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Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Havana welcomes home the Cuban baseball team returning from the World Baseball Classic. Several dissident leaders denounce the “acts of repudiation” organized against oppositionists by Cuban authorities. The 9th Biennial Fine Arts Exhibition opens up in Havana.

Economy: As part of a nation wide crusade, official daily Granma leads a campaign in Cuba’s official media against corruption and illegal activities. The island invests next to 140 million euros in the purchase of European optical instruments destined for the "Operation Miracle." Cuba seeks to breathe new life into the sugar industry. Iran and Cuba sign important economic agreements.

Foreign Affairs: Bolivia launches a literacy program with Cuban assistance. A special UN rights envoy delivers her report on the situation of human rights in Cuba. As part of the preparations for the 14th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, Cuba’s Foreign Affairs minister meets with the Arab League Summit. A Canadian bank ends deals with a Cuban government account under the application of the US Patriotic Act.

Security: A top-level Chinese military delegation visits Cuba.

US-Cuba Relations: Some 50 Cuban intellectuals are denied visas by the US government to attend an academic meeting in Puerto Rico. The top American diplomat in Cuba lashes out at what he calls "a sinister wave of repression" on the island. Cuban rafters choose Puerto Rico to reach US soil. US authorities say they will not release Luis Posada Carriles because he represents a threat to national security.



Domestic Affairs

March 1: This year Cuban television will reach 11.2 million inhabitants, thus eliminating the so-called "silent zones" particularly in the mountain regions. This will be possible with the installation of satellite receptors and parabolic antennas in video rooms and other social centers that the national network does not reach. The Cuban Ministry for Information and Communication informed that the platform will allow Cuban TV and radio signals to be received in

Latin America, Caribbean countries, and part of North America. The modern technology will favor four national TV channels and Cubavision Internacional, in addition to seven Cuban national radio stations. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/06)

March 1: The Cuban film “Roble de olor” (“Scent of Oak”), directed by Rigoberto Lopez, was recently awarded the Dikalo Grand Prix at the Pan-African Film Festival that took place in Cannes, France. The film is a co-production of Cuba with France and Spain, starring Jorge Perugorria and Lia Chapman. “Roble de olor” was the first fiction film produced by Lopez, who wrote the script along with Cuban writer Eugenio Hernandez. (*AIN*, 1/3/06)

March 2: Former consul-general of Cuba in Mexico and retired Cuban intelligence officer, Pedro Aníbal Riera Escalante, was detained for several hours by the State Security service who warned him that he would face new charges if he persisted in his denunciations before the press and international institutions. The former Cuban official - who served a 5-year prison term until April, 2005 - denounced the Mexican authorities before the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission for allegedly abducting him on the street and turning him over to the Cuban government on October 4, 2000. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 2/3/06)

March 2: Members of the “Rapid Response Brigades” (Brigadas de Respuesta Rápida) organized by the Cuban authorities gathered across from the house of opposition leader Martha Beatriz Roque in order to prevent any access to or exit from her residence. Three accredited diplomats from different countries on their way to visit Roque were harassed by the demonstrators as they approached the building. (*Netfor Cuba*, 4/3/06)

March 2: Replacing computers by enhanced hardware at lower cost is one of the advantages of a recycling method gaining momentum in Cuba. The president of Cuba's Electronics and Technology Marketing (COPEXTEL), Fernando Sordo, said the technique allows for the renovation of computers every three to four years. This practice means less investment to replace components, so that the island's computer availability can be broadened by the use of recycled computers added to the purchase of new ones, he explained. COPEXTEL is a main Cuban supplier of mostly China-made computers to schools, hospitals and social programs in the island. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/3/06)

March 5: Fidel Castro spoke with the Cuban baseball team that will represent the island at the World Baseball Classic (WBC), during a ceremony held in Havana. For close to two hours, Castro spoke with the players; the coaching staff; management from the Cuban Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER). The Cuban leader said that this is the most difficult tournament ever for the island's baseball and that the Cuban people are well aware of this. At the same time, he pointed out that there is a lot of confidence in the quality and dedication of the country's players. "We are confident in your abilities, honor and resolve." (*Granma*, 6/3/06)

March 5: The Cuban regime has created a 30,000-strong contingent of men and women to carry out highly sensitive political missions that cannot be postponed, from the control of fuel sales to the replacement of incandescent light bulbs throughout the country. Many average Cubans regard these so-called “social workers” with suspicion and apathy, alienated by the power and authority they exercise with the support of the police force. "What arose as an idea to provide occupation for delinquent youths has evolved into a highly suitable instrument for the plans of the government," said activist Elizardo Sánchez, president of the illegal Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN). (*El Nuevo Herald*, 5/3/06)

March 6: Cuba's healthcare accomplishments is the main topic of discussion at the 9th International Seminar on Primary Healthcare taking place at Havana's Convention Center from March 6-8. Since 1983, Cuba has fulfilled indicators established by the World Healthcare Organization (WHO) under the “Healthcare for All” strategy. The event gathered some 1,000 delegates from 21 countries, as well as United Nations officials and international figures in the field. Cuba's experience on healthcare primary attention was the topic of a conference delivered by the Minister of Public Health, Jose Ramon Balaguer, at the opening ceremony. Balaguer announced that during 2006 Cuba has reduced its infant mortality to 5,2 after having achieved 6,2 in 2005. (*AIN, AFP*, 6/3/06)

March 6: According to local media, film director Enrique Pineda Barnet, who helmed the film "La Bella del Alhambra," was honored with the 2006 National Lifetime-Achievement Film Award for his life's work devoted to the seventh art. (*AFP*, 6/3/06)

March 6: The wife of jailed dissident Hector Palacios, Gisela Delgado, divulged the contents of a letter addressed to Fidel Castro, Pope Benedict XVI and heads of "democratic governments" and international humanitarian organizations. It notified them of her husband's serious health problems. "I'm speaking out about the grave risk to my husband's life," Delgado said in the letter, which explains that Palacios has recently suffered a transient ischemic attack and currently is battling high blood pressure and poor circulation. The 64-year-old Palacios was sentenced to 25 years in prison in the Spring of 2003, one of 75 dissidents to receive lengthy prison terms in summary trials. (*EFE, Acción Democrática*, 6/3/06)

March 6: More than 1,478,000 Cuban students are examining central topics to be discussed at the 4th Congress of the Jose Marti Pioneers' Organization (OPJM). Participants will hold discussions on studies and on the defense of the revolution, as the main duties of Cuban children. "From now on, all Cuban pioneers know our Congress has just started", asserted Miriam Janet Martin, leader of the OPJM, in the act held in Havana. Martin said that children ranging between 6 and 14 years from over 12,000 schools would meet on matters related to the Congress call. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/3/06)

March 7: Computer sciences are to become a powerful scientific, economic and political force for Cuba, said Fidel Castro during the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the networks' central hub at Palacio Central de la Computacion, a large computer training facility that for years was a well-known department store in town. The event also celebrated the establishment of 300 new Youth Computer Clubs throughout the nation. Castro highlighted the advances achieved in the program since its inception. He noted that the program makes it possible for some 200,000 young persons to train in computers and communications by means of 50 different courses being taught, including several for senior citizens and people with disabilities. (*Granma*, 8/3/06)

March 8: The Jose Marti Anti-Imperialist Plaza in Havana was the venue for the main Cuban rally on International Women's Day. A large delegation from the Cuban Women's Federation, family members of victims of terrorist acts against the island, and relatives of the Cuban Five participated at the event. The rally was televised live on local Cuban TV and Cubavision International, as well as broadcast by local and short wave radio stations. International Women's Day has been marked by anti-war protests, and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) – with some four million members – is joining in that campaign. In Cuba, "we have many achievements to celebrate; this has been an important year for Cuban women," affirmed Yolanda Ferrer, general secretary of the FMC, citing advances in the economy, the energy revolution, the battle to end illegalities and corruption, and other campaigns to strengthen the Revolution that are part of the Battle of Ideas. (*Granma International*, 8/3/06)

March 8: A Cuban dissident who has been on a hunger strike for 36 days to demand unfettered Internet access is refusing medication and his health is deteriorating rapidly, fellow dissidents said. Guillermo Fariñas, a 41-year-old psychologist, went on a hunger strike on January 31 to press Cuba's Communist authorities to respect his right to freedom of information and allow him Internet access, which is controlled by the government. Fariñas was moved to a hospital in his hometown of Santa Clara, in central Cuba, where he is being kept on an IV drip. Cuba, like China, controls access to the Internet. Direct access to the world wide web is generally only available to government-approved individuals, but passwords can be purchased on the black market. The postal service offers an e-mail service, but users can only surf Cuban Web sites. International web sites run by exile groups are routinely blocked by Cuba's state-run servers. Fariña's hunger strike has alarmed other opposition activists. Cuban dissident Oswaldo Paya urged him to end his protest. "We call on authorities to respect his rights, agree to his petition immediately, and save his life," Paya said. [[Llamamiento para salvar la vida de Fariñas](#)] (*Reuters*, 8/3/06)

March 8: Cuba became a member of the World Organization of General and Family Doctors due to the island's results in Primary Health Assistance. Adolfo Rubinstein, president for the Ibero American region of the international institution made the announcement during his intervention at the 9th International Seminar on Primary Health Assistance underway in Havana's Convention Center. (*AIN*, 8/3/06)

March 8: Cubans celebrated the triumph of the Cuban team at their debut in the World Baseball Classic, after a tense game with Panama that paralyzed the country's work places, parks and other public places for five hours of good ball. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/06)

March 8: Cuban authorities have stepped up their campaign against illegal antennas and satellite-TV dishes, equipment sought by many in a country that tries to keep tight control of what people may watch, listen to or read. The official daily *Juventud Rebelde* published a lengthy article in which it denounced the practice of illegally accessing international TV signals and emphasized the risks being run by those who commit this type of crime. "The attempt and practice of encouraging the spread of channels having notable anti-Cuban propaganda is taking on a political connotation in our country, since they serve the (US) empire in its plans to annihilate the Cuban nation," the paper said. The "alienating programming" that is offered on US television channels "is an affront to the thirst for knowledge and the general improvement that Cubans get nowadays through truly educational programs," said *Juventud Rebelde*. In addition, the illegal distribution of TV signals "has become a lucrative business for a group of people ... (and) brings with it the diversion of resources" from state enterprises, the daily said. Despite the warnings and prohibitions, thousands of Cubans have illegal antennas and satellite dishes camouflaged in the most surprising ways in homes, on balconies, roofs, backyards and gardens. Dozens of people can access a single receiver, and many run cables hundreds of meters (yards) in length from a neighbor's satellite dish to their own televisions, a form of neighborhood sharing popularly known as a "spider web." (*EFE*, 8/3/06)

March 9: International medical collaboration, challenges and sustainability were important issues on the table at the 9th International Seminar on Primary Health Care taking place in Havana. Cuban experts are discussing their experiences in medical education for primary health care, as colleagues from Mexico and Venezuela are analyzing how family doctors work in their respective countries. Dr. Maria Matilde Serrano, expert of Cuba's Medical Collaboration Central Unit, told the press that the island currently has over 29,000 collaborators in 69 countries. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/3/06)

March 9: The illegal Christian Movement of Liberation (MCL) announced that Cuban journalist Juan Carlos Herrera, one of 75 dissidents sentenced to prison terms of up to 28 years, has been on a hunger strike since last March 4th. Herrera, who is serving 20 years at the Kilo 8 prison facility in Camagüey, went on a hunger strike to protest the subhuman conditions of his confinement, the lack of medical assistance, as well as the physical and verbal abuse he endures there. (*EFE*, 10/3/06)

March 11: Cooperation in healthcare is one of Cuba's main foreign goals, and "we have the human capital, willpower and wish to cooperate with all the peoples in the world", Fidel Castro said. In the closing speech of the 9th International Seminar on Primary Health Care, the Cuban leader referred to thousands of Cuban doctors who are helping poor people and victims of natural disasters worldwide. Fidel Castro highlighted Cuba's breakthroughs in rehabilitation and physiotherapy, as he recalled the first family doctors trained 20 years ago. He invited participants to hold the next Seminar on Primary Health Care in Havana in two years. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/3/06)

March 13: Cuban university students convened the 8th Congress of the University Students Federation (FEU). "Starting today we face a new challenge ahead; to commit ourselves to new quests amidst criticism, commitment and action. We will also voice our dissatisfactions, dreams and our way of viewing and accepting the new society we want," stated FEU President Carlos Lage Codorniu, when convening the congress from the steps of the University of Havana. Yenny Gonzalez, a third year major in Social Communication, told Granma that, "The Congress will be a

reflection on these times". On hand for the event were the Minister for Higher Education, Fernando Vecino Alegret; Julio Martinez Ramirez, leader of the UJC Young Communist Organization, and former members of the March 13th Revolutionary Directorate, led by Faure Chomon Mediavilla, Commander of the Rebel Army. (*Granma*, 13/3/06)

March 13: The representative of the Public International Laymen's Association, Rolando Garrido said in Bogotá that the Catholic Church has gained important spaces in Cuba in the wake of Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit to the island. Garrido claimed that "following the Pope's visit in 1998, small but very important steps are being taken to open the doors of the Catholic Church to the Cuban people." Garrido was in the Colombian capital, attending the 1st Meeting of the Ecclesiastic Movements and New Communities of Latin America, as representative of Cuban laypeople. (*Notimex*, 13/3/06)

March 14: According to a Fire Department spokesperson, extensive damage but no human casualties were the results of a major fire at Cuba's oldest pharmacy, located in Havana's historic core. Department of the Interior experts will determine the causes of the incident at the historical Johnson building, where the drug store and pharmacy by the same name used to be located. (*Notimex*, 14/3/06)

March 15: Cuba says it has developed a treatment for the Hepatitis C virus that would contribute to a long-term cure of liver damage caused by the disease. The Havana-based Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology said the product is a combination of Alpha-2B interferon and Rivairina, developed in the country. The combination of these two formulas allows for an increased therapeutic response in people suffering from chronic hepatitis. Clinical trials of the product were carried out at the National Gastroenterology Institute in Cuba. (*Radio Jamaica*, 16/3/06)

March 16: Two centers to treat ophthalmic disorders are near completion in Ciego de Avila, Cuba. The installations -to benefit Cuban patients as well- are now being equipped with technology that will be followed by future improvements to join the international program Operation Miracle. (*Prensa Latina*, 16/3/06)

March 16: Cuba hopes to host some portion of future World Baseball Classic editions, an idea that sits fine with the Major League Baseball, but also an idea that could face many obstacles. "Hosting games in the next event is the maximum ambition that any country that loves baseball could have," said Higinio Velez, manager of Cuba's national team. "We want to be a part of the tournament, and I think Cuba would be an ideal place because it already has experience organizing baseball events," added Velez. Velez said the World Baseball Classic has been such a successful tournament that it should be held every two years instead of every four. Organizers do not object to Cuban aspirations, although the second World Baseball Classic isn't scheduled until 2009. "I think Cuba could host games in the next edition, although not the games in the last rounds, but I don't see why it couldn't host the first round games," said Gene Orza, executive vice president of the Major League Players Association. (*ESPN*, 16/3/06)

March 16: Cuban Health Minister Jose Ramon Balaguer officially opened an advanced provincial genetics center in the eastern city of Guantanamo. Alongside Luis Torres, the First Secretary of the Communist Party in the province, Balaguer spoke to the center's personnel, which are made up of 37 workers - 90 percent of whom are women, of which five are specialists. The group will assist families, couples, women and children with genetic risks and offer pregnant women various basic blood tests. (*AIN*, 17/3/06)

March 17: The Christian Liberation Movement under Cuban opposition leader Oswaldo Paya, called on the United Nations, human-rights organizations, the international community and the Cuban people to demand the release of Cuba's imprisoned dissidents. "They have already unjustly served three years in jail in inhuman conditions. Today marks three years of suffering for them and their families, and each day that passes makes the outrage that much greater," said a statement signed by Paya and other members of the group. The Christian Liberation Movement said that the prisoners had "worked peacefully and openly for the respect of human rights and peaceful changes in Cuban society." At the same time the opposition group decried the "subhuman conditions" in which the Cuban prisoners are

living, and said that most of the political prisoners "suffer many serious illnesses that they caught or were made worse by the poor hygiene, deficient medical attention, lack of running water, overcrowding, verbal abuse and often physical abuse." "It is first of all up to the Cuban people to demand freedom for these prisoners who did nothing more than defend the rights of the Cubans themselves," he said. He also considered that the United Nations and organizations like the Commission on Human Rights and the international community "ought to demand directly and without ambiguities the liberation of Cuba's peaceful political prisoners." (*EFE*, 17/3/06)

March 17: Fidel Castro congratulated the Cuban baseball team for its efforts so far in the 1st World Baseball Classic (WBC), said manager Higinio Velez in a press conference. The Olympic champions faced teams stacked with US Major League players in Rounds 1 and 2 of the WBC, while playing in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Now, they face off with the Dominican Republic in a one-game semifinals match in San Diego, California. Velez told reporters that before leaving for Puerto Rico the Cuban players met with Fidel Castro, who loves baseball and is considered to be their leading fan. "Before we left for the Classic, he got together with us, bid us farewell and did not demand that we win this tournament," said Velez in San Diego. "He just asked us to play good ball, do our best as a baseball team, and show the world the kind of baseball we play in Cuba." (*Periódico 26*, 18/3/06)

March 17: Three years after the harshest crackdown on dissent in decades, human-rights conditions in Cuba have deteriorated as authorities intensify a campaign to disrupt and intimidate the island's small opposition movement, according to dissidents, diplomats and political analysts. Elizardo Sanchez, an opposition activist who heads the Havana-based Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said the number of political prisoners in Cuba increased from 306 in early 2005 to 333 in early 2006. Sanchez said that about 100 pro-government crowd actions, known in Cuba as "acts of repudiation," and other attacks have occurred against opposition figures since July 2005. "The situation with civil and political rights has worsened in the past three years," said Sanchez. "And what's most worrying for us is that it seems the situation is going to get even worse." Diplomats and experts say it is unlikely Fidel Castro will ease the pressure on opposition activists as the 79-year-old leader tries to boost revolutionary fever and tighten control to ensure the government's survival after his death. Cuban officials defend the island's human-rights record by saying they provide universal education, health care and other services. They portray the acts of repudiation as spontaneous outpourings of support for a system they describe as the world's most democratic and fair. (*Chicago Tribune*, 17/3/06)

March 17: A Cuba television series that explores the relationship between HIV/AIDS and human sexuality through several fictional stories has sparked discussion and controversy on the Communist-ruled island. The series titled "La cara oculta de la luna" (The Dark Side of the Moon), which was first broadcast in January on state-run television, has generated a flood of responses from viewers, some of which have been published in *Juventud Rebelde*, a leading official daily. Each of the five stories has a similar didactic component, warning viewers about HIV/AIDS and urging them to engage in more responsible sexual behavior as the best means to prevent further spread of the scourge, screenwriter Freddy Dominguez told the press. "Each story has elements (designed) to make an impact," said Dominguez, who referred in particular to one involving a bisexual who infects his wife with the disease. He called the problem explored in that story "the most taboo" of all. According to figures from the National Center for the Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, 6,910 people were infected with the AIDS virus through January, out of population of 11 million. (*EFE*, 17/3/06)

March 18: Cuba defeated the Dominican Republic 3-1 to reach the championship game of the inaugural World Baseball Classic. Cuba will face Japan, a winner over South Korea in the second semifinal. At Petco Park in San Diego, California, chants of "Cuba! Cuba!" began in the late innings from the crowd of 41,268 for a squad with no major leaguers. "We really went at it hard like professionals," Dominican manager Manny Acta said. "They deserve the credit. I'd rather give them credit than make excuses." (*The New York Times*, 19/3/06)

