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Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba March 2008

HIGHLIGHTS

Domestic Affairs: Cuba authorizes the sale of computers and electrical appliances. Fidel Castro defends the Cuban penitentiary system in one of his Reflections. The Ladies in White demand the release of political prisoners in the fifth anniversary of the crackdown against dissidents. The blog “Generación Y” is blocked in Cuba. The Cuban government lifts a rule that forced people to pick up prescription drugs from a specific pharmacy. The use of mobile telephones is authorized for all Cubans. Cubans are allowed to stay at tourist hotels.

Economy: Public transportation notably improves in the city of Havana. Farmers are allowed to buy supplies in Cuba's hard currency. Huge waves crash over the sea wall of the coastal city of Baracoa causing great damages. Cuba is taking economic actions to turn Basic Units of Cooperative Production into the major providers of food for the population.

Exile Community: Exile organizations participating in a forum on Cuba in Costa Rica issue a statement calling for the unity of all Cubans and against foreign interference in Cuba's internal affairs. A group of Cuban exiles living in different countries issues a statement calling for “peace, reconciliation, and concord among all Cubans”. The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry organizes a meeting in Havana with over 100 Cubans living abroad.

Foreign Affairs: Fidel Castro writes several articles on the conflict between Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, backing Ecuador and blaming the US for the dispute. The European Union's top development aid official meets in Havana with the Cuban government. Cuba and Mexico declare their relations fully restored.

US-Cuba Relations: US politicians and lawmakers are urging a review of US policy toward Cuba. President George W. Bush criticizes democratic governments that do business in Cuba and reaffirms US hard-line policy toward the island. Cuban athletes

from a soccer team seek for asylum in the US. International human rights groups based in the US call on President Raul Castro's government to free political prisoners.

LO MÁS RELEVANTE

Asuntos domésticos: Cuba autoriza la venta de computadoras y equipos eléctricos. Fidel Castro defiende el sistema penitenciario en Cuba en una de sus Reflexiones. Las Damas de Blanco demandan la libertad de los presos políticos en el quinto aniversario de la represión contra la disidencia. El blog "Generación Y" es bloqueado en Cuba. El gobierno cubano levanta una regulación que forzaba a las personas a recoger medicamentos bajo receta en farmacias específicas. Se autoriza el uso de teléfonos móviles para todos los cubanos. Se les permite a los cubanos alojarse en hoteles para el turismo.

Economía: El transporte público mejora notablemente en la ciudad de La Habana. Se les autoriza a los campesinos la compra de suministros en la moneda convertible cubana. Grandes olas abaten el malecón de Baracoa creando grandes daños. Cuba está dando pasos para convertir a las Unidades Básicas de Producción Cooperativas en las principales proveedoras de alimentos para la población.

Comunidad de exiliados: Organizaciones de exiliados reunidos en Costa Rica emiten una declaración llamando a la unidad de todos los cubanos y contra la interferencia extranjera en asuntos internos de Cuba. Un grupo de cubanos exiliados residentes en varios países da a conocer una declaración que llama a "la paz, la reconciliación y la concordia entre todos los cubanos". El Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba organiza una reunión en La Habana con más de 100 cubanos que viven fuera de la isla.

Asuntos exteriores: Fidel Castro escribe varios artículos sobre el conflicto entre Colombia, Ecuador y Venezuela defendiendo a Ecuador y culpando a Estados Unidos por la disputa. El alto funcionario de la Unión Europea para la ayuda al desarrollo se reúne en La Habana con el gobierno cubano. Cuba y México declaran que sus relaciones se han restablecido plenamente.

Relaciones Cuba-Estados Unidos: Políticos y congresistas de EEUU urgen a la revisión de la política hacia Cuba. El presidente George W. Bush critica a los gobiernos democráticos que sostienen negocios con Cuba y reafirma su política de línea dura hacia la isla. Atletas cubanos de un equipo de fútbol piden asilo en Estados Unidos. Grupos internacionales de derechos humanos basificados en Estados Unidos llaman al gobierno de Raúl Castro a liberar los prisioneros políticos.



DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

March 1: Just a week into his job as Cuba's new president, Raul Castro discussed the island's prisoners with a visiting Vatican official and directed his government to sign two

international human rights treaties that his older brother, Fidel, opposed. Some dissidents and human rights activists see reason for cautious optimism, but others don't expect improvements. "He wants to give the Cuban government a new image," said Oscar Espinosa Chepe, a state-trained economist who became an anti-communist dissident. "In the areas of human and social rights, the government surely needs one." But dissident Oswaldo Paya, who won the European Union's Andrei Sakharov prize for human rights in 2002, said the very succession from one Castro brother to another was a disappointment. "The driving force of society should be the sovereignty of the people, not the Communist Party," Paya wrote in a statement distributed to international media on the island. "The people of Cuba want changes that signify liberty, open expression of their civil, political, economic and social rights." Former political prisoner Eloy Gutierrez-Menoyo said the treaties had "tremendous importance" and could open the door to creating more than a single political party in Cuba. The president of the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, Elizardo Sanchez, said once parliament ratifies the newly signed rights treaties, Cuba will be compelled to release 55 dissidents still behind bars after a 2003 crackdown that rounded up 75 people. Many of those freed since Raul took power were already close to completing lengthy prison terms. Sanchez acknowledged a new crop of prisoners has not been jailed since then, but said there has been an increase in short detentions and beatings of dissidents. "They have changed tactics, but the level of repression is the same," he said. (*AP*, 1/3/08)

March 2: The Assembly to Promote Civil Society, an illegal Cuban opposition organization, denounced that 10 dissidents were "beaten" and nine arrested on March 1st, when they were distributing copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in downtown Havana. Marta Beatriz Roque, the head of the Assembly, told the press that four women and six men were passing out the copies of the rights document amid a "heavy police operation" when a plainclothes officer "jumped at Guillermo Fariñas, and "put a hold on him to immobilize him throwing the declarations to the ground." Roque said that the dissident group was made up of herself, Lourdes Esquivel, Idania Llanes, Iris Perez, Jorge Luis Garcia (known as "Antunez"), Felix Bonne, Lucas Galvez, Jose Diaz Silva, Carlos Cordero and Fariñas. Roque said that a woman was beaten at the scene but was not arrested. She added that she and Bonne were taken directly to their homes and seven others driven to a police station, where their copies of the rights document were seized, after which they were taken to their homes. "This is the ratification of the civil and political rights pact," she added, referring to the UN human rights treaties signed by Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque in New York. "They did it (by) beating us," said Roque. (*EFE, EER*, 3/2/08)

