

March 16: A top expert on US-Cuba trade announced that he had resigned, saying he was "tired" of dealing with the Cuban and US governments, careless journalists and "two-bit hustlers." "I don't care what conclusions people draw; I would just like them to use accurate information," said John Kavulich, head of the New York-based US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council (USCTEC). "Integrity, accuracy, ethics seem to be increasingly less important." Kavulich and USCTEC have been regarded as the leading experts on US trade with Cuba and the Cuban economy since it was established in 1994. Its members are largely major U.S. companies exploring business opportunities in Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 16/3/05)

March 16: Cuba's embassy in Mexico issued a stinging rebuke of an article published in Forbes magazine, without mentioning the magazine by name, calling it "a repugnant example of a campaign of lies" by "an American magazine of decaying credibility." "It is a clumsy slander and a repugnant example of a campaign of lies perpetrated in the United States with the sole aim of justifying the criminal blockade of Cuba," the embassy said in a press statement. In a story published about the fortunes of rulers and heads-of-state, Forbes estimated Fidel Castro's net worth at \$550 million, but acknowledged "these estimates are more art than science." (*AP*, 16/3/05)

March 17: Fidel Castro has criticized Forbes magazine for the "infamy" of listing him among the world's richest people, with a net worth of \$550 million. "Once again, they have committed the infamy of speaking about Castro's fortune, placing me almost above the queen of England," Castro said in a speech to top officials of Cuba's ruling Communist Party, military and police. "Do they think I am (former Zairian President) Mobutu (Sese Seko) or one of the many millionaires, those thieves and plunderers, that the empire has suckled and protected?" he said in reference to his capitalist archenemy, the United States. (*CNN*, 18/3/05)

March 17: At the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, the United States is circulating a draft resolution that seeks to keep Cuba in the list of systematic violators of human rights. The document calls for the case of Cuba to be considered again next year under item 9; that is, countries with massive and systematic violations of human rights and countries that need permanent monitoring. (*AFP*, 17/3/05)

March 17: The US Food and Drug Administration has approved the use of YM BioSciences Inc.'s experimental TheraCIM drug in a clinician-sponsored study to treat a child with advanced brain cancer. The drug earlier achieved a 35-per-cent response rate in the second of three clinical trials conducted in Germany, allowing YM's European partner to proceed to pivotal testing. TheraCIM was developed in Cuba and has been precluded from clinical testing in the United States because of trade legislation with Cuba. (*The Globe and Mail*, 17/3/05)

March 17: The United States urged Cuba's government to release its political prisoners and promised to support Cubans who want to replace Fidel Castro's government with a democratic system. State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said in a statement to mark the second anniversary of the Castro government's crackdown on dissidents that at least 300 political prisoners remain in Cuban jails serving sentences averaging 20 years. The 14 people released so far were in poor health but still are subjected to daily harassment, he said. (*AP*, 17/3/05)

March 18: The Bush administration is refusing to back down from its decision to start imposing payment restrictions on US exports to Cuba. In testimony before the House Agriculture Committee, OFAC Director Robert Werner reiterated the Bush administration's position that Cuba must start paying in advance of the goods leaving the United

States, a move the Cuban government strongly opposes. Werner said that Cuba may use letters of credit through a foreign bank, which exporters say will increase the time and costs of transactions. (*The Advocate*, 18/3/05)

March 20: In April, the 6th Havana Film Festival in New York will pay homage to two cinema luminaries, Cuban Pastor Vega, and Brazilian Walter Salles. "This year, the festival presents award-winners from Havana's Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, as well as new independent films from and about Latin America," said festival spokeswoman Diana Vargas. During the festival, moviegoers will be able to see cutting-edge narrative, documentary, short films and classics not only from Cuba but also from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and the US. (*New York Daily News*, 20/3/05)

March 20: Cuba has rejected a US-sponsored 4-paragraph draft resolution that urges the UN Commission on Human Rights to keep the island under the scrutiny of the Commission. According to the Cuban official press, the draft resolution requests from the UNCHR to submit a report on Cuba during its current session and to keep monitoring the island through a special rapporteur. Washington submitted the draft by itself. For Cuban diplomats in Geneva, this represents a setback for Washington. The US document limits itself this time to recall a previously passed resolution. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/3/05)

March 20: UN Food Organization Rapporteur Jean Ziegler said in Havana that Washington's blockade against the island is genocide. Ziegler, a renowned Swiss lawyer and sociologist, denounced this policy as "a flagrant violation of human rights", adding that as a UN Rapporteur he has the right to ask governments for a response on certain policies, but the Bush administration had turned down a visa request when the world body requested the US State Department for permission so he could visit Washington to discuss the blockade issue. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 21/3/05)

March 21: Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said that the United States will fail in its efforts to have Cuba condemned by the top UN human rights watchdog. "This will constitute the first defeat by the United States" in its annual efforts to condemn Cuba at the United Nations meeting, Perez Roque told a news conference. The Bush administration has said it plans to submit to the UN Human Rights Commission a resolution critical of Cuba's rights record. The commission, now meeting in Geneva, is expected to consider the US resolution on Cuba by mid-April. (*AP, Prensa Latina*, 21/3/05)