March 18: Thirty "Ladies in White" marched through the streets of Havana to demand the release of dissidents jailed three years ago by Fidel Castro's communist government. The women, who dress in white and march in silent protest, are relatives of 75 dissidents jailed in 2003 in a crackdown on mounting opposition to Castro's rule. Fifteen were freed last year on medical parole, but 60 are still behind bars. "We are calling for freedom for all political prisoners," said Laura Pollan, leader of the group that last year won the Sakharov prize, the European Union's top human rights award. The women, wives and mothers of the jailed men, carried gladioli and banners that said "Amnesty" on their one-hour demonstration through central Havana. For three years, members of the group have marched silently every Sunday after mass at a Catholic church to demand the release of their loved ones. "We have created this space despite great difficulties and repression," said Miriam Leiva, wife of economist Oscar Espinosa Chepe, who was freed last year on medical parole. She said the telephone of the house they met at was "mysteriously" cut off the day before. (*Reuters, AP*, 18/3/06)

March 18: The Cuban authorities threatened to prevent a rosary prayer for the political prisoners to be said at the Parochial Temple of Palma Soriano, Santiago de Cuba. Graciela González, Municipal Communist Party Secretary for Religious Affairs called Father Francisco Sanabria Encizo to warn him that the rosary prayer was considered to be a counterrevolutionary act and that he would be held accountable should he go ahead with it. The authorities installed speakers across from the temple and started playing loud music that made it nearly impossible to hear the prayer when it began. They also set up a boxing ring for the members of the local boxing club to spar in, which created an atmosphere of hostility directed at exiting Church-goers. (*Cubanet*, 23/3/06)

March 20: The Ladies in White, a group of women relatives of 75 dissidents jailed by Cuban authorities in March 2003, commemorated three years of the incarceration of their beloved ones by marching for the second time in three days through the streets of Havana. The peaceful demonstration this time ended in front of the Cuban Attorney General's office where the women released two white doves as they sang religious hymns, and asked for the liberation of the dissidents. Although Cuban authorities seemed to have not interfered in the demonstration, Miriam Leiva, the Ladies in White's spokeswoman, said that Cuban State Security agents harassed several women who live in other provinces in order to prevent them from participating in Havana's demonstrations. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 21/3/03)

March 20: The Cubans surprised a lot of people just by reaching the World Baseball Classic final. So while Japan won the championship game 10-6, the fact that Cuba made it so far showed fans back home that this team -- which has lost top stars to defection in recent years -- could compete against rosters loaded with major leaguers. "Reaching the gold medal game wasn't a gift from anyone," Cuban manager Higinio Velez said. "Cuba was even included in the toughest group, the group of death." "I think this Classic is historic because it demonstrated that not only the players from the paid major leagues can carry the supremacy. We've demonstrated that what matters is sacrifice, human values and the effort you give on the field," Cuban outfielder Frederich Cepeda said. "This is a well-deserved second place. We're not satisfied, but we're happy with our performance." It was such an honor for them to take part that Cuban officials have hinted they would like to be considered as a host for the next WBC three years from now. (*The New York Times*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Havana went all out to welcome home the Cuban baseball team returning from the World Baseball Classic, where they defied all predictions with their spectacular performance. Following the official reception at the Jose Marti International Airport, the athletes received the applause and cheers of fans representing all of Cuba as they paraded in an open-air jeep caravan through the main streets of the capital. Afterwards, an official welcoming ceremony awaited them at the packed Ciudad Deportiva Sports Arena, headed by Fidel Castro. In a highpoint of the welcoming, the Cuban leader received from team captain and shortstop Eduardo Paret the flag the team had defended with dignity in Puerto Rico and San Diego. Fidel Castro had also personally greeted the players upon their entrance to the indoor stadium. (*Granma*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Thousands of foreign medical students are residing with Cuban families since the mass arrivals depleted existing state-run lodging capacity and classrooms. Jorge Gonzalez, chair of the Committee for Public Health and Sports of the Assembly of the Peoples' Power, said that more than 2,000 students are staying at private homes in Holguin and Cienfuegos. Thousands enjoy similar hospitality nationwide with new schools making up the state-run program for the universalization of the universities. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Employment, retirement and health care for a happy old age are issues of the 2nd Congress on Social Security taking place at Havana's Conference Center. Increased life expectancy in Cuba until 77 years old and birth-rate reduction have caused the aging of the population on a national level. Last year, Cuba raised workers' salaries, social security benefits and public assistance, benefiting over 5 million people, as well as minimum wages from 100 to 225 pesos monthly, benefiting more than 1,600,000 people. The island's social security covers one hundred percent of its population and these increases are carried out by the Cuban government, in spite of the almost 50 years of US economic, commercial and financial blockade. Among these actions are priority care and insertion into society of people with disabilities but able to work. (*Trabajadores*, 21/3/06)

March 21: According to statistics of the National Program for the Prevention and Control of Smoking (Programa Nacional de Prevención y Control del Tabaquismo) released by the official daily Granma, 69 % of all Cuban children are second hand cigarette or cigar smokers. In Granma's section "Talking about Laws", the Program's experts made a call "to respect the right of the no-smokers to breathe fresh air". They issued dramatic statistics about the rate of smokers in Cuba. Two million, 18 %, out of 11.2 million inhabitants smoke cigarettes or cigars. Smoking is the cause of 30% of the deaths by cancer reported in the country. Two of each ten Cubans began smoking between 17-19 years of age, and a 40% began between 12-16 years, Granma said. (*AFP*, 22/3/06)

March 21: In observing International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination the space called "Color Cubano", sponsored by the National Union of Artists and Writers of Cuba (UNEAC), honored distinguished figures for their contribution to the study, disclosure and promotion of Cuba's ethnic roots. Receiving certificates from "Color Cubano" for their efforts were: Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban Parliament; Esteban Lazo, member of the Communist Party Political Bureau; US religious leader Louis Farrakhan; academic Esteban Morales; Nicolas Hernandez Guillen, president of the Nicolas Guillen Foundation; Barbara Oliva, main promoter of the La California project; and National Literature Award winner Angel Augier. Coinciding with the observance of International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was the opening of the Ethnographic Hall, which shows the icons and attributes of the spiritual culture of Cubans of African descent. (*Granma*, 22/3/06)

March 22: Joe Kehoskie, an agent who has helped 15 Cuban players defect to the major leagues, says that people who expected to see wholesale defections of Cuban players at the World Baseball Classic were being unrealistic. What's more, the team that lost 10-6 to Japan in the championship final was not as good as it could have been -- something to keep in mind for 2009. "That was a solid team, but not the best they could have sent over," Kehoskie said in a telephone interview from Miami. "That was, I guess, a "Moneyball" team -- lots of guys in their late 20s and 30s with okay power who get on base. They had a lot of loyalists (...) but the pool of players is much deeper than what they brought over." (*The Globe and Mail*, 22/3/06)

March 22: Considered as "the eyes and ears" of the Cuban authorities, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution are developing a National Exercise of Vigilance throughout the island. The purpose of the exercise is to reinforce alertness in the population against illegal activities. This type of exercise is organized three times a year "to detect deficiencies in the system of vigilance and also to protect labor centers and official enterprises". Miguel Marrero, a member of the CDR's secretariat said that, "with this exercise we will check out how the popular revolutionary vigilance brigades are working in each block of the country". (*EFE*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Different signs claiming “Liberty for the 75” and “Down Fidel Castro”, appeared in different public places of the eastern towns of Palmarito, Mella, San Luis, Alto Songo, La Maya, and the cities of Santiago de Cuba and Palma Soriano. The signs provoked an increase of the repression against the dissident movement in that eastern province. “Acts of repudiation” were organized by members of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) and of the Communist Party in front of the houses of several dissidents. (*Cubamet*, 29/3/06)

March 23: Cuban retirees and pensioners added their voices to the growing national clamor against the Bush administration’s so-called Plan to Assist a Free Cuba, during a demonstration held at the Jose Marti Anti-imperialist Plaza. A pronouncement was read asking, “Who is supporting the US president in his quest to dismantle one of the most prized conquests of the revolution like the social security in our country, where no one is left unprotected?” Antonio Leon del Monte read the document, approved as a special resolution during the recently concluded Second Conference on Social Security, in the presence of Esteban Lazo and Juan Carlos Robinson, both members of the Communist Party’s political bureau. Labor and Social Security Minister Alfredo Morales said that the most recent raise in pensions and salaries cost more than 4.26 billion pesos and came during a year when Cuba was financially stressed by damage caused by a hurricanes, high oil prices and the more than 45-year economic, financial and commercial blockade by the US. (*Granma*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Pio Leyva, a singer and composer in the Buena Vista Social Club band of veteran Cuban musicians, died of a heart attack. He was 88. Leyva, who won a bongo contest at the age of six and made his singing debut in 1932, had suffered a stroke on March 18 and died five days later in hospital, his daughter Rosalia said. The colorful improviser of traditional Cuban “son” music was the latest of the famed band's stars to pass away. Leyva, born in 1917 in Moron in central Cuba, had a deep, country voice and was well known by the 1950s for singing in the bands of Cuban greats Benny More and Bebo Valdes. (*The New York Times*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Cuban dissident Vladimiro Roca denounced an “act of repudiation” organized by Cuban authorities in front of his home in Nuevo Vedado, Havana. Over one hundred persons gathered in front of Roca’s shouting slogans against “the enemies of the revolution”. Roca, who is also leader of the dissident coalition All United (Todos Unidos), told the press that the night before he decided to cancel a regular meeting he was having the next day with members of his organization when he saw some fifty people surrounding his house and preventing people to get in or outside the house. However, Roca couldn’t get in contact with dissidents who traveled from Santa Clara -- 275 kilometers from Havana--, who had to return when they reached the mob in front of Roca’s. In February, the illegal Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (Comisión Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliación Nacional) denounced a new wave of repression organized by Cuban authorities against the dissident movement. (*EFE, AFP*, 23/3/06)

March 25: Cuban Yusnier Viera became the new Guinness Record holder for the fastest mental calculation. In a public demonstration, Rivera, a young math professor at Havana’s University Math and Computer School, explained how he broke two world records. The new Guinness calculator whiz has been invited to the November 2006 International Mathematics Olympiads in Germany. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/3/06)

March 27: Havana became a giant art gallery with the opening of the 9th Biennial Fine Arts Exhibition. Running until April 27, the works of more than 230 artists from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, Oceania and North America can be seen in diverse spaces of the Cuban capital, with a central venue at the Morro-Cabana Fortress, where some 90 artists are presenting their work on the theme of urban dynamics in today’s societies. Several venues have been set up for the exhibit, including the Wilfredo Lam Gallery, the Cuba Pavilion and other galleries and institutions around the city. (*CAN, Prensa Latina, Granma*, 27/3/06)

March 27: A group of moderate dissident organizations invited the Cuban government, the dissident movement, and Cuban exile organizations to have a dialogue about the future in Cuba. In a statement given to the press, the Progressive

Arch (Arco Progresista) said that it has invited officials from the Council of State –headed by Fidel Castro--, from the National Assembly of the People’s Power and from the Communist Party to a dialogue. “Your presence will fulfill our expectatives”, the statement said. The event, under the title of “A Journey of Reflexion. Dialogue Among Cubans”, has been called for November in Havana. (*AFP*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Knee prosthesis surgery, a French procedure first used in Cuba at the Frank Pais International Orthopedic Complex in Havana, will soon be used in other provinces. Hospital Director Prof. Rodrigo Alvarez Cambras said the service, now at the Hermanos Ameijeiras Clinic, will extend to Santiago de Cuba, Villa Clara, Camaguey, Holguin and Cienfuegos. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Cuban independent journalist, Lamaciel Gutiérrez Romero, was released under parole. Lamaciel, who worked for the independent news agency Nueva Prensa Cubana, was imprisoned last October under charges of disobedience and resistance to the authorities. She is the wife of political prisoner, Rolando Jiménez Posadas, who has been in jail for over three years accused of possessing “enemy propaganda”. (*Cubamet*, 27/3/06)

March 28: Painters, sculptors and other artists from around the world explore the dynamics of urban culture during the monthlong 9th Biennial of Havana. Iranian Shirin Neshat, considered one of the most emblematic artists of the Islamic world, exhibits a collection of videos dealing with social and gender conflicts, drawing inspiration from his own culture. The public will get the chance to study the work of US photographer Spencer Tunick, who traveled earlier this month to Caracas to photograph thousands of Venezuelans posing in the nude on a major thoroughfare. Tunick, who delights in juxtaposing privacy with public space, has organized more than 75 such photographs of nude gatherings in the Americas and Europe over more than a decade. Also participating in the biennial are a collection of Cuban artists, including Agustin Bejarano, Luis Enrique Camejo and Tania Bruguera. (*AP*, 28/3/06)

March 28: Italian researcher and philosopher Gianni Vattimo won over the hearts of those gathered to hear his conference at Havana’s Higher Arts Institute (ISA) where he confessed to feel like a Cuban citizen. Vattimo was awarded the diploma by the arts institute for his writing that has made him one of the important philosophers of our time. Vattimo is in Cuba attending the 9 th Biennial Visual Arts Festival and was accompanied at his conference by Culture Minister Abel Prieto. (*Granma*, 29/3/06)

March 28: Juan de Dios Hernández Ruiz, who became the auxiliary bishop of Havana on January 14, is a 57-year-old Jesuit priest from Holguín in eastern Cuba. “I love this country and I love Jesus Christ and the church,” he said. “These are the three loves that define my life.” “At any given moment, a religious institution anywhere might find itself facing direct or indirect forms of repression. But when faith is culture, even in Cuba, which has faced enormous problems in holding onto its enormous reserve of Christianity, faith endures despite all of these difficulties”, he said. “Without a doubt, religious freedom was directly and sometimes violently infringed upon for many years in Cuba. There were times when it was very difficult for people to attend church. Thank God, there are fewer such problems today: Direct challenges by state institutions to the very right to religion have all but disappeared. We are free to publicly express our faith, and every diocese today has some kind of newsletter or magazine. This is what gives us hope that times are indeed changing.” (*National Catholic Reporter*, 31/3/06)

March 29: Traffic accidents involving bicycles, one of the main modes of transportation in this fuel-strapped nation, killed more than 200 Cubans last year, authorities said. Cyclists were involved in 1,689 accidents in 2005, while the first two months of this year saw 24 bike-riders killed and 242 injured in road mishaps, the official daily Granma reported. Cubans began resorting to two-wheeled transport in the 1990s, due to the dwindling supply of road-worthy cars as well as to shortages of fuel. Studies by the national medical examiner's office found that 15 percent of the cyclists killed die on the spot, and another 45 percent succumb to their injuries within 24 hours of the accident, often as a result of head trauma. Helmet use is very rare among Cuban cyclists. Roughly 80 percent of killed or injured cyclists are male, with 45 percent of victims between the ages of 16 and 30. The main infractions committed by Cuban cyclists

are failing to respect traffic signals, not paying attention, traveling in the wrong direction on one-way thoroughfares, cycling under the influence of alcohol and not having lights on their bikes, according to police. (*EFE*, 29/3/06)

March 29: The Cuban High Institute for the Arts (ISA) conferred the Doctor Honoris Causa on renowned French architect Jean Nouvel, one of the world celebrities attending the 9th Havana Biennial. In the activity held at the ISA headquarters, Nouvel said the award honored him and highly praised its meaning. "I am receiving this honorific title on behalf of the hundreds of people who have contributed to my work," he stated. Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto, who presided over the activity, described Jean Nouvel as "an indispensable figure of contemporary culture." (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/06)

March 29: Imprisoned dissident Juan Carlos Herrera is recovering in a Camaguey hospital in eastern Cuba after ending a three-and-a-half-week hunger strike during which he sewed his lips shut, his wife announced. Herrera, 39 and a reporter for the non-officially-recognized Libre Oriental news agency, began his hunger strike on March 4 to demand that he be transferred from his condition of confinement in Camaguey's Kilo 8 prison, where he is serving a 20-year sentence for dissident activities. Herrera is one of the 75 Cuban opposition figures who were sentenced in the spring of 2003. Meanwhile, Guillermo Fariñas, a psychologist and director of the independent Cubanacan Press agency, is in serious but stable condition after a 56-day hunger strike he began to demand free access to the Internet. (*EFE*, 29/3/06)

March 30: A Cuban painter living in Paris donated pieces of his private collection of African Art to a museum in his hometown. Lorenzo Padilla donated to the Matanzas' Art Museum over 200 pieces of African Art that he had kept for over 50 years. The pieces are "authentic works linked to the Yoruba culture and to other African religious cultures from Nigeria, Mali, and Ghana", Cuban AIN agency reported. The donation is valued at three million dollars. (*AFP*, 30/3/06)

March 30: Living Cuban boxing legend Teofilo Stevenson, considered to be the best amateur heavyweight ever, goes back to the international ring arena but as supervisor of referees. The International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA) decision recognizes the prestige of Stevenson, who won three World and Olympic titles in his career. Stevenson will make his debut as technical supervisor at the Under-19 World Boxing Championship to be hosted by the Moroccan city of Agadir next September. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/06)

March 31: In Cuba mental health is a people's right. The general secretary for the Psychiatric Association for Latin America and the Caribbean, Dr. Miguel Angel Valdez Mier, said that in the island's 169 municipalities there are qualified services being provided with the objective of offering a better quality of life for the public. The Psychiatric Association chief, who is also head of psychiatric services at Havana's Ameijeiras Brothers Hospital, participated in the First Regional Congress of the World Psychiatric Association underway in the Cuban capital's International Convention Center, along with some 500 delegates from 20 nations. (*CNA*, 31/3/06)

March 31: Cuba has completed the automation of its national network of eight meteorological radars, which guarantees the immediate detection and monitoring of any tropical cyclone representing potential danger to the island. In statements to Granma newspaper, the chief of Weather Forecast Department at the Cuban Institute of Meteorology, Dr. Jose Rubiera, pointed out that Cuba has also a modern system to present the weather forecast on TV. According to Dr. Maritza Ballester, researcher at the Weather Forecast Center, the coming hurricane season will be very active: some 17 tropical storms are expected to hit the Caribbean area and 9 of them could reach the category of hurricane. (*CAN*, 31/3/06)

Economy

March 2: Communist Cuba, whose state-controlled press generally refrains from pursuing the traditional Western journalistic task of exposing corruption, is pushing in official media a campaign against what has been denounced by Fidel Castro as burgeoning illicit enrichment by pilferers large and small. Leading the way has been Granma, the organ of the Cuban Communist Party, whose recent series about the agricultural sector uncovered sharp practices that end up hurting consumers. "The incorrect marketing of (farm) products is a breeding ground for the flowering of undesirable factors, such as the middleman who buys and pays instantly, as well as the diversion of resources and discontent among the rural masses," the newspaper said. Juventud Rebelde, the other big official daily, is also looking at corruption. The denunciations in the press are part of what has become a crusade led by Fidel Castro against the skimming, siphoning and stealing of property, almost all of which is in practice the patrimony of the state under the 47-year-old Communist regime. The battle has been joined by Cuba's plethora of government-directed "popular" organizations and by Cuba's Workers Central (CTC), the only legally recognized labor federation on the island. (*EFE*, 2/3/06)

March 2: Havana Club Inc. unveiled in Cuba its "Máximo Extra Añejo", a rum that will set buyers back up to \$1,600.00 USD per bottle. This year, the company hopes to sell 100 units of this luxury brew, 10 of them in Cuba, a communist country where the cost of living is heavily subsidized but the average salary is about \$15.00 USD. Havana Club, a joint venture between state-owned Cuba Ron and the French group Pernod-Ricard, only brewed 500 Máximo bottles, 200 of which have already been distributed. (*Reuters*, 3/3/06)