March 3: The 10th International Meeting on Globalization and Development Problems began in Havana with the participation of more than one thousand local and foreign specialists who will discuss topics of economic interest and their impact on society. During the inaugural session of the event, participants will watch the documentary "Ten Years Later", regarding the history of these events that began in 1998 at the initiative of Fidel Castro. The program also includes the conference "Globalization: Potential Justice" by Monsignor Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, Bishop in charge of Foreign Affairs of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican. In addition, Canadian Robert Mundell,

1999 Nobel Prize on Economics laureate, will deal with the topic of global economy. The first day of sessions will conclude with a panel entitled "International Financial Crisis and Instability" with the participation of renowned scholars from the United States, Chile, Germany and Cuba. Representatives from nearly 20 regional and international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization are taking part in the meeting. (ACN, 3/2/08)

March 3: Fidel Castro is having a good chuckle at reactions in the United States and elsewhere to his decision to retire from the Cuban presidency, the communist country's foreign minister said. Felipe Perez Roque also told the United Nations Human Rights Council that the old leader's younger brother Raul, who some outside commentators have said might introduce some liberal reforms, "is also Fidel." "Back in Cuba, Fidel is enjoying the petty and pathetic reaction of those who thought that his authority stemmed from his office, who thought that if he was removed from office or assassinated that would be the magic formula for the defeat of the Cuban Revolution," Perez declared. "But it turns out otherwise, that Fidel is the people, that his ideas are those of the people." "Raul, with all the authority that his own life story gives him, is also Fidel in his loyalty to the fatherland, to the revolution, and to socialism," declared Perez. "At the end of the day, Fidel is every man and woman in the world who fights for justice and liberty for people everywhere," Perez said. [[Perez Roque's statement](#)] (Reuters, 3/3/08)

March 3: Verónica López denounced the subhuman conditions her daughter has to endure at the women's prison El Bellote, in Matanzas. Ms. López León said that her daughter Daisy Mercedes Talavera López, an activist with the Democratic Party known as November 30 "Frank País" is not allowed walks in the sun or access to medical care. Daisy Mercedes is accused of committing a felony and an act of disobedience, for putting up a sign that read, "Freedom without exile for all political prisoners." (Cubamet, 7/3/08)

March 4: The Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs of Cuba denounced that in February alone the authorities arrested 82 dissidents and 12 new trials were initiated "for political reasons." According to a report from the organization, "12 people are currently facing trial for political reasons, eight of which remain behind bars, and there have been 82 verified arrests in February while dozens of dissidents have been summoned to police stations and threatened with jail." (EER, 5/3/08)

March 5: Cuba has invited the Catholic Church to open a new monastery on the island, and a German Benedictine order said it would send four monks to establish a "spiritual centre". The church has been officially banned in the past from building new churches on the communist island. The four monks will be provided by the Missionary Benedictines, also known as the Ottilien Congregation, an order of monks with its world headquarters at Landsberg am Lech, west of Munich. The new site will be in the archdiocese of Havana, the order's spokesman said. The foundation had been requested by the archbishop, Cardinal Jaime Lucas Ortega y Alamino, and had been expressly approved by Fidel Castro before his retirement last month as Cuban leader. The spokesman said Cuban authorities had been helpful in the preparations to set up the monastery, which was likely to open this year. (DPA, 5/3/08)

March 5: Political prisoner Juan Bermúdez Toranzo, vice-president of the Cuban Human Rights Foundation, was sentenced to four years and six months in jail after being convicted of "three counts of assault on the local chief of police, his wife and daughter," denounced the opposition group Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs of Cuba. The trial against Bermúdez Toranzo had been scheduled to begin on February 20 at the Municipal People's Court of San Miguel del Padrón but it was postponed, allegedly because the prosecution had no witnesses to support their case. (*EER*, 5/3/08)

March 6: A growing underground network of young people armed with computer memory sticks, digital cameras and clandestine Internet hookups has been mounting some challenges to the Cuban government in recent months, spreading news that the official state media try to suppress. Last month, students at a prestigious computer science university videotaped an ugly confrontation they had with Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the National Assembly. Something similar happened in late January when officials tried to impose a tax on the tips and wages of employees of foreign companies. "It passes from flash drive to flash drive," said Ariel, 33, a computer programmer, who, like almost everyone else interviewed for this article, asked that his last name not be used for fear of political persecution. "This is going to get out of the government's hands because the technology is moving so rapidly." Cuban officials have long limited the public's access to the Internet and digital videos, tearing down unauthorized satellite dishes and keeping down the number of Internet cafes open to Cubans. Only one Internet cafe remains open in Old Havana, down from three a few years ago. People who have smuggled in satellite dishes provide illegal connections to the Internet for a fee or download movies to sell on discs. Others exploit the connections to the Web of foreign businesses and state-run enterprises. Employees with the ability to connect to the Internet often sell their passwords and identification numbers for use in the middle of the night. Hotels catering to tourists provide Internet services, and Cubans also exploit those conduits to the Web. Even the country's top computer science school, the University of Information Sciences, set in a campus once used by Cuba's spy services, has become a hotbed of cyber-rebels. Students download everything from the latest American television shows to articles and videos criticizing the government, and pass them quickly around the island. "There is a whole underground market of this stuff," Ariel said. (*The New York Times*, 6/3/08)

March 6: Néstor Pérez González, a second-year Law student at the University of Pinar del Río was expelled on "political grounds." The decision was based on opinions the twenty-five year old Néstor expressed during a class debate and for contributing the article "The Spanish transition according to Victoria Prego," to "Convivencia", an online magazine edited by Dagoberto Valdés. "I was reported by a professor of Constitutional Law, after voicing my views in a debate. They decided to do it even against the expressed wishes of my fellow classmates," said Pérez González. [[La transición española según Victoria Prego](#)] (*EER*, 6/3/08)

March 6: Daymí Nazaret Pereyra García was sentenced to a year of home imprisonment by the municipal court of San Miguel Padrón, Havana, for allegedly committing the

crime of disobedience. According to Pereyra García, she was victim of a trial that lacked the most fundamental procedural guarantees. (*Cubanet*, 6/3/08)

March 6: President Raul Castro presided over a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Rebel Army's Mario Muñoz Third Eastern Front, in the province of Santiago de Cuba. Also attending was Vice President Juan Almeida Bosque, a founder of the Third Front. Thousands of residents gathered to recall the significant date and the profound social and economic changes witnessed in the area over the last half century. Among the activities, a local museum was inaugurated and a stamp was issued marking the 50th anniversary, reported *Granma* newspaper. Revolutionary Commander Guillermo Garcia Frias, the first farmer to join the rebel movement in the Sierra Maestra mountains, recalled that during the struggle against the Batista regime, the combatants of the Third Front held of an offensive from the dictatorship and attacked dozens of enemy garrisons while liberating several towns along the Central Highway. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/3/08)