March 22: Cuban exile groups and South Florida legislators are hoping to turn political attention to human rights in Cuba. Florida's Hispanic Legislative Caucus members announced that they will mark the first "Free Cuba Day" celebration in the state Capitol in hopes of building awareness of human rights violations under Fidel Castro's rule of the island nation. "We want to expose what goes on behind communist Cuba's lines," said Representative Julio Robaina (Republican-Miami), explaining why various Cuban exile groups will descend on the Capitol at the invitation of the 15 members of the Hispanic Legislative Caucus. The daylong event, modeled after a similar recognition held by Hispanic members of Congress each year in Washington, is expected to include political speeches, the airing of a film documentary about the lives of impoverished children in Cuba and a series of exhibits, including a "refugee raft" and a "jail cell" reproduction. "It's a day of visuals so people can see what Cubans living with communism are going through, and their plight to freedom," said Robaina. (*Sun Sentinel*, 23/3/05)

March 22: The mastermind behind the "trucknauts," whose gutsy voyages to freedom from Cuba aboard 1950s-vintage vehicles failed, has finally made it to Miami. He did it the hard way. By land. Luis Grass' first two attempts were aboard a modified 1951 Chevy truck and a 1959 Buick car. He made international headlines when photographs of migrants on the amphibious contraptions surfaced. Last week, Grass' third and successful attempt was by land, crossing the US border with Mexico. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/05)

March 22: Cuban television's nightly round table discussed the case of the Cuban Five beginning with comments from the head of the British campaign to free them from US prisons. Father Geoffrey Bottoms visited two of the five men

recently - Gerardo Hernández and René González - and described them as very firmly believing that their case, which is under appeal, will be won. Father Bottoms said that although the appeal had been a year in the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, the men were in good mental and physical health. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 22/3/05)

March 22: Cuban Ambassador to Zambia Francisco Correa has denounced Forbes Magazine for listing Fidel Castro among the richest people in the world. Forbes Magazine placed Castro among the world's wealthiest people, with a net worth of US \$550 million. Ambassador Correa in an interview termed the listing of Castro as a big lie whose sole purpose was to discredit Castro. "We denounce and criticize this very strongly; that this magazine wants to show the world that President Castro is a rich man when he has no wealth at all," Ambassador Correa said. (*All Africa.Com*, 23/3/05)

March 23: Jorge de Cárdenas Agostini, arrested in June on suspicion of supervising a team of torturers in Cuba, has been released from the Krome detention center, where he had been held for months awaiting deportation to Cuba -- a country that generally refuses to take back Cuban exiles. Sources familiar with the case said de Cárdenas Agostini had indicated during testimony in a previous deportation case that he had worked for a Cuban intelligence unit and supervised a team that allegedly tortured dissidents opposed to Fidel Castro. Linda Osberg-Braun, the immigration attorney who represents de Cárdenas Agostini, has denied the allegations. She declined to discuss the case in detail on or the reasons for her client's release from the West Miami-Dade center last month. Officials with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement have yet to release evidence linking de Cárdenas Agostini to specific acts of torture. (*The Miami Herald*, 24/3/05)

March 24: Cuba will continue buying US food despite stricter new Bush administration requirements for cash-in-advance payments, a senior Cuban official said. "The United States is a nearby market and prices are good. We will keep buying despite increased regulation, if prices, shipping and other costs remain competitive," said Miguel Alvarez, top aide to the president of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón. Congress authorized cash sales of food to Cuba in 2000, a rare exception to the US trade embargo dating from 1963, which is aimed at pressuring Cuba's communist government. (*Reuters*, 24/3/05)

March 24: There's little hope Arkansas farmers will have access to an expanded market in Cuba in the near future, or for the Social Security system in the long term if something isn't done to fix it, US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said. Gutierrez, 51, who was sworn in last month, has pledged to help American exporters by negotiating more agreements for trade with other countries while striking out against unfair trade practices. During confirmation hearings, the Cuba native said foreign trading partners have to uphold their ends of agreements. Gutierrez said after a speech to about 70 people at the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce that he supports Bush's policy of severe restrictions on business with Cuba. "We require certain changes to happen in Cuba before opening broader trade relations," Gutierrez said. (*AP*, 25/3/05)

March 24: Two Republican lawmakers promised to try to ease US restrictions against Cuba, saying tourism and trade can do more to undermine Fidel Castro's hold on the country than current US policy. Representative Jeff Flake of Arizona said he will attempt to get Congress to eliminate funding for enforcement of the US travel ban against Cuba, allowing more Americans to travel to the communist island. "I don't think that for the next four years we can maintain this policy," Flake told a group of international journalists. Referring to US' four-decade old policy of isolating Cuba, Flake and Representative Wally Herger of California said that US policy-makers needed to take a more creative approach. "We need to do what we did in Eastern Europe" by putting more Americans in contact with Cubans, said Herger. "Change will not come from the policies we've had in the past." Both lawmakers said they would also back other legislation aimed at making it easier for American food producers to sell to Cuba by easing new limitations on how communist Cuba pays for the goods. (*AP*, 24/3/05)