March 4: The Havana Cigars' Festival closed in Havana with the traditional auction of humidors autographed by Fidel Castro, during which nearly €600,000 were collected that will be used to finance Cuban health programs. Castro's absence disappointed many of the 850 in attendance who paid \$500.00 each to take part in the closing event of a smokers' festivity that aims to become one of the highest-ranked of its kind in the world. (*EFE*, 5/3/06)

March 6: Cuban Minister of Economic Cooperation and Foreign Investment Marta Lomas and her Kuwaiti counterpart penned an economic and technological agreement, Viet Nam's News Agency reported from Cairo. The accord stipulates that both sides will set up a joint committee under the co-chairmanship of the Kuwaiti Finance Minister and the Cuban Minister of Economic Cooperation and Foreign Investment. The committee will meet annually to discuss ways to promote bilateral cooperation between the two countries. (*AIN*, 6/3/06)

March 7: In the course of the last three years, the district attorney's office confiscated illegally obtained property, including vehicles and houses, in the framework of a campaign led by Fidel Castro to eradicate the so-called "nouveau riches". According to the official newspaper Granma, "37 % (of the cases) were self-employed workers, mainly landlords who breached the terms of their permits (...) and others who engage in this type of activity without authorization." Without quoting percentages, the newspaper identified other means of acquiring illegal wealth including the misappropriation of State resources by members of its workforce and the unauthorized husbandry of animals for self-sustenance or the theft of feed to raise those animals. (*AP*, 7/3/06)

March 7: Cuban authorities in eastern Santiago de Cuba province have implemented a series of initiatives to boost bee honey production. According to experts, the plans include increasing the number of beehives and transferring them to places where there are lots of flowers to counter last year's drop in production. In 2005, Hurricane Dennis affected plantations of a plant species known as "bejuco indio", which contributes 68 percent of the bee honey collected in the province. (*Periódico 26*, 7/3/06)

March 7: The Venezuela-Cuba Industrial Bank (BIV) will receive \$50 million USD, that is to say, \$107 billion Venezuelan bolivars, to finance joint ventures by companies from both countries that are looking to invest in areas of interest to the Cuban economy. Luis Quiaro, President of the BIV, said that this new influx of resources stems from the success of loan transactions from 2005 that aimed at developing the construction sector, sardine exports and the uniform and boots manufacturing plant. (*El Nacional*, 7/3/06)

March 7: Cuba is turning to Chinese companies rather than western ones to modernize its crippled transportation system at a cost of more than \$1bn, continuing a trend of favouring the fellow Communist country that has made Beijing Cuba's second trading partner after Venezuela. Buses plying Cuba's highways increasingly come from the Yutong Bus Company and railway locomotives from the 7th of February works on Beijing's outskirts. Cuba's ports are being revamped with Chinese equipment, in part, to handle millions of Chinese domestic appliances that began arriving last year. Oil rigs along Cuba's northwest heavy oil belt boast Chinese flags, and this is only the beginning, Fidel Castro has said. Cuba's "maximum leader" announced in February he was negotiating personally the purchase of 8,000 buses to be partially assembled on the island. In addition, was a deal for 500 Chinese railway cars and thousands of trucks and cars. China reported 2005 bilateral trade between the two countries up to November was \$777m, up 62.5 per cent year-on-year. The increase was mainly due to \$560m in Chinese exports to Cuba, up 91 per cent. China has provided Cuba with about \$500m credit to cover the development of communications and electronics. But direct investment between the countries is only about \$100m. Plans jointly to produce nickel and cobalt have yet to materialise. (*Financial Times*, 7/3/06)

March 8: While speaking at the 15th anniversary of the Central Computer and Electronics Palace, Fidel Castro asserted that the island is on solid bases in different fields. "Our people will be surprised about the speed of the Energy Revolution and the economic resources it will provide," Fidel said, noting that energy generation grows at 80,000 kw per week and the battle against power shortages is succeeding. The program, emerging from serious energy problems in 2004, has been constantly analyzed, along with the experience of dealing with hurricanes, and has enabled acquisition of safer and more efficient generators, which are strategically combined with engines. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/06)

March 9: Cuba has purchased a top-of-the-line Russian airliner for Fidel Castro. The plane is one of two Russian planes being purchased by the communist island for a total price of \$110 million. The other plane will reportedly be used to transport Cuban workers back and forth from Venezuela. Russian manufacturer Ilyushin said Castro's plane was completely customized for the long-time Cuban leader and included state of the art electronics and a sofa bed. To finance the deal, Cuba has paid 15% of the total sum up front, the rest coming from a 10-year loan from Russian banks. (*BBC, UPI*, 10, 11/3/06)

March 9: Ukraine and Cuba have plans to develop their cooperation in the sector of transportation. The Ministry of Transport and Communications' press service told the press about an official meeting between the Acting Transport and Communications Minister Viktor Bondar and the Cuban Ambassador to Ukraine Julio Garmendia. According to the press service, both parts said it was necessary to establish a direct regular flight between Cuba and Ukraine. The aviation industry, in the opinion of the meeting participants, is one of the most promising sector to step up cooperation between the two countries. (*Ukrainian News*, 9/3/06)

March 9: China will auction 200,000 tonnes of raw sugar from state reserves and another 200,000 tonnes arriving from Cuba during the first half of the year, the Ministry of Commerce said. For the Cuban sugar, the refining fee was set between 240 and 280 yuan (\$29.80 and \$34.79) a tonne. China expects to import three cargoes of Cuban sugar in April and another three in May, the document said, for a total 100,000 tonnes each month. (*Reuters*, 9/3/06)

March 10: Cuba and Venezuela prepare for future joint commercialization of tourist package deals. "One of the offers under study would sell Cuban beach-Orinoco jungle excursion bundles," revealed the Cuban vice-minister of Tourism, Oscar González, head of the Havana delegation to the International Tourism Bourse (ITB), held in Berlin. González pointed out that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Venezuelan tourists visiting his country, although "there are many Venezuelans who are going to Cuba to train in different areas and others for something called 'Mission Miracle'". Last year, approximately 80,000 Venezuelans traveled to Cuba for this purpose, "disadvantaged people who, at no charge, can avail themselves of Cuba's world-class health care system," he added. "Our goal now is to put together an offer that turns into a reality what the tourism and hospitality industry in the region has been unsuccessfully trying to achieve for quite some time: an attractive and compact multi-destination bundle," he said. (*EFE*, 10/3/06)

March 10: According to official statistics, the European Union-Cuba trade balance grew significantly in 2005, following a 31% increase in EU exports to the island and an increment of 28% in European Community imports from the Caribbean nation. European exports to Cuba last year reached 1,272 million euros (approximately \$1,590 million USD) propelled by sales of electrical equipment and optical instruments, as indicated by a report from the Office of the European Commission in Havana. Cuba spent more than 440 million euros (\$550 million USD) purchasing generators and electrical machinery from European manufacturers, mainly power generators from German and Spanish companies to alleviate the energy crisis that besets the country. Also, the island invested next to 140 million euros (\$175 million USD) in the purchase of European optical instruments, mostly from German companies and destined for the so-called "Operation Miracle." (*EFE*, 11/3/06)

March 11: Iran and Cuba signed an agreement based on which Iran will build a cement plant in this Latin American country. In addition to the \$200m agreement concluded for building the cement production plant, Iran has also agreed to construct a power plant aimed at generating at least 500 to 1,500 megawatts of electricity in the island. Also, the Islamic Republic will supply the raw materials and chemicals needed for rubber and plastic production in Cuba, the report quoted an official at the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Industries and Mines as saying. Based on a short-term agreement Iran has undertaken to, through its tractor manufacturing plant in Venezuela, provide tractors needed by Cuba, Mohsen Shaterzadeh said in Tehran. Trade volume between Iran and the Caribbean island state has increased from the earlier \$20m to about \$90m, he commented predicting that, "the trade volume between the two countries is expected to hit \$600m soon." (*Tehran Times*, 11/3/06)

March 13: Not long after an overhaul of the sugar industry that saw the shutdown of scores of refineries, Cuba is seeking to breathe new life into what for decades was the motor of the national economy in light of rising prices for this commodity. Fidel Castro personally has taken over the relaunching of the sugar industry and has given instructions to increase production to take advantage of higher international market prices. The Cuban leader met on February 14 with the heads of sugar mills and top Communist Party officials to ask for their cooperation in the effort, the official daily *Granma* reported. "Guarantees, organizational and financial measures were adopted and (the meeting) was oriented toward seeking urgent solutions, with all possible speed, to refine more sugar given the (...) good prices in the market," *Granma* wrote. The new sugar policy is a response to the rise in international prices for the sweetener and the high cost to Cuba of importing some 100,000 tons of sugar from Colombia. In March 2005, Castro said that the industry "today is ruining" the Cuban economy because of the high cost of fuel, an expense that figures heavily in the harvest, transport and processing of cane. "Now, the sugar price rose a little, but I know that this country won't ever live off sugar again. It belongs to the epoch of slavery and of a people full of semi-literate" citizens, Castro said at the time. (*EFE*, 13/3/06)

March 13: Cuban authorities are trying to improve their auditing techniques to augment their chances of detecting skimming and other forms of corruption. As the monthly Cuban magazine *Bohemia* reported in its latest issue, in some cases poor accounting procedures have contributed to "weaving nets of disguise" around public firms who then acquire a false image of "efficiency." Auditing and Control Minister Lina Pedraza acknowledged to the magazine the deficiencies in current controls and the need for auditors to change their "mentality" to detect the crimes. "We're asking (...) questions (about) how to make audits more useful, how to prevent a firm from getting audited two or three times a year and apparently being fine and then (having) the bomb explode," she said. As an example of the limitations to current audits, *Bohemia* discussed the case of the Matanzas Pharmacy and Optical Company, located 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of Havana, from which almost 4,000 liters (1,056 gallons) of methyl alcohol were diverted in November 2002. (*EFE*, 13/3/06)

March 13: The Cuban coffee harvest experienced a 25% decline as compared to the previous cycle, which translates into fewer than 140,000 60 kg bags, according to Reuters estimates based on Cuban media reports and other local sources. Reuters had projected the 2004-2005 harvest to be in the neighborhood of 180,000 60 kg bags, one of the lowest-yielding crops in the last 50 years. According to local radio broadcasts, production in the areas east of Santiago

de Cuba, which account for one third of the crop, fell by 50% after being hit by hurricane Dennis in July in its path through the coffee-growing regions of the easternmost provinces of the island. (*Reuters*, 13/3/06)

March 14: The Haier Corporation Industrial Park in China's port city of Shandong, was the site of a ceremony marking the shipment of the first batch of home refrigerators that Cuba has contracted to buy from that nation. The initial purchase is for 300,000 refrigerators of the highest quality, distributed as three different models, and bought as part of the National Energy Saving Program that Cuba is implementing. The delivery ceremony was attended by Cuban Minister of Government Ricardo Cabrisas, and Commander of the Revolution Ramiro Valdes Menendez, President of the Electronics Group of Cuba. Also attending were Cuban Ambassador to China Alberto Rodriguez Arufe, business persons and officials of the Cuban diplomatic mission in Beijing. (*Granma*, 15/3/06)

March 16: Swedish industrial technology group G & L Beijer AB said it was awarded a 1.2 million euro (\$1.4 mln) order to deliver dry coolers to a major infrastructure project in Cuba. G & L Beijer won the deal via the collaboration of its subsidiaries, Danish distributor TT-Coil A/S and Swedish heat exchangers manufacturer Asarums Industri AB. The order represents a first sub-order to the project, which has a potential of at least 7.0 million euro (\$8.4 mln). Dry coolers conduct away surplus heat from the compressor plant in a cooling system or other industrial processes. They include components such as heat exchangers and fans. (*Swedish News Digest*, 16/3/06)

March 16: The anti-corruption drive that has become the new warhorse of the 47-year-old Communist regime turned its sights on the public health sector, with the official newspaper saying the theft and clandestine sale of medicines is contributing to their shortages. The newspaper *Granma* said that "unscrupulous elements" were "taking advantage of a lack of order and lapse of vigilance" over the medications and profiting from illegal sales of remedies. The daily gave details of a police operation carried out on February 16, in which government authorities seized a large quantity of stolen medicines and arrested three suspects. *Granma* said the medicine-skimming case "is cause for reflection by directors and workers at laboratories, pharmacies, warehouses, polyclinics and hospitals." (*EFE*, 16/3/06)

March 18: After having strung more than 272,000 poles with tobacco leaves, four percent above production targets, it has been estimated that growers in eastern Las Tunas province will set a new record during the current tobacco-leaf harvest. The figure represents nearly a third of the estimated total harvest, which will soon enter its peak stage and should be wrapped up by the end of April. Las Tunas has an overall area of over 1,700 hectares of tobacco fields. Romilio Lopez, assistant director of the Tobacco Company in Las Tunas, told the local press that some 34,000 quintals of the leaf (over 1,500 tons) are expected to be harvested in Las Tunas this year, thus surpassing the local production record set in 2001. (*Cuban News Agency*, 18/3/06)

March 21: More than 600,000 Canadian tourists will visit Cuba this year, which confirms the North American nation as one of the main tourist sources for the island, reported Alexandra Bugailiskis, Ambassador of Canada in Havana. In declarations to the local media, the Canadian ambassador added that commercial bilateral relations are "very good" and that her country is one of the largest investors in the Caribbean island. (*Europa Press*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Havana feels that Russia could take part in the exploration and development of oil-bearing fields located in the island's economic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, the Cuban Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eumelio Caballero, announced in Moscow. At the end of his negotiations with the Russian authorities in Moscow, Caballero said that "a favorable climate has been created for possible Russian investments" in the island and added that Cuba "is experiencing an economic boom." (*EFECOM*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Sixty per cent of the fresh drinking water supplied in Cuba goes to waste due to breaks and leaks in decades-old pipes and mains, a luxury the island cannot afford due to low levels in water reserves. To deal with the water deficit, the Government approved a batch of measures and investments submitted for expert assessment in 2004. The above mentioned plan is backed by an initial budget of \$182 million USD. (*Reforma*, 21/3/06)

March 22: Cuba's ruling Communist Party has sent thousands of its members, including retirees turned into detectives, to track corruption that Defense Minister Raul Castro warns is spreading like a "deadly cancer," government sources said. Fidel Castro's younger brother, in a video making the rounds of the country's leadership, says 6,000 party cadre and 2,000 retired members working in pairs have discovered "the situation is far worse than we imagined." Raul Castro, 74, number two in Cuba's political hierarchy and constitutionally in line to succeed his 79-year-old brother if he were to retire or become incapacitated, heads the party's Commission against Corruption and Illegalities set up three years ago. "The deadly cancer has metastasized from our knees up to here," Raul Castro, pointing to his chest, told national-level leaders and administrators in a recent meeting, according to sources who had seen the videotape. Castro singled out the East Havana municipal wholesale food company as an example of how managers and their government superiors appear to be "blind" to the diversion of resources to the black market. Despite 14 visits by ministry officials, 21 inspections and an audit, it took a pair of party retirees to discover 2,000 tonnes of products were missing, the younger Castro said. "How can you explain that a couple of retirees are able to discover in a week grave problems that were not detected by management in the same companies, nor by their superiors, during months and years," Castro asked. Attorney General Juan Escalona reported 5,800 cases of economic crimes in 2000, including embezzlement, theft and bribery. But the current anti-corruption campaign led by Raul Castro is the most serious since he and his brother swept to power in a 1959 revolution. (*Reuters*, 22/3/06)

March 22: The Cuban Minister of Government, Ricardo Cabrisas, briefed a group of Japanese businessmen, government officials and lawmakers on the current situation of the island's economy. The performance of Cuban commerce in 2005 and its future perspectives, especially in relation with Japan, were topics that generated great interest among the participants. Mr. Cabrisas, on an official visit to Japan since March 19, held talks with deputy and former Prime Minister, Yoshiro Mori, and with Parliamentary Secretary, Takuya Hirai. (*AIN*, 22/3/06)

March 23: Venezuela will begin to receive the first consignments of 500,000t of Cuban cement to help resolve the existing supply deficit in the market, local press quoted housing minister Luis Figueroa as saying. However, despite the claims by Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez that the agreement to bring in cement from Cuba was because of shortages in the local market, domestic cement industry sources said that the real problem was the low market prices for the product. These imports of cement from Cuba are merely aimed at forcing the companies to lower their prices even more, said the sector insiders, who were not named by the press. (*Business News Americas*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Fiagro 2006, the 11th International Livestock Trade Fair, began in Havana, with the participation of over 20 foreign companies from ten countries. Exhibitors from the US, Spain, Holland, Israel, Germany and Canada are among participants in the event, which will be taking place in the outskirts of Cuba's capital. (*Prensa Latina*, 23/3/06)

March 25: New power plants are being installed in Havana to save energy, cut costs and ease chronic summer blackouts, Cuba's state news agency said. Officials from Cuba's Basic Industries Ministry said the new generators will help ensure "optimum quality" in electrical service for the capital's 11.2 million residents, *Prensa Latina* reported. Havana has historically suffered from outages when demand rises in the hot summer months. The plants are part of the government's Energy Revolution, a nationwide program aimed at ending blackouts by May 1. Cuba has contracted to buy 4,158 of the generators, more than 3,000 of which have already been installed. They form a key part of a plan to replace the island's huge thermoelectric plants -- which consume huge amounts of petroleum -- with smaller, more cost-efficient energy facilities. (*AP, Xinhua*, 25/3/06)

March 26: Efforts and hard work for a more efficient use of industrial capacity currently mark the Cuban sugar harvest. Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro has asserted the 2006 harvest is so far better than that of 2005. The island nation has increased its industrial efficiency during the last harvests and present conditions are favourable to raise sugar production, said Rosales del Toro. The minister assured industrial performance and the hike of the international price of sugar have encouraged to draw up strategies to produce more sugar for export in the coming seasons. Cuba is also planning to expand sugar plantations for the 2007 harvest. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/06)

March 27: Cuba maintains a foreign debt of more than \$37 billion USD with 27 countries, informed the Cuba Transition Project of the University of Miami. According to the Project, one of the main creditors is Venezuela, to which it is believed that Castro owes \$3,532 million USD. Another major creditor is Russia, with \$20,848 million USD. In addition to a previously disclosed sum of \$682 million USD in trade and financing that Cuba owes China, the Asian nation revealed at the close of 2004 the existence of nearly \$38 million USD worth of commercial credit that dates back to the period 1990-1994. China also issued another loan estimated at \$150 million USD so that Cuba could purchase one million TV sets, and announced an investment of \$500 million USD to be financed through Chinese loans to a new nickel mining joint venture in the East of Cuba. Cuba owes Canada \$97 million USD. (*Martinoticias*, 27/3/06)

March 27: In a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Tehran, Cuban Minister of Transportation, Carlo Manuel Pazo Torrado, gave him a letter from his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Perez Roque, dealing with cooperation between the two states. According to a report released by the Foreign Ministry Media Department, Torrado briefed Mottaki on his talks with the officials of Iranian Ministry of Roads and Transportation on his country's intention to purchase train wagons from Iran. Meanwhile, he expounded on Cuba's high economic development in Latin America, despite the 15-year economic sanction against it under the leadership of Fidel Castro. (*IRNA*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Cuba's flagship airline will buy five more Russian jets, with PS90A engines, the newest engines available. Cubana de Aviacion will buy two Il-96-300s, two Tu-205-100s and a Tu-204S, Novosti. Three weeks ago, Cuba received a second Il-96-300 furnished with a VIP cabin for use by Fidel Castro that can be reconfigured for commercial flights, he said. "It is not only for travel by the Comandante," he said, referring to Castro. For trips abroad, Castro has been flying an IL-62 built 30 years ago. Civil aviation authorities in the European Union and other countries no longer allow the plane to land because it does not meet safety standards. Cuban officials had to scramble to get special permission to land Castro's plane in Japan during a trip to Asia in 2003, an Asian diplomat said. (*UPI, Reuters*, 27,28/3/06)