March 8: Students role in the continuity of the Cuban Revolution is on the table of the 11th Congress of the Middle School Student Federation (FEEM), starting Havana's Conference Center. FEEM president Patricia Flechilla told the press that attendees will analyze in commissions the organization's internal labour, culture, international relations and their participation in the defence of Cuba. The event will be attended by 700 delegates and dedicated to Commander Ernesto Guevara, the 50th anniversary of the Revolution, and Cuban women. Cuban President Raul Castro and comrade Fidel will be the honorary guests of the gathering, in addition to the five Cubans imprisoned in US jails since 1998, represented by their relatives, the student leader said. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/08)

March 10: The abbot of the Congregation of the Benedictines of Saint Ottilien, Father Jeremias Schroder, said the religious order will open a new house in Cuba by the end of the year in response to a request from the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino. Cardinal Ortega hopes the new community and the exemplary life of its four members will help bring about a spiritual renewal in Cuban society. Father Schroder said that after the visit by Pope John Paul II ten years ago and the recent visit by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, "the role of the Church in Cuban society is not only no longer rejected, it is even appreciated." "I hope that this openness continues," he said. "Our community has also been supported by Cuban officials, for example, concerning the simplification of bureaucratic procedures," Father Schroder emphasized. (*CNA*, 10/3/08)

March 11: "A picturesque clamour," was the figure of speech used by the president of the National Assembly of the People's Power, Ricardo Alarcón, to refer to the shockwaves generated by Internet-posted video footage of his meeting with students from the University of Computer Sciences (UCI), who confronted him about the limitations imposed by the regime. Alarcón referred to the issue for the first time in an essay entitled "The two Cubas," published in the weekly online magazine "La Jiribilla". [[Las dos Cubas](#)] (*AP*, 11/3/08)

March 11: Cuba's President Raul Castro attended the military ceremony in Segundo Frente, Santiago de Cuba, marking the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Frank

Pais Second Eastern Front. Members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and civilians gathered at the monument to fallen Second Front combatants in Segundo Frente. First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura took the podium and stated that Cuba has continued to resist a powerful, determined enemy for several decades because of the tireless efforts of its leaders and the support of the people. Machado alluded to the hardships experienced by the first members of the Rebel Army and stated that though they were poorly armed, they took strength from their convictions and the character they developed under those difficult conditions. He also said that Raul Castro played a "decisive role" as the young leader of the Second Front, and added that Castro was known for his humility and maturity and was admired by his subordinates and fellow officers. Machado encouraged Cubans to "increase production and offer better services" and improve efficiency, which he maintains is "the only realistic way" to gradually improve living conditions. He also emphasized that all citizens are obligated to work to this end. [[Discurso de Machado Ventura](#)] (*BBC Monitoring*, 11/3/08)

March 12: Storytellers from Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Cuba will offer personal shows during the International Festival of Oral Narration, headquartered in Havana on March 17-23. Coinciding with the celebration of the World Day of Oral Narration, the official opening will take place March 20 at the Gran Teatro de la Habana. (*Prensa Latina*, 12/3/07)

March 13: Communist Cuba has authorized the sale of computers, DVD and video players, and other electrical appliances in the first sign President Raul Castro is moving to lift some restrictions on daily life. "Based on the improved availability of electricity the government at the highest level has approved the sale of some equipment which was prohibited," said an internal government memo. It listed computers, video and DVD players, 19-inch and 24-inch television sets, electric pressure cookers and rice cookers, electric bicycles, car alarms and microwaves that can now be freely bought by Cubans. The new memo circulated within the state-run retail system said Cubans would have access to a second group of products in 2009, including air conditioners, which are much in demand to help endure the hot summer days in the tropical country. (*Reuters*, 13/3/08)

March 13: Yuri Martínez Sánchez, a peaceful political activist, was arrested at home by the police. That same day, José Castelnau was also picked up by the authorities. Both are members of the illegal organization Political Prisoners' Attention Committee. (*Cubanet*, 17/3/08)

March 14: Cuban authorities arrested two independent journalists and detained four others in their home to prevent them from attending a videoconference journalism workshop run by Florida International University, an independent Cuban journalist reported. Journalist Jose Antonio Fornaris reported that Richard Rosello -- one of the two journalists arrested and held by state security agents for several hours -- was warned by the agents not to attend the workshop. The six journalists were all detained or arrested on March 10, when the conference took place in the offices of the US Interests Section in Havana. (*Editors & Publishers*, 14/3/08)

March 14: About two-dozen women marched in Havana to demand the release of their husbands and other political prisoners ahead of the fifth anniversary of a crackdown on dissent. Of the 75 government critics arrested March 18-19, 2003, and given long prison terms, 55 remain imprisoned. Sixteen were released early on medical parole and another four were freed into forced exile in Spain last month. Next week's anniversary "is very painful for us," said Laura Pollan of the Ladies in White, a support group for wives of political prisoners. Pollan's husband, Hector Maseda, was arrested and sentenced to 20 years. [[Declaración de las Damas de Blanco](#)] (AP, 14/3/08)

March 14: Granma newspaper, the mouthpiece of Cuba's ruling Communist Party, has doubled the page count of its Friday editions to provide more information in a country debating its future. The larger edition -- 16 pages instead of the usual eight -- points to changes in the Cuban press since Castro, 81 and sidelined by illness, handed over the running of Cuba in July 2006 to his brother Raul Castro, who has encouraged debate on the country's economic problems. Granma and its sister paper, Juventud Rebelde of the Communist Youth organization, have begun to print stories on inefficiency, theft and corruption in the state-run economy. Top party officials are now following Raul Castro's cue and encouraging journalists to be more hard-nosed. "The Cuban revolution needs analytical and investigative journalism that can help solve the central issues of today's society," Rolando Alfonso, head of the party's ideology department, said. Cuban journalists are more accustomed to toeing the official line than digging up dirt in a one-party government that censors the media and allows no independent press. (Reuters, 14/3/08)

March 15: Accidents represent the first cause of death for Cubans under 20 years of age, and the fifth cause for the rest of Cubans, the official media reported. Preliminary data by the National Direction of Statistics of the Cuban Public Health Ministry said that in the first nine months of 2007, 198 persons were killed in accidents. Every 33 hours, a person under 20 dies in Cuba, Granma newspaper said. Accidents also rank fifth as the cause of death in all ages, only surpassed by heart illnesses, heart and brain diseases, tumors, influenza and pneumonia. Specialists consider that prevention of accidents should be regarded as a public health emergency. The main causes of death are originated by falls, accounting for 38 percent of the total, traffic accidents (27 percent), drowning and submersion (6.1 percent), strange bodies (3.4 percent), electrocution (1.2 percent), as well as food broncho-aspiration, fire and hit by objects. Granma said that a survey carried out in hospitals of three Cuban provinces which were not identified, showed that 44 percent of 4,346 people assisted by that cause had an accident at home. (Prensa Latina, 15/3/08)