March 27: As relations between the US and Cuba sink to the lowest point in years, the two countries are cooperating in one key area of mutual interest: anti-narcotics operations. Despite increasing hostility and a lack of formal diplomatic ties, Cuba's top anti-narcotics officials regularly share information with the US Coast Guard on drug traffickers passing near Cuba en route to the Bahamas and the United States, according to US officials and a new State Department report. "There are opportunities for good communications on drug shipments, and there is evidence they will notify us and incidents where they are helpful," Asa Hutchinson said in an interview just before his retirement as Homeland Security undersecretary. "But overall, it is fairly limited in terms of the resource capability of Cuba and because of the lack of formal channels and relations between the two nations," said Hutchinson, who was previously director of the US Drug Enforcement Administration. (*Chicago Tribune*, 27/3/05)

March 28: The best way to promote freedom in Cuba remains trading and promoting tourism in Cuba. That's because personal freedom follows economic freedom, and Cubans want and need American products, Representative Jerry Moran said in Salina. Moran visited the island nation again last week, where he met two other congressmen on a fact-finding trip concerning markets for US agricultural products. Moran has been a strong supporter of easing economic sanctions on Cuba. He pushed legislation in 2000 that allowed Cuba to purchase American food, agricultural products and medical supplies for cash. "Cuba has become a market for US agricultural commodities that ranks twenty-third in countries we sell the most to," he said. "Since my amendment became law, nearly \$1.4 billion dollars US agricultural commodities (have been sold)." (*The Salina Journal*, 29/3/05)

March 28: Many countries in Latin America are struggling to consolidate democratic reforms and respect for human rights, a State Department report said, reserving some of the strongest language for abuses in Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Colombia. The congressionally mandated report -- Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2004-2005 -- details US actions worldwide to promote democracy and respect for human rights. [[Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The US Record 2004-2005](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 29/3/05)

March 29: US Treasury Secretary John Snow downplayed the likelihood that a brewing political scuffle over agriculture exports to Cuba would hamper his ability to fill a swath of vacant high-level positions in the Treasury Department. "I'm sure we'll be able to work out whatever these issues are," Snow told reporters during a stop in Montana, the home state of Senator Max Baucus, who has threatened to block Treasury nominees in a spat over new rules about food sales to Cuba. "I want to sit down with the senator and talk through what his concerns are," he said. Treasury's new rules, which came into effect this month, require that Cuba pay cash for US food items before they are shipped, a change critics say could choke off sales to a key emerging market for American agricultural goods. (*Reuters*, 30/3/05)

March 30: The US Department of Homeland Security's US Coast Guard, 7th District, delivered a press release saying that the Coast Guard Cutter Key Biscayne repatriated 40 Cuban migrants to Bahia de Cabanas, Cuba. The migrants were from two groups stopped by the Coast Guard. The first group of 10 were on a raft that was located by the Coast Guard Cutter Decisive about 22 miles south of Key West, Florida. Another 30 migrants were interdicted during a failed smuggling attempt after their go-fast was located by an HU-25 Falcon jet from Coast Guard Air Station Miami about 24 miles south of the Marquesas islands. (*US Fed News*, 30/3/05)

March 30: According to non-confirmed sources cited by "El Nuevo Herald", Luis Posada Carriles, has been in Miami for several days negotiating his permission to remain in the US with the American Immigration authorities. The Department of Territorial Security's office of Immigration and Customs Control would not comment on the subject. Luis Posada Carriles was released from prison last August by a pardon bestowed by former Panamanian president Mireya Moscoso. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 30/3/05)

March 31: A Coral Gables immigration attorney hired to represent Cuban exile militant Luis Posada Carriles said he plans to ask the Department of Homeland Security for asylum and parole for his client so he can live in the United

States without fear of extradition. Attorney Eduardo Soto said he expects a tough battle on behalf of the controversial 77-year-old -- hailed by some as an anti-Castro icon, but wanted by two countries as a terrorism suspect. Posada, thought to be in hiding now in South Florida, has been accused of blowing up a Cuban airliner in 1976 when he lived in Venezuela and trying to kill Fidel Castro in 2000 when he visited Panama. "I anticipate a huge struggle here, both on the immigration front and in other matters," Soto said, referring to the possibility that Venezuela may seek Posada's extradition as a result of his 1985 escape from a prison where he was held in connection with the airliner bombing. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/3/05)

March 31: In testimony before the House Agriculture Committee, the Director of the Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Robert Werner, reiterated the Bush administration's position that Cuba must start paying in advance of the goods leaving the United States, a move the Cuban government strongly opposes. Werner said that Cuba may use letters of credit through a foreign bank, which exporters say will increase the time and costs of transactions. "It's moronic. The Cubans are panicking like crazy," said Gary Frankston, a Metairie shipper who joined the Louisiana trade delegation in Havana. "OFAC is not making this easy for Louisiana businesses." The delegation to Cuba -- as well as anyone currently doing business with the communist nation -- is ensnared in a political tango between the US federal government and the communist country. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/3/05)