March 29: Cuba is interested in setting up joint venture pharmaceutical industries in Bangladesh to share its advancement in the treatment of cancer and other diseases. This was stated by Delhi based Cuban Ambassador to Bangladesh Juan Carretero Ibanez, when he called on Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at her office. The Prime Minister welcomed Cuba's eagerness and called for importing quality medicines that are being manufactured in Bangladesh. (*Bangladesh Observer*, 31/3/06)

March 29: Fidel Castro received the Latin American Energy Organization (OLADE) Executive Secretary Alvaro Rios, who is visiting local power generation centers and other energy related facilities in western Cuba. Castro and Rios, on his first visit to the island nation, discussed the global energy situation and the Latin American and the Caribbean panorama. The statesman explained to the OLADE leader the national energy revolution afoot that guarantees a rational and efficient consumption of fuels, enables a planned and diversified policy of energy production plus a considerable saving of financial resources to use them in other sectors and social programs. Rios hailed Cuban projects and expressed interest in sharing these experiences with other regional nations. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/06)

March 30: Cuba does not aim to sustain its whole economy on sugar production alone. Instead, it seeks to diversify its sugar industry enough that it can meet the demands of its domestic market and fulfill its international commitments, said the minister of the sector, Ulises Rosales del Toro. This year, Cuba expects the sugar harvest to increase to approximately 1.5 million tons. The Cuban sugar industry has deteriorated progressively in the last decade, with its steadily declining output finally hitting a low of 1.3 million tons in 2005, the worst results in a century. (*EFE*, 30/3/06)

March 31: A forest fire destroyed 1,000 hectares of pine in the Cuban province of Camaguey, said the official media. The fire, of still unknown causes, is located in one of Cuba's most important coniferous reserves, nearly 600 kilometers to the east of Havana. The drought affecting the island might intensify the risk of such occurrences. According to the

National Institute of Water Resources, today in Cuba it rains an average 133 mm less than 40 years ago. (*Reuters*, 31/3/06)

March 31: Cuban authorities last year imposed more than 26,000 fines on individuals for irregularities at markets selling farm products across the country, the local press reported. The national director of prices at the Finances and Prices Ministry, Ines Arguelles, told the official daily Granma that "excessive charges to the consumer" were the cause of 30 percent of the fines, which ranged as high as 150 pesos (just over \$6) and were doubled if the offense was repeated. (*EFE*, 31/3/06)

Exile Community

March 2: Anti-Castro Cuban exiles have scheduled an auction of 50 paintings by accused terrorist and amateur artist Luis Posada Carriles to help defray the jailed militant's legal expenses. The exhibition and sale is set in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood. "The sale's going to be very successful. People have called from other states asking to buy up to two pictures (each) by Posada Carriles and to get information on payment methods," Abel Nieves, one of the directors of the organization arranging the event, told the press. The paintings were created during Posada's 2000-2004 imprisonment in Panama and in jail in the United States, where he was taken into custody last May. (*EFE*, 3/3/06)

March 8: In a day that underscored tension between some Cuban exiles in Miami and the Bush administration, Cuban-American leaders met with federal officials in Washington to ask for a new US-Cuba migration policy, while others called the meeting partisan. The Cuban-American group wants the administration to change the controversial wet-foot, dry-foot policy in which Cubans caught at sea are generally returned to the island while those who reach US soil are allowed to stay. At the White House meeting, Republican US Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart and several spiritual leaders from Miami's Cuban exile community asked federal officials from the departments of State and Homeland Security to make the policy more humanitarian for Cubans. "The meeting was designed to allow for a serious dialogue, and does not signal any change in policy as it relates to Cuba or any other country's migrants," said White House spokeswoman Maria Tamburri. The meeting came almost two months after the Coast Guard repatriated 15 Cubans found on the old Seven Mile bridge in the Florida Keys -- a move that set off controversy and a 12-day hunger strike by the Democracy Movement's Ramon Saul Sanchez. (*The Miami Herald*, 9/3/06)

March 9: While Cuba played the Netherlands in the World Baseball Classic, a spectator in the stands raised a sign saying: "Down with Fidel," sparking an international incident that escalated with the velocity of a major league fastball. The image of the man holding the sign behind home plate was beamed live to millions of TV viewers - including those in Cuba. The top Cuban official at the game at Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan rushed to confront the man. Puerto Rican police quickly intervened and took the Cuban official - Angel Iglesias, vice president of Cuba's National Institute of Sports - to a nearby police station, where they lectured him about free speech. "We explained to him that here the constitutional right to free expression exists and that it is not a crime," police Col. Adalberto Mercado was quoted as saying in *El Nuevo Dia*, a San Juan daily. The brouhaha gathered steam when Cuba's Communist Party newspaper, Granma, called the sign-waving "a cowardly incident." Cuba's Revolutionary Sports Movement exhorted Cubans to demonstrate in Havana, saying US and Puerto Rican authorities were involved in "the cynical counterrevolutionary provocations." An anti-Castro Web site, therealcuba.com, identified the protester only as Enrique, and carried his own account of the incident. (*AP*, 9/3/06)

March 9: South Florida's Cuban-American community is not as preoccupied with Fidel Castro and communist Cuba as it previously was, according to a new poll being released. Asked what's the most important political issue, 33 percent of respondents said the war in Iraq and terrorism. Twenty-seven percent put Cuba and Castro at the top, while 11 percent

said the economy is most important. The poll, conducted in February of 600 Cuban Americans in Miami-Dade, shows the broadening of opinion in the community as younger generations and new arrivals focus on other issues beyond communist Cuba, the pollsters noted. The survey was conducted by two researchers outside of Florida -- Jessica Lavariega Monforti, a political science professor at the University of Texas-Panamerican, and Lisa García Bedolla of the University of California at Irvine. They presented their results at an event organized by Florida International University. The researchers conclude that national security issues will be more important for Cubans and Cuban-American voters in 2008 than US-Cuba policy. "I think what we are looking at is a much more complicated view of this community than we've seen in the past," said Jessica Lavariega Monforti, a political science professor at the University of Texas, Pan American. "You have to engage this community on issues other than Cuba." (*The Miami Herald*, 9/3/06)

March 23: Delfín Fernández, who was part of Fidel and Raúl Castro's inner circle, knows everything from why the Cuban leader incinerates his dirty underwear to his cravings for pricey Spanish ham. Fernández says chief of bodyguards, Bienvenido "Chicho" Perez, told him the Cuban leader has his underwear burned to foil any assassination plots with chemicals during laundering. And he knows Fidel's capricious appetite for Serrano hams, having been sent to Spain to bring \$2,500 worth of the "pata negra" delicacy back to Cuba. He knows well the Castro brothers' doctors and children, having vacationed with them at lavish oceanfront homes on the island. Former CIA analyst Brian Latell, a senior researcher at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies, said he spent several hours meeting with Fernández in Miami earlier this year for academic research. "A lot of the stories he told me were fascinating, and I found almost all of them to be highly credible," Latell said. Fernández said he defected in Spain in 1999 on a trip to Europe to drop off Raúl's daughter, Mariela Castro Espin, in Italy to visit her father-in-law and pick up a Rotweiller in Germany for Fidel. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/06)

March 25: A growing number of exiles choose Cuba to rest in peace. It costs more and takes longer, but more Cubans are fulfilling their wish to return to the island -- even after death. Funeral directors say the number of shipments has doubled in the past year or so as domestic funeral costs rise, more people realize tightened remittances and other restrictions do not apply -- and older generations of Cuban exiles continue to die. There are no records on how many bodies are shipped annually to Cuba, according to the office of Vital Statistics for Florida, the Cuban Interests Section, and the US Treasury Department, which oversees the trade embargo with Cuba. Some Cuban exile leaders and Cuban funeral home operators oppose the practice, contending it aids the Castro government, which collects fees on shipments. "The only purpose it serves is to give Castro money," said Jose Basulto of Brothers to the Rescue, an anti-Castro group that flew missions searching for Cuban rafters. "Does Fidel Castro benefit? Yes," said Joe Garcia, former executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation. "But you know what? Fidel Castro benefits more from other things than a poor guy sending his dead mother back. If my mother asked me to bury her on the moon, I would send her to the moon." Garcia did fault the Cuban government for what it charges for the process. The average cost, excluding airfare and storage of the body: \$2,795 for a body; \$2,000 for ashes. A chunk of the money -- \$1,120 -- goes to the Cuban government. (*The Miami Herald*, 25/3/06)

March 28: Cuban exile Rafael Rojas, who lives in Mexico, won the 34 th Anagrama Essay Awards with the book "Tombs without Peace. Revolution, dissidents and exile of the Cuban intellectuals" (Tumbas sin sosiego. Revolución, disidencia y exilio del intelectual cubano), a brief intellectual history of Cuba. (*Europa Press*, 28/3/06)

March 27: Jorge Mas, chairman of the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation, sent US President George Bush a letter asking if the administration had changed its position on the Helms-Burton law. The letter criticized US Representative Lincoln Díaz-Balart's statements, saying CANF members "do not consider it beneficial to alter or suggest altering Helms-Burton now or at any time in the future." It added that the Castro brothers should leave Cuba if they are serious about a transition to democracy. Díaz-Balart issued a statement saying that his views on Helms-Burton had been misrepresented, restating his key conditions and saying that CANF could have saved itself the time by telephoning him for his comments. Díaz-Balart had told The Miami Herald in a recent interview that while he supports

the law, he would favor lifting some of the sanctions if Havana freed all political prisoners, legalized opposition parties and promised free elections -- regardless of who rules Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 28/3/06)

March 29: Some 20 demonstrators angered by a ceremony honoring a Cuban defector stormed into Puerto Rico's statehouse, breaking tables, windows and a glass case covering the US territory's constitution. The demonstrators were angered by a tribute lawmakers were paying to Julio Labatut, a Cuban dissident and a renowned florist honored for his charitable works and entrepreneurship in Puerto Rico. Some alleged Labatut was involved in the unsolved 1979 killing of Carlos Muniz Varela, an activist for Puerto Rico's independence with close links to the Cuban government. Labatut, who was part of a group of Cuban exiles that encouraged Cuban athletes competing in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s to defect from Cuba, said he was insulted by the protest. (*The New York Times*, 30/3/06)

March 29: Cuban journalist and exile Raúl Rivero, his wife Blanca Reyes, and the NGOs People in Need and Reporters Without Borders commemorated in Madrid the 2003 crackdown on dissidents and paid tribute to the Cuban independent journalists who remain in jail. Two photo exhibitions were inaugurated with the presence of Rivero and Reyes, one of them dedicated to the Ladies in White, a group of women who demand the release of their beloved ones who remain in jail since 2003. "I walked together with them along the streets of Havana", Reyes said. Rivero, who was also sent to jail in 2003, was later released due to health conditions and allowed to leave the island. (*EFE*, 29/3/06)

Foreign Affairs

March 1: A group of twelve Cuban immigrants arrived in Guatemala claiming political refuge. The group was intercepted by Guatemalan authorities while crossing a path close to the Aguascalientes border, between Guatemala and Honduras. In 2005, Guatemala granted refuge status to 17 Cubans. (*AP*, 1/3/06)

March 1: The Mexican government expressed its "concern" over capital municipal authorities' closure of a US-owned hotel after the inn was involved last month in an incident that became a three-nation diplomatic flap. The Maria Isabel Sheraton was ordered closed over alleged irregularities surrounding its business licensing. The spokesman for Mexican President Vicente Fox, Ruben Aguilar, expressed the "concern over the repercussions for Mexico City, the country in general and, particularly, for the workers of the delegational authorities' decision to close this company." Aguilar said at a press conference that the measure "not only puts at risk the source of the jobs for the people that work there, but also affects the image of the Mexican tourist sector and, probably, could discourage investment." The hotel, upon orders from Washington, expelled the members of an official Cuban economic delegation who were participating in a meeting with US businessmen to analyze business opportunities in the Communist island's energy sector. (*EFE*, 1/3/06)

March 2: Bolivia has launched a pilot literacy program in eight provinces of the country with Cuban assistance. The first stage of the campaign was symbolically launched by Bolivian Deputy Education and Literacy Minister Benito Ayma at the Laja locality, 35 kilometers west of the capital La Paz. Teachers will travel to remote Bolivian regions to undertake their mission and they will also teach the physically impaired how to read and write, Ayma said. Cuba's ambassador to Bolivia Luis Felipe Vázquez stressed the experience attained by Cuban experts, who also participated in the literacy campaign undertaken in Venezuela, a country declared free of illiteracy in 2005. (*AIN*, 2/3/06)

March 5: Cuba reiterated "its firm and unchanging position of supporting the existence of only one China, with Taiwan as an inalienable part of it." The Cuban government released a statement on its position toward the question of Taiwan's status in response to the move by "the head of the Taiwanese authorities, Chen Shui-bian," who ordered the abolition of an organization created to work toward reunification with China. Chen, who is the president of Taiwan, has urged the country's allies in Latin America in the past year to support the island's efforts to be recognized as a sovereign state by the United Nations. [[Declaración del gobierno revolucionario](#)] (*EFE*, 5/3/06)

March 5: A 71-year-old Cuban national regarded as one of the best cigar rollers in Russia died after being beaten late at night in central Moscow. Luis Cardenas Miranda, 71, was attacked by two teenagers, said Sergei Marchenko, a spokesman for the City Prosecutor's Office. Cardenas had just left Staraya Gavana, the Cuban restaurant where he worked, when the two teens knocked him off his feet and started pummeling his head and body. Natalya Ishchuk, a spokeswoman for Staraya Gavana, downplayed the possibility that the attack might have been racially motivated. "I don't think there was a racial motive in Luis' killing," she said. "What happened to him could as well have happened to anyone who goes out on the street late at night." Dozens of dark-skinned foreigners have been beaten in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities in recent months. Several have died. (*Moscow Times*, 6/3/06)

March 5: The Organization of Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL) held a solidarity conference with Syria at the Arab club headquarters in Havana. The conference stressed the necessity of unifying efforts to defend the peoples struggling against imperialism. The Secretary General of the OSPAAAL, Alfred Lion, denounced the campaigns of pressure against Syria, highlighting the relations between Syria and Cuba. The OSPAAAL was founded in Havana in January 1966. (*SANA*, 6/3/06)

March 5: A Canadian tourist, who witnesses said is from Ottawa, drowned during a catamaran tour in Varadero, Cuba. Foreign Affairs would only confirm the woman's family had contacted the Canadian consulate in Cuba for assistance and that her identity was not being released. "We are aware of the case and we are talking to relatives of the person," said spokesman Rejean Beaulieu. Cuban authorities are investigating the incident, which appears to be an accidental drowning. Ottawa resident Stephen MacDonald was staying at the Tryp Peninsula Hotel in Varadero. He said that he and his wife had taken the same catamaran tour the day before the drowning. The couple were concerned for their own safety after noticing a lack of life preservers, life jackets and a steady flow of alcohol. (*Ottawa Sun*, 8/3/06)

March 6: Local authorities in Mexico City have fined a US-owned hotel, at the centre of a diplomatic row, \$15,000 (£8,500). They said the branch of the Sheraton chain had discriminated against 16 Cuban officials by expelling them from its premises last month.

The delegation was ordered to comply with a US embargo against Cuba. A US law bans American companies from doing business with the island. The hotel denied discrimination and said it would appeal the decision. (*BBC*, 6/3/06)

March 6: Mongolian Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ts.Tsolmon paid a working visit to Cuba. The Vice Minister held official negotiations with his Cuban counterpart, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Marcos Rodriguez, and met with the Cuban Chairperson of the Mongolia-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission, Ramon Ripoll Diaz. During the visit, a cooperation plan between the Mongolian and Cuban ministries of Foreign Affairs was signed. (*Mongolia Web*, 6/3/06)

March 6: Health officials in St Lucia have confirmed that an 82-year-old woman has become the second person from that country to die in Cuba while seeking medical treatment under an eye care project. Eunice George died on March 5, one week after arriving in Cuba for surgery. She is the second to have died from the recent group of St. Lucians sent to Havana for medical attention under the Cuban government programme which began in August 2005. According to family members Mrs. George, who had no known medical complication when she left for Cuba, was due to have surgery to her eyes on March 17 and had been receiving medication ahead of the operation. However she collapsed suddenly and was diagnosed as having died from heart failure. Late last month, 62-year-old Henrietta James of Vieux Fort died in Havana prior to receiving surgery. (*Radio Jamaica.Com*, 6/3/06)

March 7: Spain's conservative opposition introduced a measure in Parliament calling on the Socialist government to condemn the upsurge in repression in Cuba. The "proposition," which is not draft legislation, urges Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's government to demand that Cuban authorities release political prisoners and stop harassing the opposition. The center-right Popular Party, or PP, said Cuba's Communist dictatorship violated human rights, "including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights." The PP said the island imprisoned, in conditions that

were "subhuman, dozens of independent journalists, peaceful dissidents, human rights activists" and members of the democratic opposition. Cuban authorities also prevent citizens from leaving the country, as was the case with the Women in White - relatives of jailed dissidents - who were prevented from traveling to Strasbourg, France, in December to accept the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament, the PP said. The PP noted that Zapatero's government changed policy toward Cuba, "both in Spain and in the EU Council," and "the change has not produced any results." (*EFE*, 7/3/06)

March 7: The Mexican government said it was stepping up security at detention centers for illegal Cuban migrants after a group of detainees fought police officers and held a guard against his will -- the seventh uprising or mass escape by Cubans in a year. Officials also will deny political asylum to those involved in the latest conflict. "After these acts, changes will certainly have to be reviewed to increase the level of security" at immigration holding centers like the one in Mexico City where a dozen Cubans rioted and briefly took over the facilities, presidential spokesman Ruben Aguilar said. The riots are fueled in part by the fact that most Cubans are forced to wait for months inside decrepit Mexican detention centers. The Cuban government often delays recognizing them as a means of punishment for their attempt to leave the island, Mexican officials say. The Cubans involved in the uprising were demanding not be returned to the island, saying they feared reprisals there. Eight Cubans were injured in the scuffle, though their injuries were not life-threatening, the government said in a news release. (*AP*, 7/3/06)

March 7: President Tran Duc Luong affirmed Vietnam's collaboration with Cuba in preparing for the 14th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Havana in September. At the reception for Ricardo Cabrisas, special envoy of Fidel Castro, in Hanoi, the Vietnamese state leader reiterated, "Vietnam always attaches importance to participating in the Non-Aligned Movement". Talking with the special envoy, who conveyed Castro's invitation to attend the 14th NAM conference to President Luong, the Vietnamese leader said he was pleased to see that Cuba, under the leadership of Fidel Castro, obtained great achievements in socio-economic development and external relations in spite of difficulties caused by hostile foreign forces. (*Nhan Dan*, 9/3/06)

March 7: Presiding Episcopal Bishop Frank Griswold blamed Cuba's misery on US foreign policy from the pulpit of Havana's Holy Trinity Cathedral. The Ash Wednesday homily concluded a six-day pastoral visit to the Anglican Church in Cuba. Bishop Griswold issued no public comments on the persecution of Cuban Christians during his Havana visit. In September the Cuban government passed new laws cracking down on evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, beginning a new round of jailing of church leaders and banning unsupervised home churches. Founded by missionaries from the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church in Cuba became an independent diocese in 1967 amid worsening political tensions between the two countries. It is now governed by a Metropolitan Council whose members include the primates of the Church of Canada, the United States, and the West Indies. (*Living Church Magazine*, 7/3/06)