March 15: Cubans are spending too much time waiting for reforms they hope will bring luxuries such as electronics and trips, while what the country needs to advance is the sweat of their brow, according to an editorial in the ruling Communist Party newspaper. The editorial, penned by Granma newspaper director Lazaro Barredo, appeared aimed at deflating expectations for change that have ballooned since Raul Castro took over the presidency from his ailing brother Fidel last month. "I am worried that some people are waiting for the announcement of specific measures that would immediately resolve household or spiritual needs, or ones that would automatically lead to more

consumption," Barredo wrote. Barredo wrote that without an improved economy, changes cannot be sustained. "We can't expect more needs to be resolved if people don't work more, if they don't produce more," he wrote, adding: "Unfortunately, there is a not-insignificant part of our society (..) that wants to live without working." (*AP, Sun Sentinel*, 15/3/08)

March 15: Cuban President Raul Castro presided the celebration of the 130th anniversary of the Baragua Protest led by General Antonio Maceo against Spanish colonialism. Described by Jose Marti as "one of the most glorious events in our history", the Baragua Protest is seen as a symbol of revolutionary resistance in the struggles for national independence. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/3/08)

March 16: Cuban doctors are treating circulatory ailments with innovative adult stem cell techniques, the official newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* reported. Cuban researchers first tested treating circulatory ailments with stem cell techniques in 2002 in a Havana clinic, as stem cells have the ability to regenerate tissue. The technique is now being used in four Cuban regions. Doctors are also studying the possibility of using the technique in treating eye ailments like pterygium, a fleshy growth in the eye caused by excessive exposure to ultraviolet light. (*Xinhua*, 16/3/08)

March 17: Activism against AIDS is uniting a group of transvestites and crossdressers in western Cuba in a project that is going beyond peer education and making inroads into the world of culture. "The time has come to take us seriously. We are in a position to demand our place in society, to contribute to AIDS prevention through our art, and to be respected for our abilities and knowledge," a Cuban transvestite, whose artistic name is that of Mexican actress and singer Ninel Conde, told the press. "I never felt so sure of myself as I do now. When I used to dress in male clothes, I would always hang my head. Since I put on a pair of high heels, I have felt proud of being who I am. I began to be happy with myself, and I walk down the street with my head high," she said. A volunteer worker at the state Provincial Centre for Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS at Pinar del Río, 162 kilometres from Havana, Ninel Conde won one of the prizes at *Transarte*, a cultural festival that concluded with a performance at the city's main theatre. Fourteen crossdressers and transvestites took part in the gala, along with some of the best-known singers in Pinar del Río, with a panel of judges made up of personalities from the world of culture. (*IPS*, 17/3/08)

March 18: Super-heavyweight Robert Acea beat American Michael Hunter to cap off a dominating display by Cuban boxers at the Americas Olympic qualification tournament with nine fighters earning tickets to Beijing. The results marked a stunning return to the international ring by the powerhouse Cubans, who did not send a squad to Chicago for last year's world championships where the first Olympic qualifying spots were up for grabs, following a string of defections. (*Reuters*, 18/3/08)

March 18: The Boys choir from Hanover, Germany, which is recognized around the world for its high quality, was introduced for the first time in Cuba at the Milanes

Theatre, in Pinar del Rio. Invited by the Cuban Music Institute, they will perform in different venues in the Cuban capital. (*Periódico Ahora*, 18/3/08)

March 19: An independent Cuban blog defies the “censorship, blocked pages” and “other limitations imposed on Cubans” to impede their access to the Internet. In addition to offering software to circumvent the blocking of web pages, “Potro Salvaje” (www.desdecuba.com/potro) seeks solutions that allow Cubans easier access to the Internet. The identities of the blog authors are not known. (*El Universal*, 19/3/08)

March 19: Political prisoner Adalberto Ramos Monteagudo, sentenced to 24 years in jail in 1991, was released for humanitarian reasons. 43-year-old Ramos Monteagudo underwent surgery to remove a cancerous tumour in September 2007. The cancer has since spread to other areas in his body. His relatives had been petitioning to have his sentence commuted to house arrest by reason of ill health since 2005, when the prisoner first showed symptoms of the disease. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 20/3/08)

March 20: Spanish artist Luis Eduardo Aute and his wife, Maria del Carmen Rosado, received in Havana the Cuban National Culture Distinction, the highest award granted by the Cuban Council of State in this field. Culture Minister Abel Prieto presented the Distinction during the inauguration of Aute’s exhibition “Transfiguraciones” (Transfigurations), at the Museum of Fine Arts in the Cuban capital. This exhibition includes Aute’s pictorial works from 1951 to 2005 and it will remain open to the Cuban public until June 2. “I am living a dream that I want Cuba and Spain to share. I hope that we can further improve our cultural relations. Let us work for a just society and for an independent Latin America,” said the versatile artist upon receiving the award. The inauguration of the exhibition was attended by the Spanish Ambassador in Cuba, Carlos Alonso Zaldivar, and by personalities of the Cuban culture sector such as painters Zaida del Rio and Roberto Fabelo as well as singer-song-writers Silvio Rodriguez and Vicente Feliu. (*ACN*, 21/3/08)

March 21: A book on Argentinean-born guerrilla fighter Ernesto Che Guevara titled "Evocación" (Evocation), was released at Casa de Las America, in Havana, by the author, Aleida March. During the presentation ceremony, Alfredo Guevara, who wrote the prologue for the book, highlighted the value of the work by Aleida March, who was Che's life companion after 1959. Guevara said "Evocación" will show the readers, and in particular new generations, Che's different facets. He recalled that the Argentinean fighter was an inspiration in the fights for independence and an important figure in the development of the bases for today's social revolutionary ideas. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/08)

March 21: Cubans have a new vehicle to express their opinions: letters to the editor of the ruling Communist Party newspaper Granma. Letters for and against reforms under consideration by Cuba's new President Raul Castro were published by Granma. One writer called for the elimination of the dual currency system, a major source of complaint among Cubans, who are paid in Cuban pesos but must buy many consumer goods in Cuba's hard currency Convertible pesos worth 24 times more. Publication of the letter

was a novelty in a country where the press is controlled by a one-party state that allows no independent media and has a record of suppressing dissent. (*Reuters*, 21/3/08)