March 7: A special UN rights envoy expressed alarm at allegations of ill treatment in Cuban jails, but said that a US economic embargo was hampering attempts to improve Cuba's respect for political rights. "The extreme tension between Cuba and the United States has created a climate which is far from conducive to the development of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly," French magistrate Christine Chanet said. In a new report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Chanet said her main concern was still the detention of dozens of dissidents whose arrest while working as journalists, writers and members of associations in March and April 2003 caused an international uproar. She said she was "alarmed at the allegations of ill-treatment in detention" submitted by prisoners' families. "Food and hygiene are substandard and medical care either unavailable or inappropriate," said Chanet, whose post was created in 2002. Furthermore, more people had been arrested over the past year for expressing opinions, added the magistrate, who has yet to be allowed to visit the Caribbean communist state. But Chanet, whose report was posted on the Commission's Web site, pointed to a number of "positive" developments in the areas of economic, social and cultural rights, especially in education and health. [[Situation of Human Rights in Cuba](#)] (*AFP, Reuters*, 6/3/06)

March 7: Switzerland and Cuba have very good diplomatic relations marked by mutual respect and friendship, stated Swiss ambassador to the island Bertrand Louis. Switzerland established its first diplomatic mission in Havana halfway through the last century, and since then that has forged not only solid political ties but also stable cultural and economic links, said the ambassador to the local press. The ambassador pointed out that there are regular political contacts between the two nations, citing the example of an official visit to Cuba by Charles Kleiber, the Swiss Secretary of State for Higher Education and Research, last February. (*AIN*, 7/3/06)

March 7: The two-day Iran-Cuba Artistic Cultural Conference began at Tehran's Honar Cultural Center. The conference features film screenings and reviews, musical performances, and book and poetry sections. Critics will be reviewing the films "Goodbye Ernesto" directed by Puyan Shahrokhi, "Comandante" by Oliver Stone, and "Sacrificio: Who Betrayed Che Guevara" by Erik Gandini in the film section of the event. The book "My Best Friend Che" written by Alberto Granado is also being reviewed at the conference. Cuban Ambassador Fernando Garcia, UNESCO Secretary General in Iran Mohammad Tavakol, the head of the Spanish Department of Tehran University, Ali Feizollahi, film director Naser Taqvaii, and several other Iranian and foreign officials will be attending the conference. The Iran-Cuba Friendship Association, Faragah Publishers, and the House of Young Movie Makers are sponsoring the cultural event in order to strengthen ties between the two countries. (*Tehran Times*, 8/3/06)

March 8: The Government of the Republic of Cuba has responded to a request from the St. Kitts-Nevis Labour Party administration to assist local residents in reducing their electricity bills. Minister of Public Works, Utilities, Transport and Posts, Dr. the Hon. Earl Asim Martin said that his formal request to the Fidel Castro Government in Havana to donate energy-saving bulbs to St. Kitts, free of cost, has been positive and will also result in reducing the country's high energy bill. "We approached them (Government of Cuba) with respect to assisting us with compact fluorescent bulbs. These bulbs are energy saving bulbs and they have decided to donate these bulbs to the poor and vulnerable groups in our society free of charge," said Dr. Martin in an exclusive interview with the Communications Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister. (*CUOPM*, 8/3/06)

March 8: Cuban officials said the 72-year-old Canadian tourist who died during a snorkelling excursion suffered a heart attack. The woman's body had been taken to Havana, said an official with the Barcelo Marina Palace Hotel's department of public relations. Ottawa resident Stephen MacDonald, who was also vacationing in the Varadero resort area at the time, told the press that a witness said the woman was from Ottawa and had drowned. (*Ottawa Sun*, 9/3/06)

March 9: Cuba is stepping up preparations for the 14th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NOAL) to be held in Havana on September 11-16. The written invitation by Fidel Castro has currently been extended to dignitaries of the movement's 144 country members. The agenda of the gathering includes preliminary discussions by representatives of all these nations, September 11-12, as well as meetings by foreign ministers September 13-14. The Heads of State and Government will meet on September 15-16 to approve the final documents of the summit. A meeting of the Ministerial Committee on Palestine will be held on the sidelines of the NOAL gathering to discuss the situation in the Middle East, according to sources from the Cuban Foreign Ministry. Malaysia is currently presiding over the NOAL Movement. The post will be handed over to Cuba at the Havana Summit. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/3/06)

March 10: Vice-president Carlos Lage Davila left for Chile heading the Cuban delegation to the inauguration of Chilean President-elect Michelle Bachelet. Cuba and Chile reestablished diplomatic relations in 1995 after ties were broken following the fascist coup that overthrew President Salvador Allende in September, 1973. The other members of the Cuban delegation heading for Santiago are: Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque; Deputy Foreign Minister Yilliam Jimenez Exposito; Jose Arbesu Fraga, deputy head of the Communist Party of Cuba's International Relations Department; and Alejandro Gonzalez Galiano, director for Latin America and Caribbean in the Cuban Foreign Ministry. Lage was received by President-elect Michelle Bachelet in the Andres Bello Diplomatic Academy. The meeting was conducted in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere a few hours after the island's senior official arrived in

Santiago. "We bring the warmest greetings from the people of Cuba, from our President Fidel Castro, to our brothers and sisters in solidarity, the beloved Chilean people, and our most sincere desires for the success of the elected leader Michelle Bachelet," declared the Cuban vice president. (*Granma*, 10,11/3/06)

March 10: Cuba will open embassies in four more Caribbean countries, a move that will give it a presence in most of the Caricom nations, a Cuban official said. Embassies in Antigua, St Vincent, Dominica and Suriname will open in about a month, said Alejandro Merchante Castellanos, Cuban Ambassador to the 15-member Caricom. "We will be completing all the countries of Caricom. This is a decision of our country to develop relations with all of them. The integration of the Caribbean is very important to us," he said while presenting his credentials to Caricom secretary general Edwin Carrington. (*AP*, 12/3/06)

March 10: According to local media outlets, the Medical School of Bolivia demanded that President Evo Morales order the immediate departure of 600 Cuban health care professionals who came to the country in February to attend to flood victims. The president of the institution, Fernando Arandia, said in a letter to Morales that no step had been taken to validate the medical qualifications of the Cubans and, therefore they could not practise in Bolivia. (*Reuters*, 11/3/06)

March 11: Canadian artists Jane Bunnett and Larry Cramer donated musical instruments to the Esteban Salas conservatory of Santiago de Cuba. They were accompanied by luthiers Rag Ballagh, Gary and Kevin Armstrong, who built more than 40 of the donated instruments. (*Prensa Latina*, 11/3/06)

March 12: The new Honduran government of President Manuel Zelaya granted a petition by the Cuban exile in the United States that Honduras continue to give refuge to hundreds of Cuban raft-people who come ashore on its Caribbean coast, said the consul of Tegucigalpa in Miami, Carlos Siercke. Siercke added that "the budget set aside by his government to care for the raft-people had already been spent, and (the exiles) would finance the assistance requirements of these people." (*AFP*, 13/3/06)

March 12: Members of the Mexican Navy found a group of Cuban immigrants in the isle of Contoy, north of Cancun. According to the Mexican militaries, the immigrants, ten men between, 24-53, had arrived in a raft. They were all in good health conditions. (*AFP*, 13/3/06)

March 12: The Cuban government has handed over two field hospitals to Pakistan's Islamic International Medical College Trust. Cuban Ambassador designate to Pakistan Mr. Ivan Mora Godoy signed a Memorandum of Understanding on behalf of the Cuban Government with the IIMC-T in Islamabad donating all the equipment of the field hospitals located in Hattian Bala, Azad Kashmir and Attar Shisha. (*News Pakistan*, 12/3/06)

March 13: Cuba and Uzbekistan established diplomatic relations. A Cuban delegation headed by Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Eumelio Caballero visited the Uzbek capital of Tashkent. Caballero and Uzbek Interim Minister Ilham Nematov signed a joint declaration on both nations' willingness to expand their friendship and cooperation. (*Prensa Latina*, 13/3/06)

March 14: A grieving Manitoba family is looking for more information on the death of a 21-year-old Winnipeg woman who was vacationing in Cuba. Melissa Nelson, 21, apparently fell from a fourth-floor balcony at her hotel in Varadero, a tourist hot-spot west of Havana. Her boyfriend, Manuel Ruiz, told the Winnipeg Free Press Nelson was sick after an evening of drinking at a nightclub when she fell over the balcony's waist-high railing. Nelson's uncle, Chief Terrance Nelson of the Roseau River First Nation, south of Winnipeg, says the family is devastated by the death of the young woman. Nelson said his niece was a hard-working woman who had earned a black belt in martial arts and was considering a career in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Nelson says the family wants the RCMP and the Canadian government to investigate the circumstances of Nelson's death. (*Canadian Press*, 14/3/06)

March 15: Costa Rican President-elect Oscar Arias said he was inviting all the Western Hemisphere leaders except Cuba's Fidel Castro to his inauguration. Arias, who governed Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990, is to be sworn in May 8. He told the press that he planned to invite "all the presidents from the hemisphere" except Castro because "we do not have diplomatic relations" with Cuba. Costa Rica, considered one of the best-functioning democracies in Latin America, has shunned Havana for the lack of freedom on the Communist-ruled island. (*EFE*, 15/3/06)

March 15: The administration of Chilean president Michelle Bachelet is betting on an improvement of her country's political ties with Cuba, said the Chilean ambassador to the island, Celso Moreno. "I can say that relations are very well and I will do everything possible so that they get better every day," added the diplomat shortly after presenting in Havana a cultural program in tribute to Chilean painter Roberto Matta. "Years ago, we were perhaps a little distant on the political arena," he offered. He said that the reason behind their differences was the position taken by Santiago against Cuba at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. (*AP*, 15/3/06)

March 15: Cuba warned that the resolution approving the new UN Human Rights Council, to replace the former Human Rights Commission, will not impede the superpowers' traditional maneuvers against the Third World. Rodrigo Malmierca, Cuban ambassador to the UN, noted that there was an aspiration to establish an agency that would contribute to the strengthening of the international system of promoting and protecting human rights through genuine cooperation. He stated that "despite its serious reservations and bearing in mind, above all, the requests that it has been receiving from friendly delegations, Cuba will vote for the resolution." The ambassador said that the text, approved by 170 votes in favor, four against and three abstentions, does not represent a balance of the negotiating positions, as many people wished to have believed. (*Prensa Latina, Granma Internacional*, 15/3/06)

March 15: Both the Vietnamese and the Cuban National Assembly leaders agreed that the political relations between the two countries have been fine but their economic ties have yet developed commensurately. Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon told Vietnamese National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An during their talks in Havana that the two countries should therefore promote economic, trade, investment and cultural cooperation in accordance with their political ties. The talks were held during Chairman An's ongoing visit to Cuba, which began after his tours of Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela. (*VNA*, 16/3/06)

March 15: Omara Portuondo, the Buenavista Social Club diva, put on a benefit concert in Havana leading up to the ninth edition of the Canadian Terry Fox Run. The world famous artist said that people could always count on her to help out, especially in such a beautiful and humane cause as raising funds for cancer research. (*Granma*, 17/3/06)

March 16: The last three years of intense repression against independent journalists in Cuba have not succeeded in wiping out a critical press on the communist-ruled island, Reporters Without Borders said in a report. "On March 18, 2003, an unprecedented wave of repression broke over Cuban dissidents. For three days, ninety opponents of the regime were arrested on grounds that they were 'agents of the American enemy.' Among them were twenty-seven journalists," begins the document from the Paris-based group known as RSF. [[Three years after "Black Spring"](#)] (*EFE*, 16/3/06)

March 16: Venezuela's National Assembly passed a draft resolution for the development of a cultural agreement with Cuba. According to Prensa Latina news agency, the bill includes a preamble and 16 articles aimed at consolidating the front of intellectuals and artists from both countries who are fighting against international neo-fascist and colonialist trends. Deputy Hayden Pirela Sanchez, with the Quinta Republica Movement said the bill falls within Venezuela's current foreign policy directives related to Latin American integration. (*AIN*, 16/3/06)

March 16: In a Bundestag (lower chamber of the German Parliament) debate over the human rights situation in Cuba, there was a fierce exchange of blows between the Left Group and the four other Bundestag Groups. Deputies of the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union), the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), the

FDP (Free Democratic Party), and the Greens expressed sharp criticism of the Left Party's position on the human rights violations under Fidel Castro. In response, Left Deputy Michael Leutert accused the other groups of not being interested at all in the people of Cuba. Rather, they want to "make" the Left Group "look like a fool," he said. The reason for the debate was a resolution by the European Parliament, where three of the Left Party deputies voted in favor of a condemnation of Cuba for gross violation of human rights. (*DDP*, 18/3/06)

March 16: Some 50 people gathered outside the Cuban Embassy in Prague to protest against the imprisonment of Cuban dissidents by the regime of Fidel Castro. The demonstration opened a three-day event that the People in Need NGO organized which commemorates the 3rd anniversary of political repressions in March 2003 when 75 representatives of the political opposition were arrested in Cuba. Jiri Knitl from People in Need read an open letter addressed to Castro in which they call on him to release the political prisoners who often have health problems. The embassy did not react in any way, only loud music was heard through the opened windows of the building. (*CTK*, 16/3/06)

March 17: Delegations from Panama and Cuba, headed by Vice President and Foreign Minister, Samuel Lewis Navarro and Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, respectively, put in a day of intense work. The sessions ended with the signature of important agreements that, in the words of the Minister Perez Roque, certainly constitute a landmark in the relationships and pave the way for increased exchanges between both countries. Following an exchange on the state of affairs in the respective nations, topics of bilateral interest were analyzed, such as the increment of trade and tourism and others like air and marine transport were identified. Of the two documents signed by Perez Roque and Lewis Navarro, the first one establishes a mechanism of inter-ministerial consultations on foreign policy issues, and the other provides for the exemption of visas for holders of diplomatic, official, consular, special and service passports. The visitor assessed the discussions and agreements signed as a step forward in a relationship that he described as extremely important for Panama. (*Granma*, 18/3/06)

March 17: Fidel Castro welcomed Vietnamese Parliament Speaker Nguyen Van An, who is heading a large business and government delegation on a visit to the island. Van An passed on the Cuban leader warm greetings sent by Vietnam's top leadership and party, as well as an early special congratulation for his coming 80-years birthday. The talks were especially friendly, in accordance with the profound relations between the two countries, Cuba's Granma daily highlighted. Parliament Speaker Ricardo Alarcon, and Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Marcos Rodriguez attended the meeting for the Cuban side. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/3/06)

March 17: Politicians from both the government and opposition parties have locked themselves closed in a symbolical prison at Prague's Wenceslas Square in support of Cuban dissidents. They supported a campaign by the group People in Need which will highlight the third anniversary of political repressions in Cuba. In March 2003, 75 representatives of Cuban opposition were arrested. A part of the sentence for Cuban dissidents has been "served" by Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda (the Christian Democrats, KDU-CSL), Mirek Topolánek, the chairman of the opposition Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Alexandr Vondra, a former diplomat and ambassador to the USA, and film directors Vaclav Marhoul and Otakaro Schmidt. The campaign was watched by about 30 people who could sign an open letter to Fidel Castro. In it, the activists ask for the release of the opponents of the regime who are often in a bad health condition. (*CTK*, 17/3/06)

March 17: Panamanian Vice President Samuel Lewis Navarro is visiting Cuba to discuss cooperation, a proposed Latin American Summit in Panama and that of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Havana next September. Lewis, who is also Panama's Foreign Minister, told the local press that relations with Cuba are growing in importance. Bilateral relations have recovered, the high-ranking official said, after they fell to a critical point with the prior Panamanian administration. (*Prensa Latina*, 17/3/06)

March 17: The most recent report by Amnesty International on the situation of human rights in Cuba highlights an increase of the attacks against fundamental freedoms in the island, and “urges the Cuban authorities to unconditionally and immediately free all prisoners of conscience”. “ On 22 July 2005 approximately 30 people were arrested as they tried to participate in a peaceful demonstration outside the French Embassy in Havana, to demand the release of political prisoners in Cuba. Nine of them remain in detention without charges. Amnesty International believes that at least four of those arrested in July 2005 are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, association and assembly. All the prisoners remain detained without trial or any formal charges. Although not charged, they are reportedly being held in maximum security prisons outside Havana”, the report says. [[Cuba: fundamental freedoms still under attack](#)] (*El Nuevo Herald*, 26/3/06)

March 17: Some of the former emigrants heading back to their Spanish homeland with the aid of the government in Madrid say they're particularly happy about the trip because if they don't do it now, they probably never would. Carrying with them memories of a country that in most cases they left behind decades ago, this group of elderly Spaniards - many of whom came to live in Cuba after fleeing civil conflict in their native land - is to arrive for a brief visit to Spain in April. The travelers, a total of 206 among those born in Spain and their family members, are beneficiaries of a program run by Spain's Institute of Migrations and Social Services, which for a decade has allowed Spanish emigrants over the age of 65 and with limited financial resources to return to Spain for a few weeks. According to figures from Spain's embassy in Havana, some 3,000 Cuban residents receive annual financial assistance totaling more than \$6 million from the Spanish government. (*EFE*, 17/3/06)

March 18: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque travelled to Egypt and Algeria to officially invite their presidents to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit Havana will host next September. Perez Roque is also slated to visit Sudan, where he will attend the Summit of the Heads of State of the Arab League between March 26 and 27. Cuba was invited to the Arab summit to brief participants about preparations of the NAM meeting, which brings together 114 countries. (*Prensa Latina*, 18/3/06)

March 18: Panamanian Health Minister Camilo Alleyne asserted his government is preparing to honourably host the Operation Miracle, a Cuba-Venezuela spearheaded project of free ophthalmology attention to poor Latin American communities. "Within one month and a half or two months we will open the venue of the Operation Miracle to contribute to the social integration of Latin America," stated Alleyne, who gave thanks for Cuba's healing of 917 Panamanian with eye afflictions since November 2005. (*Prensa Latina*, 18/3/06)

March 19: Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel acknowledged that Caracas has "political, constitutional and social" differences with Cuba and Iran, but it maintains relations with those countries because doing so is in the interest of Venezuela. "We have differences of a political, constitutional (and) social nature, but there are also things that seem interesting to us. For example, we're all interested in things having to do with health and education in Cuba, which has also been acknowledged by the United Nations, and with Iran's industrial development," he said. (*EFE*, 19/3/06)

March 19: A graphic report in the Colombian news magazine Cambio, claimed that the Cuban ambassador to Colombia was at the center of an espionage network. According to the magazine, the Colombian government was only informed by the US that the Cuban ambassador José Antonio Pérez Novoa, was a spy sent to destabilize the country last week. Pérez Novoa has been in Bogotá since November 2005. Cambio's story implies that the US is long on innuendo but short on fact. Indeed, several sources in the Colombian foreign ministry argue that the US theories about Pérez Novoa are ridiculous. (*Latinnews Daily* , 20/3/06)

March 20: A cruise ship rescued five Cuban immigrants close to the coast of Bahamas, the US Coast Guard said. The ship, from the Norwegian Cruise Line fleet, handed the immigrants over to the Bahamian authorities, the spokeswoman for the US Coast Guard, Dana Warr, said. (*The Miami Herald*, 27/3/06)

March 20: The practice of journalism is dangerous in much of Latin America, but no nation in the hemisphere sees the sort of systematic official repression of independent news gatherers that prevails in Cuba, the Inter American Press Association said in Quito, Ecuador. Cuba "continues to be the most repressive nation in this hemisphere, with little possibility of change under the regime of Fidel Castro," IAPA said in the final declaration from its midyear conference in Quito. The island's Communist government is currently holding 25 independent journalists behind bars, in conditions so awful that a number of the prisoners have resorted to hunger strikes. Another newsman, Mario Enrique Mayo, was released from prison into house arrest, but only after mutilating himself with a knife in a desperate bid to get medical attention. (*EFE, 20/3/06*)

March 20: The Colombian government denied having received a CIA report from the United States about the actions of Cuba's envoy to Bogota favoring the governments of Venezuela and Bolivia. The Colombian foreign ministry issued a communique denying the story published in Cambio magazine that such a report had been delivered by US envoy to Bogota William Wood. Neither Foreign Minister Carolina Barco nor Ambassador in Cuba Julio Londoño "has received any report from the US Embassy in Colombia concerning the activities of Ambassador (Jose Antonio) Perez Novoa before his accreditation in Colombia or during his stay in the country," said the statement. "It is not the policy of the Colombian government to get into grading the behavior of foreign governments' representatives with regard to the duties they carried out earlier, when those (activities) in no way affect the interests of Colombia or the principles of non-intervention in internal affairs," the communique continued. The foreign ministry recalled "the atmosphere of cordiality and understanding that characterizes all areas of the relations between" Colombia and Cuba. (*EFE, 20/3/06*)

March 20: Bolivia's new Socialist president traveled to the eastern town of Camiri to kick off a mass literacy drive that enjoys the support of the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. Evo Morales was joined by the education ministers of Bolivia, Felix Patzi, of Cuba, Luis Ignacio Gomez, and of Venezuela, Aristobulo Isturiz. In his speech, the president thanked Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro for the cooperation they have provided on the campaign and he compared the advances those countries have made in education with that achieved in the United States. He added that he had always considered Chavez and Castro to be his ideological allies against US "imperialism." The centers will teach people to read and write using the "Yo, si puedo" (Yes, I can) audiovisual method created by Cuban pedagogue Leonela Relys and used in Venezuela from 2003-2005 and in 13 countries throughout the Americas, as well as in New Zealand, for which an English-language version of it was created. Cuba sent to Bolivia 24 experts in applying the method, as well as 10,000 televisions, VCRs and training manuals, as well as 270,000 videotapes with the classes on them and 200,000 readers for 10,000 instruction centers. The value of the aid has been calculated at about \$15 million, said Gomez. Gomez recalled that the support of Cuban advisers and technical means for the Bolivian literacy campaign was signed by Presidents Evo Morales and Fidel Castro during Morales' visit to Havana on December 30, then as president-elect of his country. (*EFE, Prensa Latina, 20/3/06*)

March 21: Calling them a "disgusting lie" and a "coarse canard," the Cuban Foreign Ministry rejected accusations against the Cuban ambassador in Bogota, José Antonio Pérez Novoa, of allegedly pursuing a "secret agenda" on behalf of Bolivia and Venezuela. In a press release carried by the official daily "Granma," the Foreign Affairs Ministry rejected "each and every lie" contained in an article published last March 18 th by the Colombian magazine "Cambio", accusing Ambassador Pérez of helping organize "spy networks." [[Declaración del MINREX](#)] (*EFE, 21/3/06*)

March 21: A Cuban legislative delegation attended a meeting of the Latin American Parliament (PARLATINO) Legal Committee in Brazil, with the main goal of ratifying support to Mexico against US discriminatory migration policy and its border wall. The Cuban mission from the Permanent Committee for Constitutional and Legal Affairs of the Assembly of People's Power is led by vice chair Elba Martinez. The meeting will hear Mexico's demand for a structured migratory legislation. Cuban solidarity with Mexico was expressed in advance by Parliament Speaker Ricardo Alarcon in a letter to his counterpart of the Mexican House of Representatives, Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga. (*Prensa Latina, 21/3/06*)

March 21: Three fishermen from Yucatan and Nuevo León under arrest in Cuba since May, 2005 will stand trial “starting next April 12,” accused of illegal human trafficking, while another Mexican has just been arrested in Havana under similar charges, reported the Ambassador of Mexico to Cuba, José Ignacio Piña. The ambassador also pointed out that the Mexican embassy in Cuba will seek to attend the proceedings that will reportedly take place in Cienfuegos. (*Milenio*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, was received by the President of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, with whom he spoke on topics related to bilateral relations. The Minister arrived to Algiers and after a short meeting with his Algerian counterpart Mohamed Bedyoui, he was received by Bouteflika at the venue of the Presidency. In relation to Perez Roque’s visit, the Algerian Foreign Affairs Ministry noted the good relations between the two nations, and pointed to the areas in which Cuban cooperation is participating. As an example, he recalled that Cuba is helping to install an ophthalmologic clinic in Bechar province, to the south of the country, and that this facility is to be inaugurated soon. (*Granma*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Cuba “protects Iran’s right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy with appropriate safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)”, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Eumelio Caballero told the press. He stressed that, “Cuba is for peaceful settlement of all international disputes.” “Iran is a friendly country, a member of the Non-Aligned Movement,” Caballero said. “Over these years Tehran came up against countless difficulties and pressure from foreign countries, especially the United States,” he said. Washington “tried to impose on Iran economic, political and social models of development alien to its sovereign will,” Caballero said. “Cuba is against nuclear weapons proliferation,” Caballero stressed. “We firmly stand for general and complete disarmament, including nuclear disarmament.” (*Itar Tass*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Fidel Castro has reiterated his deep appreciation for the visions and ideas of the brother leader of the Libyan revolution, Al-Qadhafi, in dealing with international issues. In a letter delivered to Lybia’s leader, Castro said that his country would be honoured if the brother leader would attend the proceedings of the Non-Aligned Movement’s summit which would be held in Havana this coming September. (*JANA*, 21/3/06)

March 22: Belarusian Foreign Relations Minister Serguei Martinov expressed appreciation for the congratulatory message sent by Fidel Castro to Alexander Lukashenko on his electoral victory. The message, given by Cuban Foreign Relations Deputy Minister Eumelio Caballero, head of a delegation on an official visit to Belarussia, states that the overwhelming victory of Lukashenko illustrates the wide support of the people to his successful work as president. The letter also served to invite the Belarusian president to the 14th Summit of the Non-Aligned Countries Movement to be held in September in the Caribbean island, which expects to host delegates from 114 nations. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/3/06)

March 22: Cuba and Pakistan signed an understanding memo assuring that the tent hospitals granted by the Cuban people to that country will continue providing permanent, free health care. The document was sealed in Abbottabad city by Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, and by Pakistan army surgeon general, Lieutenant General Syed Afzal Ahmad, Cuba’s “Juventud Rebelde” newspaper reported. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/3/06)

March 22: Cuban Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, defended the importance of the Non Aligned Movement (NOAL) amidst a unipolar world, in a press conference at the end of his visit to Algeria. "In this unipolar world, with one single superpower with the highest technological and military development, we should concentrate our efforts in finding ways to fight for peace, to favor multilateralism, and for a world where international law is respected," noted the Foreign Minister. Perez Roque said revitalizing the weakened Third World movement is the primary goal of the NOAL Summit to be held in Havana. Outlining the objectives of the Non Aligned Movement, Perez Roque said that its members should struggle for the respect of all religions, against all forms of discrimination, for the right to development and for the sovereign equality of all states. "And we want to oppose preventive wars; the idea that one country can proclaim its right to change the regime of another; and I think that if we succeed in keeping ourselves

united, our voice will be heard and the Non Aligned Movement will be a relevant actor in international relations," he said. (*Granma*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Cuban Ambassador to Bolivia, Luis Felipe Vazquez, said that his country, as President of the Non Aligned Movement starting next September, will be supporting Bolivia's claim to have access to the sea. "We will be as solidary as we have always been in regards with Bolivia's access to the sea. The Bolivian people deserve that justice is done", Vazquez said. The Cuban diplomat participated in a ceremony to pay tribute to Bolivian hero Eduardo Albaroa, during the "Sea Day", which commemorates this country's loss of access to the sea, 127 years ago, during the war against Chile in the 19th century. (*EFE*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Costa Rican authorities detected several fake visas used by Cuban citizens trying to enter the Central American country. The Costa Rican Migration office issued a press release explaining details of the falsifications. This year, authorities have received 278 applications to enter the country from Cuban citizens, of which 95% are married to Costa Ricans. (*AP*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Trying to reach the United States, a group of 28 Cuban immigrants arrived in Honduras' Atlantic coast. The Cubans, who had left the island a week before from the southern coast of Camaguey province, arrived in Cocalito, northeast of Tegucigalpa. "We have come to find freedom, the freedom we don't have in Cuba", Arnulfo Tejada, the group leader said. Tejada, 39, is a journalist. "We couldn't stand anymore the conditions imposed by the Cuban government and decided to go to Miami, where our relatives live", Tejada said to a local radio station. (*AP*, 23/3/06)

March 23: Seven Cuban rafters, including four women and three men, arrived in Honduras' Atlantic coast. The Cuban migrants left Cuba a week before trying to reach the United States, Honduran migration authorities said. "They are in Trujillo. "And although they have claimed political asylum, their purpose is to keep on going to Miami", the Migration office's spokeswoman, Carmen Peña, told the press. (*AP*, 23/6/06)

March 24: Foreign Ministers Felipe Perez Roque, of Cuba, and Micheline Calmy-Rey, of Switzerland addressed bilateral issues and the new UN Human Rights Council, during talks in Bern. The meeting between the two foreign ministers "has helped strengthen the political dialogue between the two countries," Jean Phillippe Jonnerap, a spokesperson from the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the press. Both foreign ministers also addressed human rights issues and the new UN Human Rights Council that will replace the controversial Human Rights Commission as of June 19, 2006, *Granma* newspaper reported. (*CNA*, 24/3/06)

March 24: Eleven Cubans rafters arrived in the southern coast of Isla Mujeres, Mexico. Mexican authorities took the group to an office of the Migration National Institute, in the island. According to witnesses, the group was trying to reach a contact in Cancun who would take them to the United States. The Cubans said they had left Havana on March 18. (*Novedades Quintana Roo*, 26/3/06)

March 24: A US-owned hotel that expelled Cuban guests under pressure from the Treasury Department must pay \$112,000 in fines for violating Mexican commercial law, the Mexican government said. Mexico's Foreign Relations Department said the hotel violated national commercial laws, which bar companies from discriminating against customers because of their nationality. The Sheraton Maria Isabel Hotel, located at Mexico City's Angel of Independence monument, kicked out 16 Cuban officials attending a February 2 meeting with US oil executives after receiving a warning from the Treasury Department that it was in danger of violating a four-decade trade embargo against the regime of Fidel Castro. (*AP*, *Prensa Latina*, *The Guardian*, 25/3/06)

March 27: The press watchdog and advocacy organization Reporters Without Borders asked Cuban authorities for "a humanitarian gesture" toward journalists Guillermo Fariñas Hernandez and Juan Carlos Herrera Costa who are on a hunger strike in prison. The organization said in a communique that Fariñas Hernandez is "dying" and Herrera Costa is

"in a critical state of health." "How can we understand so much indifference towards the suffering of these two people who ask for nothing more than the freedom to write or navigate the Internet?" the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, or RSF for its initials in French, asked. The Inter American Press Association (IAPA), at its meeting in Quito earlier this month, demanded the release of all journalists imprisoned in Cuba and the end of government reprisals against independent reporters on the island. (*EFE*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Gisela Garcia Rivera, Cuba's ambassador in Jamaica, angrily closed all her government's accounts at a branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia in the Jamaican capital, ending a business relationship that had lasted a decade or more. The Cuban diplomat received a letter dated March 7 from Barrington Chisholm, manager of the Scotiabank branch on Knutsford Blvd. in Kingston, in which Chisholm said his bank is no longer willing to handle US dollar accounts for the Cubans or to carry out international financial transactions on their behalf. Frank Switzer, a Scotiabank spokesman in Toronto, told the press the company's new restrictions involving its dealings with Cuba apply not only in Jamaica but anywhere the bank does business. Andrew Hannan, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa, said the federal government is not yet prepared to make an official comment on the dispute in Jamaica between Scotiabank and the Cuban Embassy. "We are aware of the situation and are looking into it," he said. (*The Star*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo received a special message from Fidel Castro. The special envoy of Castro and Cuban Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Marco Rodriguez delivered Castro's message on preparations for the Non-Aligned Movement Summit to be hosted in Havana in September at the State House, in Abuja. Responding, President Obasanjo stressed the need to "revitalize and re-energise" the Non-Aligned Movement. (*AllAfrica*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Cuba's Foreign Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, addressed the ministerial segment of the Arab League Summit that took place in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, with the attendance of the 22 countries that form that regional bloc. Perez Roque ratified Cuba's unwavering solidarity with the just causes of the Arab nations and particularly, its steadfast support for the heroic struggle of the Palestinian people, their inalienable right to self-determination, the creation of a sovereign and independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and the unconditional return of all the Arab territories occupied by Israel since June of 1967. "This is a time where we have witnessed clear manifestations of intolerance and a lack of respect to Islam and to the Arab nations. Cuba strongly criticizes such acts," said the Cuban minister. He also expressed his country's gratitude for the Arab people's solidarity with the struggle of Cuba against the US blockade. On behalf of Fidel Castro, the foreign minister invited the dignitaries of the Arab League to be present in the 16 th Summit of the Non Aligned Movement, slated to take place in Havana September 11-16. Perez Roque made reference to the need to strengthen the Non-Aligned Movement, especially in today's world where unilateralist and hegemonic pretensions prevail in international relations. (*Granma, Prensa Latina, CAN*, 27/3/06)

March 27: Haiti's President-elect Rene Preval highly praised the collaboration of Cuba, from whence 120 Haitian doctors have graduated to return to his nation to help needy people in urban areas. Presently, 750 Haitian youth are studying in Cuba and 120 will return to their hometowns to treat people, Preval told the press in New York. Preval referred to the numerous problems of his country and the 500 workers of the health sector, and also spoke about the work of Cuban doctors, who will be gradually replaced by Haitians. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/06)

March 28: Gambian Foreign Minister, Lamin Kabba Bajo, arrived in Havana on an official visit following an invitation by Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Perez Roque. This is the second time that the Gambian foreign minister visits Cuba, within the framework of the excellent ties of friendship and cooperation that exist between this African nation and Cuba. Lamin Kabba Bajo will be also presiding over an important delegation of his country that will be participating in the Sixth Session of the Gambia-Cuba Intergovernmental Mixed Commission, set to meet in Havana. (*Granma*, 28/3/06)

March 29: Cuba was re-elected to the vice presidential position of the Board of Directors of the Association of Caribbean States' Ministerial Council during its 11th Ministerial Meeting. Cuban Ambassador and ACS representative Sergio Oliva Guerra told Prensa Latina that the Board of Directors, which will be presided over by Guatemala next year, re-elected Cuba and also selected Cuba to chair the ACS Special Transport and Special Budget and Administration committees. The Cuban delegation was headed by Cuban assistant minister Rafael Daussa and Edilia Prince, director for Latin America, of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and Angel Socarras, official of the Cuban Transport Ministry and new ACS transport chair. (*Prensa Latina*, 29/3/06)

March 30: Members of the Venezuela-Cuba Friendship Parliament Group started a visit to Havana to tighten bilateral ties. The visit will allow for exchange of legislative information and cooperation on common issues, official daily newspaper Granma stated. The Speaker of the Venezuelan Parliament, Nicolas Maduro, is heading the Venezuelan delegation. The gathering will also analyze the ALBA integration project (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), US aggression and interventionist policy, Washington's economic and financial embargo on Cuba and the release of five Cubans imprisoned in US jails. The inter-parliamentary cooperation between the two nations and their coordination in international forum will also be an item for discussions, including Latin American integration policy and collaboration experiences between Cuba and Venezuela. (*El Universal, Prensa Latina*, 31/3/06)

March 30: The Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) said in its latest annual report that Fidel Castro's Communist-ruled government continued to exercise "tight control over (the island's) independent journalists, regarding them as counter-revolutionaries". IPI said that Cuban security forces in 2005 "systematically monitored, harassed or detained" independent journalists who had not been arrested during a huge 2003 crackdown on the dissident press. [[2005 Country Reports: Cuba](#)] (*EFE*, 30/3/06)

March 30: Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban parliament, traveled to Kingston to attend the inauguration of Portia Simpson as Jamaica's first woman prime minister. Before becoming prime minister, Simpson, 60, held the post of minister of Labor, Social Welfare, Tourism and Sports and is known as one of Jamaica's most popular political figures in recent years, reported Prensa Latina. (*Granma*, 31/3/06)

March 31: A former governor of the Chilean 8th Region and former minister during Salvador Allende's government has been appointed ambassador to Havana. Jaime Tohá González is the person selected by president Michelle Bachelet to occupy the diplomatic post in Cuba. Although the Chilean chancellery has not yet confirmed Tohá's nomination, government sources indicated that his name has been already presented to the Cuban government. Considered a socialist hard liner, Tohá will assume his post at a moment in which relations between the two countries have been weakened by Chile's stance regarding resolutions on Cuba at the UN Human Rights Commission. (*La Tercera*, 31/3/06)

March 31: "Sahrawi children who are sent to Cuba followed military training and courses on making explosives," testified one of the Cuban former officials, who made documentaries on the inhumane conditions of the Sahrawi children in Cuba. Some former Cuban senior officials confessed that children, who were snatched from their parents in Tindouf camps and deported to Cuban "Youth Island" (Isla de Pinos), endured ill-treatment. "These children followed military training and courses on the making of explosives," said former Cuban instructor, Dariel Alarcon. Dariel Alarcon, known as "Benigno", testified in a documentary entitled "Cuba and Polisario Front: crime partners" that he was in charge of making Sahrawi children, barely nine years old, undergo a military training. (*Morocco Times*, 1/4/06)

March 31: Carolina Barco Isakson, the foreign minister of Colombia, arrived in Havana for a working visit. The distinguished guest traveled accompanied by two other cabinet members, Jorge Humberto Botero, minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism; and Luis Ernesto Mejia Castro, minister of Energy and Mines. During her stay in Cuba, the Colombian official will hold talks on topics of bilateral interest with her Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque. The two foreign ministers are expected to discuss both regional and international matters. (*Granma*, 31/3/06)

March 31: Fidel Castro met with Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco at the Palace of the Revolution. Minister Barco was accompanied by Humberto Botero, minister of Trade, Industry and Tourism; Luis Ernesto Mejia Castro, Energy and Mining minister; the Colombian High Commissioner for Peace, Dr. Luis Carlos Restrepo; and Colombian Ambassador to Cuba, Julio Londoño. During the encounter the issues discussed included bilateral relations between Cuba and Colombia, the economy and international politics. On behalf of her government, Carolina Barco expressed gratitude for Cuba's support to the peace process in Colombia, and conveyed a personal message from President Alvaro Uribe. Prior to the meeting with Castro, the Colombian delegation held talks with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque at the Foreign Ministry. (*Granma*, 31/3/06)

Terrorism

March 4: The United States defence department has at last released the names and nationalities of hundreds of the inmates detained at its Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba. The names, which are buried within 6,000 pages of documents posted on the Pentagon's website, have been made public after a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the Associated Press. (*Scotsman.Com*, *AP*, 4/3/06)

Security

March 8: A top-level Chinese military delegation, led by Lieutenant General Peng Xiaofeng, political commissary of the People's Liberation Army, has been visiting Cuba since March 4, *Granma* newspaper reported. Peng and his accompanying group were welcomed by the vice minister of the Cuban Chiefs of Staff, Alvaro Lopez Miera. The Chinese military delegation's agenda includes visiting military schools and units and meeting with chiefs, officials and teaching staffs (*Prensa Latina*, *Reuters*, 8/3/06)

March 20: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez warned that if US troops were to invade any Latin American country, "revolutionaries" from across the region would join forces to battle the Americans. Chavez's remark in a speech confirmed what many in Venezuela have long presumed: that his government would go to the aid of a close ally like Cuba in the hypothetical scenario of the US sending troops. Although US officials often dismiss his claims as outlandish, Chavez insists his country must be on guard to face any potential US military attack. Washington also has said repeatedly it has no plans to attack Cuba. The Venezuelan leader said the US "should know that if it wants or someday decides (...) to invade any of our countries - be it Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, today, tomorrow or the next day - we would be there gathering together the revolutionaries to do battle with weapons in hand against US imperialism." (*AP*, 21/3/06)

US-Cuba Relations

March 1: Reverend Lucius Walker, head of the US religious-solidarity organization Pastors for Peace, arrived in Havana heading a group of nine young Americans who will study medicine in the Latin American School of Medicine for free; this adds to the more than 80 US citizens who are already studying there. (*AIN*, 1/3/06)

March 1: A group of Cuban migrants who reached an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys in January only to be sent back to their homeland began preparing to legally travel to the United States after a US judge ruled they could return.