March 22: The Central Workers Union of Cuba (CTC) calls on its members to analyze the February 24 speech by Raul Castro Ruz, President of the Councils of State and Ministers, Granma newspaper reported. The news was revealed in the CTC general secretaries and national unions meeting, presided over by Salvador Valdes Mesa, member of the Central Committee and general secretary of the organization. The analysis of the speech by the second secretary of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee in the conclusions of the Seventh National Peoples' Power Assembly Legislature constitutive session will be run in this month and in April in the workers' movements meetings at the national, provincial and municipal level, and assemblies with workers. The meeting will prepare councilors from union executives in all entities, to present the content of the speech, explain the main issues and foster debate with workers, the daily states. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/3/08)

March 23: Fidel Castro published an article defending the penitentiary system in Cuba, and referred to the dissidents sent to jail in 2003 in derogative terms. "March 18 marked the fifth anniversary of the arrest of more than 70 quislings, the capos of imperialism's fifth column in Cuba who, paid by the US government, violate the laws of the land and share the opinion that this dark corner of the world should be swept off the map", he said. "Not one of the mercenaries was tortured or deprived of lawyers or trial, even if it was of a summary nature, provided by the law in cases of danger of aggression; they have the right to receive visits, access to family facilities as well as the other legal prerogatives of all prisoners; and if at any time their health seriously requires it, they are released". Castro also referred to the term "Black Spring", applied to the period of March-April 2003 when over 70 dissidents were sentenced to long-term periods in jail, as "racist". "A Department of State spokesperson described the event as the "Black Spring", a term with racist overtones. We could call it "White Spring." Darkness does not exist in space, only in the mind", Castro wrote. [[Bush in Heaven \(II\)](#)] (*AFP, EFE*, 23/3/08)

March 23: Three of four ex-political prisoners released by the Cuban authorities who arrived in Spain on February 17 will not request political asylum so as not to affect the possible release of other prisoners who remain in Cuban jails for their opposition to the Castro regime. In declarations to the media, Omar Pernet, Alejandro González Raga and Pedro Pablo Álvarez, accompanied by some relatives, showed their willingness to accept the permanent residence permits offered by the Spanish government so they could remain in Madrid. The former prisoners of conscience were forced into exile by the Cuban authorities. (*EFE*, 23/3/08)

March 24: The Raul Castro government authorized the sale to Cuban citizens of various electronic products including computers in the first known reform since he succeeded ailing elder brother Fidel exactly one month ago. According to Resolution 43/08 of the Interior Commerce Ministry, to which the press had access, the measure will take effect April 1. The ruling also includes the sale of video players of all kinds, television sets, electric pressure cookers and rice cookers, electric bicycles and car alarms. He warned,

however, that the articles will be coming on the market "gradually" as they are acquired by the stores in charge of selling them. Stores must make certain, the ruling says, that the brands, models, pieces and accessories are similar to those sold within the energy-saving program that the government has promoted since 2005. Cuba currently has around 600 computer clubs where some 100,000 members study and have access to the domestic Intranet. Even so, the International Telecommunications Union says that Cuba has the lowest Internet usage in Latin America, since a mere 0.9 percent of the 11.2 million Cubans use the Web. Private citizens are not permitted access to the Internet from their homes, while professionals - mainly in the fields of culture, education and health - can visit the government-controlled Intranet, and most of the latest technologies require restricted licenses specifically for their use. (*EFE*, 24/3/08)

March 24: Ailing former leader Fidel Castro made a rare mention of his government's crackdown on political opponents five years ago, defending the action and exhorting the United States to treat its prisoners with the same humanity he said Cuba uses with its inmates. "What an enormous difference between the methods of the United States and of Cuba!" Castro wrote in an essay published in state media, apparently referring to how the US government treats terror suspects. "None of the mercenaries were tortured or deprived of attorney or trial," Castro said of the 75 dissidents rounded up beginning on March 18, 2003. Cuba accused them of being mercenaries working with the United States to undermine the communist government, a charge the dissidents and US officials denied. Twenty of the original 75 have since been released, 16 on medical parole and four into forced exile in Spain. "They have the right to visits, access to (conjugal visits) and all the other legal prerogatives of all inmates," Castro wrote. [[Bush en el cielo \(II\)](#)] (*AP*, 24/3/08)

March 25: Cuba's most popular blogger Yoani Sanchez said that Cuban authorities had blocked viewing of her blog and then allowed slow access to the website from Cuba. Sanchez, whose critical [Generacion Y](#) blog received 1.2 million hits in February, said government censors had placed "filters" that delayed viewing of her web page on a server in Germany. "This effectively blocks access to the blog. What Cuban with limited access to internet is going to wait 15 minutes to see it?" Sanchez said. On the weekend (March 22-23), attempts to view the site from Cuba met with a notice "The page cannot be displayed." The state telecom monopoly ETECSA is Cuba's only internet service provider. The 32-year-old Sanchez, a philology graduate, has drawn a considerable readership by writing about her daily life in Cuba and describing economic hardships and political constraints. She has criticised Cuba's new leader, Raul Castro, who formally took over from his ailing brother Fidel Castro last month, for his vague promises of change and minimal steps to improve the standard of living of Cubans. "Who is the last in line for a toaster?" was the title of a recent blog that satirised the lifting of a ban on sales of computers, DVD players and other appliances Cubans long for, though toasters will not be freely sold until 2010. In a country where the press is controlled by the state and there is no independent media, Sanchez and other Cubans have found in the internet an unregulated vehicle of expression. "They are admitting that no alternative way of thinking can exist in Cuba, but people will continue reading us somehow," she said.

"There is no censorship that can stop people who are determined to access the internet," she said. (*Reuters*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Nearly 500,000 children -from one month to two years of age- will be immunized as of March 28 during the 47th national anti-poliomyelitis vaccination campaign underway in Cuba. Some 343,195 under three-year-old toddlers will receive two oral doses. On May 9-15, those children will receive the second doses and, also in the same date, the vaccine will be reactivated for 141,857 nine-year-old children. *Granma* newspaper published that since the first anti-polio campaign in 1962, more than 76 million doses of the vaccine have been administered to children, so all of Cuba's population under 61 years old is currently protected against that disease. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Cuba has lifted a rule that forced people to pick up prescription drugs from a pharmacy assigned by the state, adding to steps by President Raul Castro to cut excessive regulation in the Communist country. Public health sources said that Cubans can now buy prescription drugs at any pharmacy. Until now, they had to fill prescriptions at a single pharmacy attached to hospitals or local clinics, a bureaucratic measure introduced during a severe crisis in the 1990s when resources were scarce due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. "People used to have to go to our pharmacy and if there wasn't the right medicine or it would take a while to make, they would have to come back even if they lived far away," said Maribel, a Havana doctor. "Now they can go wherever without getting new prescriptions or having to travel long distances." The restriction was unpopular and Raul Castro has set about eliminating some of the "excessive regulations" governing all aspects of Cuban society since he took office as president. "There were lots of complaints. The authorities want people to be happy," said a Havana pharmacy manager, who did not want to be named because she was not authorized to speak to a reporter. (*Reuters*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Cuban President Raul Castro met with Spanish academic and artist Luis Eduardo Aute, *Granma* newspaper reported. In the meeting, Aute and his wife Maria del Carmen Rosado spoke with the Cuban head of State about the cultural week on the couple's work held in Havana, as well as the islands crucial historic events and Cuban and Spanish culture in general. Culture Minister Abel Prieto and Deputy Culture Minister Abel Acosta Damas attended the encounter. (*Prensa Latina*, 26/3/08)

March 26: Lisandra Guerra of Cuba won the first gold medal of the world track championships, taking the women's 500-meter time-trial in 34.021 seconds. Simona Krupeckaitė of Lithuania took silver at the Manchester Velodrome, and Sandie Clair of France finished to get the bronze. Guerra had taken silver a year ago, behind a world record-setting Anna Meares of Australia. (*AP*, 26/3/08)

March 27: Raul's daughter, Mariela Castro is fighting to introduce radical changes in Cuba. As head of the government-funded National Centre for Sex Education, she is trying to change people's attitudes towards minority groups in the community. She is currently attempting to get the Cuban National Assembly to adopt what would be among

the most liberal gay and transsexual rights law in Latin America. The proposed legislation would recognise same-sex unions, along with inheritance rights. It would also give transsexuals the right to free sex-change operations and allow them to switch the gender on their ID cards, with or without surgery. There are limits: adoption is not included in the bill and neither is the word marriage. "A lot of homosexual couples asked me to not risk delaying getting the law passed by insisting on the word marriage," Mariela Castro said. "In Cuba marriage is not as important as the family and at least this way we can guarantee the personal and inheritance rights of homosexuals and transsexuals." She says that her father is supportive of her work, although he advises her to move slowly. "I've seen changes in my father since I was a child. I saw him as macho and homophobic. But as I have grown and changed as a person, so I have seen him change." (*BBC*, 28/3/08)

March 27: Cuba, Chile and Colombia study families with multiple members suffering schizophrenia, said Doctor Migdyrai Martin, from Cuba's center of Neuro-Sciences. The expert addressed the Third Pan-American Congress of Child and Youth Mental Health, to unfold at Havana's Palace of Conventions until March 28 with 350 experts from ten countries. Martin said they wish to track the cultural and biological roots of the disease and its the hereditary features. Experts from Diego Portales University, in Chile, already work with Cuba's results, and several countries are helping to improve the Latin American Psychiatry Guide. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/08)

March 27: Political prisoner Héctor Maseda, one of 75 dissidents imprisoned in the spring of 2003, sent Fidel Castro a written testimonial account of the situation in the jails of the island. The book was dropped off at the Citizens' Attention Office of the State Council by the wife of the dissident, Laura Pollán, a member of the Ladies in White. In the book dedication, Maseda refers to an article authored by Castro where the former-president sings the praises of the penitentiary system in Cuba. (*EER*, 30/3/08)

March 28: Cuba announced that it would allow unrestricted use of mobile telephones by all Cubans for the first time in the latest step by new President Raul Castro to improve access to consumer goods. Cuba has the lowest rate of cellular telephone use in Latin America. The Cuban telecommunications monopoly ETECSA announced it would begin mobile phone service for the general public in the next few days, in a statement published in the Communist Party newspaper *Granma*. ETECSA said the new service would be paid for in hard currency in order to fund telecommunications development in Cuba. (*Reuters*, 28/3/08)

March 28: Every March, the Pepe Sánchez International Trova Festival is organized in Santiago de Cuba, taking into account that the 19th is the birthday of the man for whom the event is named, which later became Trova Day. This year, the 125th anniversary of the first recorded bolero is being commemorated: "Tristeza," by Pepe Sánchez. There is no need to convene singer-songwriters for the festival in Santiago; they are in the street, in parks, plazas and "peñas" (cultural clubs). It is not at all staged; it is something that is part of everyday life in this city of "trova" traditions, of serenades and jam sessions. The organizing committee's president is Eliades Ochoa, a "trova" musician who used to play

for tips in Santiago de Cuba's bars. "This city holds a lot of memories for me; this is where I met many of the old guard "trova" musicians. It really makes me happy to see Céspedes Park full of people for the festival's opening, and how the Casa de la Trova gets packed to overflowing." The International Trova Festival is considered to be Cuba's oldest. This year, its 46th edition, featured visitors from Mexico, Spain and Japan. Artists came from Havana and other provinces, including the Compay Segundo Group, Mongo Rives and his Sucu Sucu, and Marta Campos. (*Granma International*, 28/3/08)

March 29: Cuban writer Eduardo Heras Leon said that the upcoming Congress of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists UNEAC will help strengthen the revolution and socialism. Heras Leon who is part of the Congress' s Organizing Committee noted that this is a historic moment for Cuba; and that he hopes that vital decisions will spring from the meeting. Heras Leon who is also Director of the Onelio Jorge Cardoso Literary Center said there is a high cultural standard in Cuba, which is essential for the development of any social project, and constitutes a pillar of the revolution as well. Artist Gilberto del Rio Leon said that this next Congress challenges new generations to follow the example of those before them, and to maintain the spirit of the great Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen alive. Gillen became president of UNEAC since its foundation in 1961, until the time of his death in 1989. The seventh UNEAC Congress will take place April 1-4 at Havana's International Conference Center. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 29/3/08)

March 30: Raul Castro's government quietly lifted its controversial ban keeping Cubans from staying at tourist hotels. "We've had no Cuban guests so far but the hotel is overbooked right now," said Sandra, a young woman working the front desk at the Hotel Nacional. She said a tourism ministry official informed hotel management of the change. Employees at the Ambos Mundos, Nacional, Valencia and Maria Isabel Hotels in Havana said Ministry of Tourism officials told them Cubans would be allowed to stay in hotels. Like other guests, they will be charged in hard currency worth 24 times the Cuban pesos state employees are paid in. Granma, the Community Party daily newspaper, made no mention of the change on its website on March 31, but several hotel and rental-car employees said they were informed of the move. Cubans who live solely on government salaries, which average about \$20 a month, struggle to survive, even with free health care and education and subsidized rations of food. (*Sun Sentinel*, AP, 30/3/08)