The 15 men, women and children were completing applications for Cuban passports and had scheduled a meeting at the US Interests Section in Havana. It was not clear, however, whether the island's communist government would allow them to leave. (AP, 1/3/06)

March 1: In a press release issued by the office of US Senator Mel F. Martinez (Republican-Florida), the senator applauded the decision of a federal judge allowing 15 Cubans to return to the US. The Cubans had reached the Old Seven Mile bridge in the Keys, but since the bridge was no longer linked to land, the Coast Guard ruled that the Cubans had not reached US soil and took them back to Cuba. "I applaud Judge Federico Moreno's decision. I wish our policy could have reflected this judgment before the victims in this case were sent back to a nation controlled by a dictator", Martinez said. "This ruling is further evidence that we need to review the wet foot/dry foot policy. We also need to broaden the discussion to encompass the Migration Accords. It's unilaterally violated by Cuba while we observe the most painful part of it". (US Fed News, 1/3/06)

March 1: During 2005 drug seizures in Cuba declined to their lowest level in ten years, according to a report released by the US Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, says that the Cuban government reported the seizure of 2,477 kilograms of illicit narcotics, which included 2,194 kilograms of marijuana, 282 kilograms of cocaine, 2,579 plants of marijuana and 19,197 marijuana seeds. "Cuban officials profess their interest in developing with the US government bilateral agreements to combat drug trafficking, terrorism and the trafficking of migrants; however, such agreements are not possible until the Cuban regime abandons its totalitarian character and its role as a state sponsor of terrorism", the reports said. [[International Narcotics Control Strategy Report](#)] (EFE, 1/3/06)

March 2: Cuban academics hoping to attend a gathering of Latin America experts in Puerto Rico were denied visas by the American government, marking the latest in the current US administration's trend of shutting out Cubans. Some 55 philosophers, economists, and historians were told they'd be unable to travel to this month's Latin American Studies Association congress in San Juan. Visa requests for four academics were still pending, said Sheryl Lutjens, an American political science professor at Northern Arizona University. "These people represent strong scholars who think critically and who are often experts in their area where there are no others," said Lutjens, who co-chairs the association's Cuba section and is currently visiting the country. "This is alarming." Academic exchange between Cuba and the United States has diminished over the last two years since the administration of President Bush started tightening long-standing trade and travel regulations against the island's communist government. (AP, 2/3/06)

March 2: The regime of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro is renewing its attacks on free speech in Cuba, warns a press advocacy group called the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA). In a statement, the Miami-based group said the Castro regime "continues using perverse methods to silence critical voices and gag any slight attempt at freedom of expression" in Cuba. The group said it has received in recent weeks complaints from a number of Cuban independent journalists who say they have been subjected to harassment by the staging of neighborhood "repudiation" rallies outside their homes. Holding such rallies, said the IAPA, is a technique used by Cuba's state security apparatus "in an attempt to intimidate and demoralize those who dissent from the official political line." Part of the Castro regime's official wave of repression has been the harassment of journalists Oscar Espinosa Chepe and Jorge Olivera Castillo, said the IAPA. The two journalists were paroled from jail because of health problems after they had been imprisoned in March 2003 along with 73 other people, among them dissidents and independent journalists. The IAPA also reported the Castro regime's harassment of numerous other independent journalists in Cuba. (USINFO, 7/3/06)

March 2: In a rare display of cooperation between two generally antagonistic nations, soldiers from the US Southern Command (Southcom) provided assistance to five Cuban doctors injured in an auto accident in Honduras. Southcom, which is based in Miami, said its personnel treated the Cuban doctors after the accident near the Soto Cano air base in Palmerola. "Soldiers and Airmen provided immediate medical treatment to four Cuban citizens injured in the accident and air-evacuated the victims to a Tegucigalpa hospital for further medical care," Southcom said in a statement. The

doctors, who are in Honduras on a medical mission, were traveling from Tegucigalpa to Comayagua when the accident occurred, Southcom said. All the injured Cuban doctors reportedly were recovering. (*EFE*, 2/3/06)

March 2: Cuba is moving to develop its offshore oil and gas resources, which would result in development closer to Florida's coast than the US government allows, Representative John E. Peterson (Republican-Pennsylvania) warned. "Offshore oil and natural gas drilling, sanctioned by the Cuban government, occurs within 60 miles of Florida's southern borders. Moreover, the drilling potential within the existing Cuban basin is such that oil wells will, in the near future, be as close as 35-40 miles from the Florida keys," he said. The island nation cannot develop its offshore energy resources itself, so it enlisted the help of Canadian, Chinese, Indian, Spanish, Venezuelan, and Norwegian companies, Peterson said. With their help, Cuba has pumped \$1.7 billion into its energy industry since 2004, he said at a breakfast sponsored by Dow Chemical Co. and The Hill newspaper. The proposed 5-year Outer Continental Shelf leasing plan being developed by the US Minerals Management Service and a bill before the US Senate would establish a 100-mile oil and gas leasing buffer off Florida's coast. Most of the state's congressional delegation supports another bill that its two US senators, Republican Mel Martinez and Democrat Bill Nelson, introduced on February 1 that would effectively push new offshore exploration 260 miles from Tampa Bay. "Any way you slice it, Cuba, with the help of its foreign enablers, is drilling closer to sovereign American property than we are," Peterson said. (*Oil & Gas Journal*, 2/3/06)

March 2: Thirty-one US-bound Cuban emigrants died when the overcrowded boat in which they were traveling capsized some 20 miles off the coast, Havana television reported. Three people survived the tragedy, which supposedly took place in late December but was not reported by Cuban TV until now. A Cuban TV channel put together an extensive news report on the tragedy, one of the island's most serious ocean accidents in recent years. Local TV did not specify the date of the shipwreck, but sources said it happened at the end of December when 34 Cubans boarded a speedboat to try and get to the United States illegally. Daysel Alfaro Blanco, one of the three survivors, said in the TV report that the boat only had the capacity for 10 people. Some 20 miles off the coast, she said, the boat began to have engine and steering problems and then drifted without power until it finally capsized. "When it turned over, there were 14 of us hanging onto the boat, and everyone was very nervous and they started to drown. Many had heart attacks, and the others couldn't take it anymore and (let go)," she said. (*EFE*, 2/3/06)

March 3: Jose Ramon Fernandez, president of the Cuban Olympic Committee, said he hoped the team representing the island in the inaugural World Baseball Classic will play at the level the Cuban people expect of it. Cuba named its final 30-man roster for the event, baseball's equivalent of the World Cup. "The team is very good, has a spirit of cooperation and (...) fair play, with a blend of youth and experience and an enormous desire to give their all in the event," Fernandez said. Fernandez, who is also vice president of the Communist-ruled island's Council of Ministers, said the fact the roster was announced "means there are no problems with visas." The Bush administration on January 20 reversed an earlier ruling and said Cuba may play in the Classic, with the money from the event that would have gone to Havana to be donated, as suggested by the Castro regime, to a Hurricane Katrina relief fund. (*EFE*, 3/3/06)

March 4: A top Cuban official blamed the United States for the predicament of a group of migrants sent back home after reaching an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys. The US government said the bridge did not count as dry land because chunks of it are missing and it no longer connects to US soil -- and it sent back the 15 men, women and children in January. Parliament Speaker Ricardo Alarcon criticized the US "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy. Under the policy, Cubans who reach US soil are generally allowed to stay, while those stopped at sea are returned. It encourages illegal and dangerous immigration, Alarcon told journalists. "Ask them if one has to risk their life, going to strange places like the bridge, to make a judge order (the US government) to grant a visa?" he said. The fate of the 15 who reached the bridge was not clear. The migrants were completing applications for Cuban passports, and had a meeting scheduled at the US Interests Section in Havana. Alarcon declined to say whether the island's communist government would allow them to leave. (*AP*, 4/3/06)

March 6: More than 100 members of Congress have signed a letter to Treasury Secretary John Snow questioning changes in his department's rules that have halted the ability of some religious organizations to travel to Cuba. "We understand the complicated political reality that exists between the United States and Cuban governments," reads the March 3 letter spearheaded by Representatives James P. McGovern (Democrat-Massachusetts), Jeff Flake (Republican-Arizona) and Barbara Lee (Democrat-California). "However, we believe it is inappropriate and unacceptable for politics and government to serve as a hurdle and now as a barrier to faith-based connections between individuals. If anything, these connections foster greater religious freedom in Cuba and contribute to a severely-lacking free-flowing exchange of ideas between the two countries," the letter states. The concerns addressed in the three-page letter with 105 signatories are also scheduled to be the subject of a Capitol Hill meeting on March 15 among politicians, administration officials and religious leaders. Affected groups include the National Council of Churches, the American Baptist Churches USA and the Alliance of Baptists -- which no longer have licenses -- and organizations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) whose Cuban travel has new restrictions. Some of these groups have traveled to Cuba for more than a decade to meet with partner churches and attend conferences in the communist island nation. (*The Washington Post*, 6/3/06)

March 8: A leading association of scholars devoted to Latin American studies and based at the University of Pittsburgh is asking the US government to rethink its decision to bar Cuban scholars from the group's convention. The visa denials cover 55 participants from that country who were to attend the Latin American Studies Association's International Congress in San Juan, Puerto Rico on March 15-18. They are the latest in a long line of athletes, academics and others from Cuba and the United States who have seen their travel plans between the two countries blocked by Washington amid ongoing tension with Fidel Castro's Communist government. In a letter to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the association said its mission is to "foster intellectual discussion, research and teaching on Latin America" that promotes better understanding and civic engagement. "Our ability to fulfill this mission is seriously compromised by the systematic denial of visas to our Cuban colleagues," the letter stated. The letter, dated February 28, was signed by leaders including association President Sonia E. Alvarez, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It was resubmitted to Washington with the names of 1,534 member scholars, according to staff at the association's Pitt headquarters. (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8/3/06)

March 8: The speaker of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcon, termed the US administration program known in Cuba as "the Bush Plan", as annexionist and genocidal. Speaking at the Jose Marti Anti-Imperialist Tribune, the legislative leader spoke against the US scheme for an alleged transition in Cuba. He pointed out that President George W. Bush recently threatened to update the document, which was presented in 2004 by a commission led by then Secretary of State Colin Powell. "We will never return to the past; this country, its men, women and children will never go back to that system of dishonor, discrimination, and misery that Bush has proposed to impose on Cuba with his plan of occupation," said Alarcon. (*Prensa Latina, Granma*, 9/3/06)

March 8: Six undocumented Cuban migrants arrived on Mona Island, an uninhabited islet that lies between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico and is part of the territory of this US commonwealth, authorities said. Sgt. Jose Luis Rivera Morales said that the migrants - three men, a woman and two children - were in good health. The preliminary police report said the Cubans were dropped off on the island by the owners of a boat operating from the Dominican Republic. Traffickers frequently bring Cuban migrants to Mona, taking advantage of Washington's "wet foot, dry foot" policy, which mandates that Cubans who reach US soil may remain and apply for permanent residence while those intercepted at sea are generally returned to their homeland. A dozen Cubans reached Mona Island the day before, and a party of 23 arrived there on February 24. It is now common for the Cubans who come to Mona to contact family members already in Puerto Rico - presumably by cellphone - so the latter can alert authorities to retrieve the migrants. (*EFE*, 8/3/06)

March 8: The United States denounced the human rights records of familiar foes Cuba and Venezuela in an annual report that noted improvements in Colombia, Washington's top Latin American ally. The US State Department's human

rights report charged that the record of Fidel Castro's communist regime "remained poor," while the Venezuelan government was criticized for its treatment of the media and political opponents. Havana's "human rights record remained poor, and the government continued to commit numerous, serious abuses," the report said. "At least 333 Cuban political prisoners and detainees were held at year's end." Cuban citizens were denied the right to change their government, while "government-recruited mobs" frequently harassed political opponents, it said. Detainees, including human rights activists, were beaten and abused with impunity, the report said. [[Country Reports on Human Rights: Cuba](#)] (AFP, 8/3/06)

March 8: The top American diplomat in Cuba lashed out at what he called "a sinister wave of repression" on the island by the Castro government during a press conference timed to coincide with the release of the US State Department's annual Human Rights Report. Michael E. Parmly, chief of the US Interests Section, said the Cuban government continued to engage in "systematic violations of fundamental rights," and continued to sponsor mob actions designed to squelch dissent. "Acts of repudiation are occurring all over the country," said Parmly. "When a government-mobilized mob gathers at the home of a free-thinking Cuban and offers hateful chants, threats or violence, the victim suffers enormously, as do family members." There was no immediate response from the Cuban government, which in the past has ignored such reports. [[Statement by COM Michael E. Parmly](#)] (*Sun Sentinel*, 9/3/06)

March 10: Security workers confiscated posters from fans at the World Baseball Classic, the day after an anti-Castro sign appeared in the stands of a Cuba-Netherlands game, provoking an international incident. The controversy has escalated with the velocity of a major league fastball since a spectator raised a sign saying "Down with Fidel" behind home plate -- an image beamed live to millions of TV viewers, including those in Cuba. Private security officials confiscated all posters from spectators entering Hiram Bithorn Stadium for the Cuba-Puerto Rico game, including one showing a Puerto Rican player hitting a baseball that bore the image of Fidel Castro's head. But a top police official said his officers would not enforce the ban. "I have been clear that here there is freedom of expression and the police of Puerto Rico will not interfere at any time with any type of expression," Puerto Rico Police Chief Pedro Toledo said. (AP, 11/3/06)

March 10: Several hundred people, most of them young and members of various athletic teams, rallied in front of the US Interests Section in Havana to protest what the Castro government has called "the cynical counter-revolutionary provocations" aimed at the nation's baseball team during the World Baseball Classic round in Puerto Rico. The gathering was prompted by a scuffle that erupted in the stands during Cuba's 11-2 win over the Netherlands when a demonstrator held up a sign reading, "Abajo Fidel," which means "Down with Fidel." Among several speakers at the protest was Olga Ledia Castillo Fernandez, the mother of Cuba's 21-year-old slugger Yulieski Gourriel. She sent "kisses and hugs" to her son and then urged the team "to continue firmly moving toward victory." The Cuban government, in a front-page editorial in the communist party daily Granma, accused US and Puerto Rican authorities of supporting the anti-Castro protesters. (*Sun Sentinel*, 11/3/06)

March 10: As the Bush administration reviews the controversial wet-foot, dry-foot policy, US Senator Mel Martinez said the best solution would be to bring all Cuban migrants to land and then determine if they can migrate to the United States or go back to the island. "You bring them to land (...) everybody's dry-foot, and then you deal with them in a fair and open way," Martinez said at a news conference at the Biltmore Hotel. "I think that the human rights violations that are seen in Cuba make it immoral for us to be repatriating Cubans the way we are doing now." It's crucial for the government to undertake reforms to US-Cuba migration policy to make it more humanitarian and to serve the interests of the United States, he said. The United States should avoid another embarrassing Cuba migration episode, he said, such as the one that took place in January when 15 Cuban migrants found on an old bridge in the Florida Keys were sent back to Cuba because the Coast Guard decided that the unattached bridge did not constitute dry land. (*The Miami Herald*, 11/3/06)

March 11: A delegation of 18 faculty members, staff and students from Southern Illinois University will head to Cuba for a nine-day visit -- the school's second official trip to the country. SIU Edwardsville Chancellor Vaughn Vandegrift and SIU Carbondale's Larry Dietz, a vice chancellor, will be leading the delegation. Officials said they hope to cultivate relationships that lead to more faculty and student exchanges as well as potential collaborations in areas such as health care, biotechnology, public policy, agriculture, architecture and theater. For about a decade, SIU has had a special license from the US Department of the Treasury to allow research and education-related trips to Cuba, said John Haller, vice president of academic affairs. SIU is one of only four US universities to have such a license, he said. (*St. Louis Post*, 11/3/06)

March 13: The Senate passed a resolution that proposes a study of the socio-economic impact on Puerto Rico of the "possible return" of Cuba to the community of democratic countries with a free economy. The piece of legislation also proposes to look into the role of the Puerto Rican industrial and commercial sectors, as well as the Puerto Rican managerial and professional class in the Cuban reconstruction, and recommends the creation of a "Puerto Rican Institute for the Cuban Reconstruction." (*EFE*, 13/3/06)

March 14: The Cuban government is preventing more than 500 Cubans with visas from leaving the country, the Miami Herald reported. Among the 553 Cubans seeking to come to the United States are senior government or military officials, who the Castro government reportedly views as defectors, said officials at the US mission in Havana. Cuban authorities require citizens with visas to also get an exit visa before leaving the country. "Although the government allows the departure of people classified as immigrants or who have refugee status in other countries, thousands of citizens who received documents to travel abroad were denied authorization to leave last year," says a report issued by the US State Department. (*UPI, El Nuevo Herald*, 13/3/06)

March 14: The latest Cuban emigrants - a group of 10 - arrived at Isla Mona, Puerto Rico, from the Dominican Republic. Cubans intent on leaving the Communist island for life in the United States are increasingly resorting to a circuitous route with a stop on this uninhabited Caribbean isle that, in addition to red-footed booby birds and other fascinating wildlife, has the key distinction of being US territory. Mona Island is a speck about halfway between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico that has become the new preferred port of entry for Cubans heading to the United States. Officials said several groups of Cuban emigrants have arrived in recent weeks on Mona, a natural gem measuring 40 square kilometers (about 15.5 square miles) that features a level of biodiversity that has earned it the nickname "Galapagos of the Caribbean." Police said the boat that carried the six men, three women and 5-year-old child to the island returned to the Dominican Republic. (*EFE*, 14/3/06)

March 14: The Bahamas released two Cuban dentists who had been detained on the islands for nearly a year despite having clearance to enter the US. David Gonzalez-Mejias and Marialis Darias-Mesa arrived in Florida, according to a spokesman for US Representative Connie Mack IV, a Florida Republican who had pushed for their release and threatened economic sanctions against the Bahamas. The pair were detained in the Bahamas since April 2005, when a boat carrying them and 16 other Cuban immigrants stalled in Bahamian waters. The US Coast Guard handed the immigrants over to the Bahamas, which has an agreement with Cuba calling for repatriation of Cuban nationals. Family members said the two decided to flee Cuba after Fidel Castro's government repeatedly refused to let them leave for the US -- even though they had obtained visas three years earlier allowing them to emigrate legally. Their families were permitted to leave and had settled in Cape Coral and in Tampa. Cuba has for years refused exit visas for doctors, dentists and other health professionals. (*AP*, 15/3/06)

March 15: US Senator Mel Martinez (Republican-Florida) applauded the work of the US State Department in helping to free two Cubans doctors who were being wrongfully detained in Nassau, Bahamas. The State Department announced that Drs. David Gonzalez Mejias and Marialis Darias-Mesa were released. "To escape Cuba, with US visas in hand, only to be held in prison cells was unjust and painful to watch," said Martinez. "I applaud Secretary Condoleezza Rice's response and the efforts of Ambassador John Rood in persuading the Bahamian government to do the right thing

in letting these individuals go free.” In a recent Foreign Relations Committee meeting, Senator Martinez asked Secretary of State Rice for an update on the situation of the two Cuban doctors interdicted by the US Coast Guard in Bahamian waters in April 2005 and subsequently turned over to the government of The Bahamas. (*Netfor Cuba*, 15/3/06)

March 15: Members of Congress opposed to the US embargo of Cuba are meeting with administration officials in Washington to discuss what they say are new restrictions on religious travel to Cuba, said Matthew Specht, a spokesman for Representative Jeff Flake, Republican-Arizona. Members of the Cuba Working Group are planning to meet with representatives from the departments of State and Treasury. More than 100 members of Congress and more than a dozen senators have sent letters to Treasury Secretary John Snow over the past weeks complaining about tightened restrictions on religious travel and asking for explanations. (*The Miami Herald*, 15/3/06)

March 15: A demand to put an end to the actions carried out by the United States in Iraq and other parts of the world has been signed by 420 prestigious intellectuals from 32 countries. The manifesto, being circulated internationally under the title “Stop the Hypocrisy in Human Rights”, demands the closing of the arbitrary detention centers set up by the US imperial forces. In Havana, the document was read at the Casa de las Americas by Cuban poet and writer Roberto Retamar who emphasized the support received by eight Nobel Laureates: Jose Saramago from Portugal, Nadine Gordimer from South Africa, Dario Fe from Italy, Harold Pinter from Great Britain and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria—all winners in the category for literature—; and Nobel Peace Laureates Adolfo Perez from Argentina, Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala and Mairead Corrigan Maguire from Ireland. (*Granma*, 15/3/06)

March 16: Five Cuban migrants may have died in the past two weeks trying to make it to US shores, and the Coast Guard said it repatriated to Cuba 44 migrants picked up at sea in the last few days. The Coast Guard intercepted the first group of four migrants aboard a rustic vessel 67 miles south of the Dry Tortugas on March 5. Two days later, another group of 13 migrants was found on a on an old boat 66 miles south of Marquesas. Of those, two were transferred to Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials at the Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba, the Coast Guard said. On March 8, the Coast Guard found yet another "rustic vessel" with 13 migrants aboard 72 miles south of Key West. The migrants told the Coast Guard that their motor had broken down, that they had been adrift for almost two weeks -- including nine days without food and water -- and that one older Cuban had died during the voyage. That same day, the cutter Drummond intercepted another rustic vessel with seven migrants just four miles west of Dry Tortugas. "The group of migrants stated four fellow migrants jumped overboard in an attempt to swim to land," the Coast Guard said in a news release. "The Coast Guard launched a massive 36-hour search that included the Cutter Drummond and several aircraft in response to a body found on Dry Tortugas, earlier that morning. The body found that morning is thought to be one of the four migrants who jumped overboard because the deceased migrant was found wearing a life jacket similar to those worn by the rescued migrants." (*The Miami Herald*, 16/3/06)

March 17: Cuba criticized the US offensive in northern Iraq, saying a victory sending the island's team to the World Baseball Classic semifinals had not blinded the communist government to news in the rest of the world. In an editorial titled "No Human Pain is Apart From Us," the Communist Party daily Granma said Operation Swarmer in Iraq was conducted by "men, separated from any feeling of getting along in solidarity, made into animals by war." (*CNN*, 17/3/06)

March 17: Ten years after the controversial Helms-Burton Act tightened the US trade embargo on Cuba, one of its staunchest supporters now says that some of its key passages may need to be changed. Florida Republican Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who drafted parts of the law, said he's generally pleased with Helms-Burton because it took key elements of Cuba policy out of the president's hands and thereby allowed the embargo "to survive the second four years of the Clinton administration." But the law also contains "static" - unnecessary provisions, he added. "Legislating is never a pretty process," he told the press. Diaz-Balart says he favors paring the conditions for lifting the embargo to three: Cuba must free all political prisoners and allow exiles to return, opposition political parties

must be legalized, and the government must declare it will hold democratic elections ``in six months, one year, two years, three years." Diaz-Balart made it clear that if Raul met the three conditions, he would deal with Raul. "That's what I call static," Diaz-Balart said. "I don't care what the name is. The real name is legitimacy." (*Knight Ridder*, 17/3/06)

March 17: The White House's latest National Security Strategy report listed Cuba, Venezuela and Colombia among the world's seven top trouble spots that could threaten US interests. The report identifies national security threats and suggests ways the United States should be prepared to respond. It reasserted the need to engage in preventive wars to thwart terrorists and hostile governments, a position initially stated in the 2002 report. The report casts Cuba's communist government as a regional menace, saying that in Havana ``an anti-American dictator continues to oppress his people and seeks to subvert freedom in the region." It makes only brief mentions of the Latin American countries and provides no evidence to back up the assertions. (*The Miami Herald*, 17/3/06)

March 20: Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan began a visit to Cuba. Farrakhan was welcomed by the head of the Cuban legislature, Ricardo Alarcon, the state news agency Prensa Latina reported. The US Muslim leader also is scheduled to meet with Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque and other government officials and to visit the Latin American School of Medicine. Farrakhan - known for his controversial conspiracy theories such as that the New Orleans levee was breached during Hurricane Katrina because of an intentional explosion aimed at flooding the city and "getting rid of the poor people" - will also visit an art school and meet with Cuban athletes. In addition, he will meet with relatives of the five Cuban agents sentenced by a Miami court in 2001 to prison terms of 15 years to life for espionage. (*EFE*, 20/3/06)

March 20: Two Cubans have been jailed for 10 years in the US for planning a migrant crossing which ended in the death of a six-year-old boy, prosecutors said. The boy was in a boat with nearly 30 other Cubans when the vessel overturned, trapping him underneath. The judge imposed a maximum term on Alexander Gil Rodriguez and Luis Manuel Taboada Cabrere, citing a marked increase in illegal crossings. Both admitted conspiracy to encourage aliens to enter the US illegally. (*BBC*, 20/3/06)

March 20: A federal judge has approved a settlement allowing all but one of 15 Cubans who landed on the Old Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys to enter the United States. To make the deal possible, US District Judge Federico Moreno retracted his February 28 decision that the bridge qualifies as US soil. The Department of Homeland Security has to issue entry papers to 14 of the 15 Cubans repatriated after reaching the bridge on January 4. Immigration officials will not admit Lazaro Jesus Martinez Jimenez for reasons that were not disclosed. Fidel Castro's government issued passports for the 14 rafters, which indicates that the communist government will not prevent the immigrants from returning to the United States. (*Sun Sentinel*, *Reuters*, 21/3/06)

March 21: A Carnival cruise ship was poised to turn over to the Coast Guard 28 Cuban migrants it picked up on the high seas, after having stopped in Galveston, Texas, over the weekend, Coast Guard officials said. Meanwhile, the day before, another 19 Cuban migrants made it to dry land at Sand Key, according to Border Patrol spokesman Robert Montemayor. He said 14 were at the Border Patrol office in Pembroke Pines, and five were taken to a Miami hospital to be treated for dehydration and sun exposure. As for the 28 on the cruise ship, they most likely will be repatriated to Cuba unless they can convince US officials that they face political persecution and qualify for asylum. (*The Miami Herald*, 21/3/06)

March 21: Cuba gave its baseball team a hero's welcome and said the runner-up prize money from the World Baseball Classic would go to victims of Hurricane Katrina in the United States. Fidel Castro relished the moment as a triumph over his bitter enemy, the US government, which had tried to prevent Communist Cuba from playing in the 16-nation tourney, citing four-decade-old sanctions against Havana. The Bush administration reversed that decision under pressure from the baseball world and after Cuba vowed not to take home any prize money. As runner-up, Cuba is

entitled to 7 percent of the net revenue of the tournament. "Whatever we get will be used there for the martyrs of Katrina, be it one million (dollars), two, three or four," Castro said in a speech. "The money will go there without any doubt and with great satisfaction, because it will heighten the morale of our athletes." An electronic billboard that usually flashes criticism of Cuba's one-party state from the front of the US Interests Section in Havana congratulated the players for their sterling effort in the baseball tournament. (*EFE*, 21/3/06)

March 22: A Cuban militant accused of masterminding the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner will remain in US immigration custody for the foreseeable future but efforts will continue to deport him to a country willing to accept him. Luis Posada Carriles was arrested in Miami in May after illegally entering the United States through Mexico and is being held by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in El Paso, Texas. An ICE statement obtained by the press says that Posada "will not be released from the custody of ICE at this time" and that further review was needed to determine where he could finally be sent. A federal immigration judge ruled last fall that Posada could not be deported to either Cuba or Venezuela, citing the possibility he could be tortured. That prohibition, according to the ICE statement, "does not impede ICE from removing Mr. Posada to a third country." Posada's attorney in Miami had no immediate comment on the decision. (*AP*, 22/3/06)

March 23: Venezuela's government has accused US immigration authorities of protecting a Cuban exile who Caracas wants extradited to face trial for a 1976 plane bombing that killed 73 people. The US Immigration Customs and Enforcement Agency ruled that Luis Posada Carriles, who was detained by US authorities last May after illegally slipping into the country from Mexico, would stay in custody. Caracas rejected this attempt by the United States to avoid its request for extradition of Posada, a naturalized Venezuelan and former CIA operative. "We again call on the White House to honor its international treaty obligations and either extradite or prosecute Luis Posada Carriles for 73 counts of first degree murder," the Venezuelan embassy in Washington said in a statement. (*Reuters*, 24/3/06)

March 23: Major League Baseball denied a claim by Fidel Castro that his government will donate proceeds from the World Baseball Classic to US victims of Hurricane Katrina. In a speech on March 21, Castro boasted that the Bush administration's initial attempts to bar his country from participating in the tournament had backfired, and that Cuba's take from the tournament would go to "Katrina's martyrs." Patrick Courtney, a spokesman for Major League Baseball (MLB), which helped organized the tournament, said that the Classic's agreement with the Cuban baseball federation clearly stipulated that Cuba, unlike the other 15 participating federations, would receive none of the tournament's proceeds. "To the contrary, at the insistence of the Treasury and the State Department, Cuba agreed, as a condition of its participation in the tournament, that it will not receive any direct or indirect revenues and/or prize money," Courtney wrote in an email to the Miami Herald. "Based on the agreement, Cuba doesn't have a cut of the proceeds from the tournament, and there is nothing for Cuba to donate," he added. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/06)

March 24: Cuba's prize money from the first World Baseball Classic has become a political football in Fidel Castro's 4-decade-old sparring match with the United States. Castro said he wanted to donate the money to victims of Hurricane Katrina but US officials say Cuba isn't getting any prize money. Cuba denounced "foul play" in a front-page editorial in the ruling Communist Party newspaper Granma. A Major League Baseball official said the deal that allowed Cuba to play in the tournament, which was reached in February with the US State Department and agreed to by Cuba, made it "crystal clear" that Havana would not receive any share of the profits, even for charity. There may not be any cash left over to distribute to the WBC winners because the 17-day, 39-game tournament played at seven venues in Asia and the United States cost so much, an estimated \$50 million. [[Anuncian en Miami juego sucio contra Cuba](#)] (*Reuters*, 24/3/06)

March 24: A group of Cuba migrants repatriated after reaching an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys under the "wet foot-dry foot" policy began the final paperwork to emigrate to the United States for good. Fourteen people from the original group of 15, who were returned to Cuba in January in a disputed action, each received an official US letter confirming they will receive humanitarian visas to emigrate to the United States. They include two children, ages 2 and 13. The letter, delivered during a three-hour meeting with American officials in Havana, is required to seek permission

from their own government to leave the country. Without Cuban exit permits, they cannot leave the island. "If everything goes well, we should be able to leave toward the end of next month," said 28-year-old Alexis Gonzalez Blanco, who was among those returned in the much-debated decision. "I'm really happy," said fellow migrant Ernesto Hernandez, 48. "This is my dream." (AP, 24/3/06)

March 26: A group of Americans are headed to Cuba to help its government preserve the documents and the fishing boat of author Ernest Hemingway. Dana Hewson, a boat preservationist from Connecticut, is joining a group from the Boston-based Hemingway Preservation Foundation as they travel to the author's estate in Cuba, Finca Vigia. Hewson will examine the Pilar, the 40-foot (12.9-metre) boat that Hemingway used while he lived in Cuba from 1939 to 1960. The vessel, a Wheeler Playmate, is said to be the place where Hemingway created some of his greatest works, including "The Old Man and the Sea". It is stored under a metal roof on a former tennis court on the estate, about 20 kilometres from Havana. (CBC, 26/3/06)

March 27: Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan called the US embargo against Cuba "wicked" and said that American officials could learn much by studying the communist country's disaster preparedness plans. "We learned how they organize the people house by house, block by block," Farrakhan told international reporters of how Cuba painstakingly plans for hurricanes and other natural disasters. "They know every person in that community." After returning to the United States, he said, Nation of Islam leaders hope to meet with the mayors of American cities and leaders of black and other minority organizations to discuss incorporating some of what Cuba has learned into their own civil defense plans. (AP, 27/3/06)

March 28: Fourteen Cuban migrants sent back home after reaching an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys began the process to get their government's approval to return to the United States for good. One of the migrants, Elizabeth Hernandez, told the press in a telephone conversation from her home in Matanzas province that the group gave Cuban immigration officials their requests for exit permits necessary to leave the country. Cuban authorities in Matanzas, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) east of Havana, said the migrants would receive an answer within 30 days, Hernandez said. (AP, 28/3/06)

March 28: Under fire from some Cuban exile quarters, Miami Republican Representative Lincoln Díaz-Balart is saying that he never proposed "unilateral" changes in the Helms-Burton law that regulates the US embargo on Cuba. Díaz-Balart told The Miami Herald in a recent interview that while he supports the law, he would favor lifting some of the sanctions if Havana freed all political prisoners, legalized opposition parties and promised free elections -- regardless of who rules Cuba. The Miami Herald stands by its story, and Díaz-Balart has not requested a correction or clarification. (The Miami Herald, 28/3/06)

March 29: Federal agents planted a bug in the bedroom of a Florida International University a couple of years ago, netting evidence to charge them as unregistered agents for the Cuban government, according to court records. The FBI also wiretapped the home phones of Professor Carlos Alvarez and his counselor wife, Elsa Alvarez, from at least late 2001 until last summer, collecting electronic evidence on practically all of their conversations. The reams of intercepts included mundane exchanges and even the private musings between husband and wife. The FBI's eavesdropping of the couple's home goes far beyond what was first known about evidence in the case, which included alleged "confessions" to federal agents last summer and the confiscation of the Alvarezes' home and FIU computers. The surveillance evidence surfaced as part of their lawyers' efforts to revoke the couple's detention before their scheduled May 8 trial. But the Alvarezes' lawyers say the "majority deals only with mundane activities of daily life" -- such as conversations about the Alvarezes' dinner plans, the tenting of their South Miami home for termites and meetings at their Catholic church. (The Miami Herald, 29/3/06)

March 29: During an intense grilling on Capitol Hill, the Swiss banking giant, UBS was accused of engaging in a pattern of resistance to congressional inquiries, as lawmakers cited years of non-cooperation with congressional probes

into improper transactions between the bank and terrorist regimes. The hearing of the House International Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight, chaired by Representative Dana Rohrabacher, Republican of California, was a long-awaited public examination of UBS's alleged money laundering for state sponsors of terrorism, including Cuba and Iran. At the hearing, the witness provided by UBS, managing director Michael Herde, offered few specifics in response to lawmakers' inquiries, at times appearing to provoke interrogators already seemingly irked by the Swiss bank. Mr. Herde did disclose that UBS decided in November, after years of congressional inquiries, to end its business in countries against which America maintains sanctions. He added that the bank was in the middle of closing down its accounts in Iran and Cuba, a process a spokeswoman, Christine Walton, later said would be "around 80%" complete at the end of April. (*The New York Sun*, 30/3/06)

March 30: Trial of two Cuban-American academics accused of acting as agents of Fidel Castro's government will be delayed until early 2007, in part because of a legal fight over secret recorded conversations involving the married couple. The trial of Carlos Alvarez, 61, and Elsa Alvarez, 55, had been set to begin in May. But US District Judge K. Michael Moore said at a status hearing that he would postpone the trial until sometime in January 2007. One key reason for the delay is that defense attorneys are challenging whether the FBI lawfully obtained warrants under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to eavesdrop on the pair. Prosecutors said it will take months for federal officials to produce the information about those thousands of intercepts being sought by the Alvarez lawyers. (*AP*, 30/3/06)

March 30: A handful of US college students are getting a firsthand look at Fidel Castro's Cuba. As the Bush administration tightens the US trade embargo on the communist-run nation, students, academics, religious groups and even Cuban-Americans with family on the Caribbean island are finding their travel to Cuba increasingly restricted. "They're trying to find more ways to get tough with Cuba," said Philip Brenner, a Cuba expert and associate dean at American University in Washington D.C. "This is a foretaste of more restrictions that will prevent Cubans and Americans from dealing with each other at all," he said. Brenner helped arrange a four-month visit to Cuba by nine American University students who say they are at times puzzled by the contradictions between Cuban government rhetoric about the benefits of a socialist society and Cubans' lack of material wealth. "I've traveled a lot and for me it has been very frustrating," said 21-year-old Jessica Skinner, of Grand Junction, Colorado. "I came here being very anti-embargo and now that I'm here, I'm confused." (*AP*, 30/3/06)

March 30: A daily updated website on the case of terrorist Luis Posada Carriles, including important declassified documents released by US authorities that clearly link Posada to the Barbados downing of a Cubana Airlines DC-8 that killed all 73 people aboard in 1976, may be accessed at <http://www.familiesforjustice.cu> and <http://www.familiesforjustice.net> in English and Spanish. The Relatives of the Barbados Plane Bomb Victims Committee publishes on the homepage a selection of news items and analysis on the case by Cuban and foreign authors, said Camilo Rojo, the son of one of the DC8's crew. Rojo is on the committee's executive board. Included are a group of personal testimonies with details on the lives of the relatives of the victims of the plane sabotage. (*Granma*, 31/3/06)

March 30: The US-Cuba Trade Association has formed a Florida chapter and will hold a statewide conference on April 13 for all Florida-based companies interested in trade with Cuba called "Doing Business in Cuba." The event will be held at the Citrus Club in downtown Orlando. The focus of the conference will be on the potential for immediate trade in medical, agricultural and food products. In October 2000, Congress passed the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act, making it legal for US companies to sell such products to Cuba. Since then, US companies have conducted almost two billion dollars worth of trade with Cuba. This statewide conference will feature for the first time a live question & answer session via teleconference, during which attendees can interact with Cuban trade and business officials speaking live from Havana. (*PRNewswire*, 30/3/06)

March 31: US authorities say they will not release Luis Posada Carrilles, wanted in Venezuela for the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner, because he represents a threat to national security. "Because of your long history of criminal

activity and violence in which innocent civilians were killed, your release from detention would pose a danger to both the community and the national security of the United States," the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) said in a letter to the suspect obtained by the press. The immigration authorities had announced that Posada would remain in custody in El Paso, Texas, but did not publicly announce the reasons for the decision. (*AFP*, 31/3/06)