March 31: A family was evicted from his home in Nuevo Amanecer, a shantytown in the eastern city of Holguin, and now they are camping along the Mirador road. Over 2,000 people have been threatened by local authorities with losing their homes under the Ley de Enfrentamiento a las Ilegalidades de la Vivienda (Law Against Illegal Housing). Authorities in Holguin province have the goal of eliminating almost 40 settlements that have emerged in the outskirts of the province capital city during the last ten years. (*The Miami Herald*, 31/3/08)



ECONOMY

March 1: Cuban scientists from nine institutions met to analyze the possibilities to produce ethanol from sugarcane by-products and other alternative sources without sacrificing food. The First National Workshop on Cellulosic Ethanol, held at the ICIDCA (Sugarcane Research Institute), was attended by 42 experts, who reviewed the current situation on the international market and technological processes that are not based on food. The Cuban experts, who gave two master lectures and presented 16 papers at the event, insisted on the danger of using crops to produce ethanol and biodiesel. Participants in the meeting highlighted the international concern about using corn, wheat and soy, which are humankind's basic food, as raw materials to produce biofuels. Cuban scientists and institutions made it clear that the Caribbean island will make the necessary efforts to contribute to debating and analyzing all possible variants to produce biofuels. They noted the importance of carrying out economic studies about today's availability and potential of cellulosic wastes in Cuba. They also debated the use of genetically-modified organisms to obtain a second generation of biofuels that will not be obtained from food. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/3/08)

March 2: Cuba's vice president Carlos Lage unveiled a plan to reinvigorate key sectors of the country's economy, including its flagging construction and food industries, state-run media reported. Lage announced in *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper that the country would initiate "a stimulus plan in strategic economic sectors." Lage, a member of parliament since 1976 and a long time member of the Communist party's central committee, also underscored the need to step up Cuba's production capacity and reduce its level of imports. (*AFP*, 2/3/08)

March 4: The Cuban population decreased by 1,889 in 2007 for the second year in a row, despite a slight increase in the birth rate, the National Statistics Office (ONE) reported. According to the report "Demographic Indicators. Cuba and its Territories", published on the ONE website, the Cuban population decreased from 11,239,043 to 11,237,154. Although the number of births increased in relation to 2006, the combination of deaths and migrants tilted the balance towards a decreasing tendency, according to the ONE. The ONE's predictions are not encouraging, as the Cuban population is expected to decrease by 26,000 by 2020. Meanwhile, demographic aging increased, as 16.2 percent of the Cuban population is over 60 years of age, compared to 15.9 percent in 2006. After the demographic boom in the 1960s and 1970s, when an average of 250,000 children were born, Cuba's population began to decrease in the 1990s, and that tendency persists. [[ONE: Indicadores demográficos 2007](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 4/3/08)

March 4: Despite strong economic growth in 2006, Cuba still occupies last place in Latin America for both mobile phone and Internet penetration, and is fifth from the last in fixed-line teledensity. The government has blamed the embargo for the country's poor telecom development, which has prevented the implementation of submarine fibre-optic cables; thus, Cuba has had to rely almost exclusively on satellites for international connectivity. However Etecsa, controlled 73% by the government and 27% by Telecom Italia, holds a monopoly in both fixed and mobile services. It offers GSM, TDMA, and

AMPS services through its subsidiary Cubacel, though mobile rates are prohibitive for the vast majority of Cubans. In addition, Cubans cannot legally buy a computer or subscribe to an ISP without having a government permit. (*Business Wire*, 4/3/08)

March 4: Cuba's new government appears prepared to take urgent action on complex problems such as the country's dual monetary system and the prevalence of wages too low to stimulate production. "They say they're going to devalue the Cuban convertible peso against the national currency," said a 34-year-old woman while standing in line to exchange money in the capital. Speculation is rife. The rumors, which began to spread even before Raúl replaced his ailing brother Fidel as president, point to a possible drop from the current rate of exchange of 25 Cuban pesos for one convertible peso to 20, 16 or even 13 Cuban pesos per convertible peso. The dollar officially stands today at 1.04 convertible pesos. "If it's true, it will benefit the people who depend on their salaries in Cuban pesos," said the woman, who changes 40 convertible pesos a month for Cuban pesos in order to "more or less" cover the price of the food she needs from the farmers' markets. "But people like me, who live on remittances sent from their families abroad, would be hurt," she said. Pavel Vidal, an expert with the Center of Studies on the Cuban Economy, said that thanks to "the growth in gross domestic product and exports in sectors like nickel and professional services," Cuba is in a position to strengthen the Cuban peso against the convertible peso. (*IPS*, 4/3/08)

March 5: A biotechnology center is expected to be created in Mozambique with the technical and scientific support of Cuba, according to a report in the Mozambican newspaper Notícias, citing Science and Technology Minister, Venâncio Massingue. The paper said that the move had been announced in Havana, as part of the official three-day visit by Mozambican president Armando Guebuza to Cuba, at the invitation of his Cuban counterpart Raul Castro. According to Massingue, who is part of the presidential delegation, Mozambique is expected soon to send technicians to Cuba to specialize in biotechnology. Two Cuban technicians are currently in Mozambique, working in the district of Moamba, in the area of animal husbandry. (*MacauHub*, 5/3/08)

March 6: Sherritt International Corp., the company producing oil and gas off Cuba's coast, said fourth- quarter profit increased 6.2 percent as oil prices rose. Net income rose to C\$83.5 million (\$84.6 million) from C\$78.6 million a year earlier, Toronto-based Sherritt said in a statement. Sherritt gained from crude-oil prices that averaged 50 percent higher in the fourth quarter than a year earlier, boosting profit excluding some costs in the oil and gas business by 29 percent to C\$65.6 million. The gain helped the company overcome falling profit in its metals unit as nickel prices slid. "Strong oil prices, steady production and operating efficiencies helped drive profitability growth," Sherritt said in the statement. Nickel prices were "lower than in the prior year, when stainless steel demand was stronger," the company said. Nickel is a key ingredient in stainless steel production. Sherritt mines and processes nickel in Cuba in a joint venture with the socialist government and produces oil and gas off the island's coast. The company also provides power to Cuba and is working on a 150-megawatt expansion at its Boca de Jaruco power plant, taking its total capacity in Cuba to 526 megawatts. Boosting the

island's infrastructure will help protect the company from any change in the political regime, Sherritt has said. (*Bloomberg*, 6/3/08)

March 7: Cuba and Bolivia signed a negotiations protocol to enlarge and deepen the Accord for Economic Complementation between the two countries. Also on the list was the meeting's document for the Managerial Commission of the agreement. Bolivian Deputy Economic Relations and Foreign Trade Minister Pablo Guzman Laugier and Cuban Deputy Foreign Trade Minister Pedro Luis Padron inked the accords. The Bolivian representative said his country hopes to expand trade with the island as part of the framework of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA), to eliminate taxes and non-tariff measures in their bilateral exchanges. Objects of negotiations were access to markets and trade regulations, both very important for developing links. The aim of the South American country, Laugier said, is to export products with greater added value, generate employment and develop internal markets. Cuba is interested in helping in the Bolivian industrialization process, the island's deputy minister said, mentioning as an example the medical collaboration in that nation. (*Prensa Latina*, 8/3/08)

March 9: A state export insurer will be able to collect unpaid export-related payment of 3 billion won (\$31 million) from Cuba. The payment was due seven years ago. Cuba could not dodge the payment because the country was suffering from an electrical shortage and needed Korean-made power generators and low-energy consuming electronics. The Korea Export Insurance Corporation said that the head of the company, Cho Hwan-eik, plans to visit Cuba and recoup 2 million euros. That was the payment for tires exported by Hankook Tire in 2001. The amount is 1.4 million euros plus 6-percent annual interests. These are good conditions for collecting unpaid balance. Relations were rocky at the beginning. The corporation and the Havana branch of the Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency tried to persuade Cuban bureaucrats to pay, but they were unwilling. The country's electrical shortage, however, got serious two years ago and relations improved. Cuba came to desperately need Korean goods. Korea's exports to Cuba jumped sevenfold in the last four years because of surging exports of electronics to the communist nation. (*JoongAng Daily*, 10/3/08)

March 11: A group of Dutch entrepreneurs has begun a trade mission to Cuba. Representatives from more than 20 companies are taking part in the mission, making it the largest Dutch economic delegation ever to visit Havana. The names of the companies making the journey are being kept secret, chiefly to avoid sanctions by the United States, which still imposes a trade embargo against Cuba. However, Dutch newspaper "NRC Handelsblad" reports that representatives from the Rabobank and three Rotterdam-based shipping companies are among the delegation. NGOs such as CNV (the National Federation of Christian Trade Unions in the Netherlands) and Pax Christi have been urging Dutch companies to begin cooperating with the Cuban government once a number of conditions have been met. These include the improvement of Cuban workers' rights and a discussion of the position of the country's trade union leaders and dissidents. (*Radio Netherlands*, 11/3/08)

March 12: Cuba will strengthen its participation in the World Trade Organization and other international economic and trade organizations to defend national and third world interests, said an official source. A document from the Foreign Trade Ministry (MINCEX) on the work goals for 2008, says that the country will reinforce its participation in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in particular the 12th ministerial conference of that organization in April. Cuba also aims to make stronger its integration in the regional and international economy, for which it will intensify the fight against the US embargo, The Bush Plan, and other measures of the US government that affect the Caribbean country's trade interests. It will also increase links with the region through the implementation of planned actions in the agreements of the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA) and the Peoples Trade Treaty. The country will enlarge its economic, trade and cooperation relations with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), reinforce its presence in the Association of the Caribbean States, strengthen coordination and agreements with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group and CARIFORUM. (*Prensa Latina*, 12/3/08)

March 13: Deficient public transport, one of the most pressing problems inherited by Cuba's new president, Raul Castro, has taken a great leap forward over the last year thanks to thousands of buses imported from China. It is the most noticeable change to life in Cuba since Raul Castro took over as caretaker when his brother Fidel Castro fell ill and stepped aside in July 2006. The transfer of power was completed when Raul Castro was formally named president, raising hopes among some Cubans that the improvements he has overseen in transport might be spread to housing and other social services. The lines at Havana bus stops are now much shorter with new buses running 10 or 15 minutes apart, and the sight of Cubans racing desperately to catch a lone bus already packed with passengers is less frequent. "This is improvement, compared to the apocalypse we were living through," said state employee Jose, 51, amazed to see two buses arriving simultaneously. Flashy articulated buses have replaced the notoriously uncomfortable "camels" or humped-back buses Cuba resorted to when the loss of Soviet aid took the communist island nation to the brink of collapse in the 1990s. (*Reuters*, 13/3/08)

March 13: In a near-record drop, Cuban coffee output fell to 4,400 tons of semi-processed beans this season, far short of the 8,200 tons produced in the previous crop. "It is estimated that approximately 9,200 tons of coffee will be produced in 2008, for a 62 % increase above the previous year's output," said the official newspaper Granma. The publication blamed low production on natural disasters, insufficient investments on the plantations and a pest infestation. (*Reuters*, 13/3/08)

March 14: Mexico and Cuba put six years of testy relations behind them with a visit by Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa and the rolling-over of \$400 million in Cuban debt. Mexico's Foreign Trade Bank (Bancomext) has opened a new \$25 million credit line aimed at kick-starting stagnant trade with Cuba, the state bank's director general Mario Laborin said. Repayment of the \$400 million will be spread over 15 years, at 6 percent interest and a five-year grace period before principal is due, he added. The new credit line will be increased with more trade, which sank to \$200 million in the absence of financial guarantees. (*Reuters*, 14/3/08)

March 15: For the first time, Russia has devoted to Cuba the opening day of the International Travel and Tourism Fair (Intorurmarket) starting at the Moscow-based Krocus Expo, a source from the Cuban delegation said. This is in recognition of the interest of Russian travellers for Cuba as a destination, said director of the office of MINTUR (the Cuban Ministry of Tourism) in Russia, Carlos Oscar Hernandez said. He told the press that Deputy Director of the Federal Tourism Agency of Russia, Natalia Shenguelia, and Deputy Minister of MINTUR Maria Elena Lopez will attend the opening of the largest stand ever presented by Cuba in this fair. We will have a very busy day, as our ministry and firms including Cubanacan, Havanatur and Gaviota will present their products, he added. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/3/08)

March 17: The Cuban press has increased its criticism of diverse issues affecting the country, particularly calling for further preventive actions against "social misconduct," corruption and "criminal activities." The weekly paper Tribuna de la Habana published several articles in this regard, one of them about the on-going theft of L-shaped steel frames that support high tension power lines. Criticism of some of the ills affecting the Cuban society is generally directed against sectors of the population that are accused of "social misconduct," without acknowledging in the least the possibility of errors on the part of the government. (*EFE*, 17/3/08)

March 17: Communist Cuba has partially lifted a decades-old ban on farmers buying supplies in the latest sign that new President Raul Castro is looking to individual initiative to stimulate food production. Agricultural sources told the press that Cuba plans to open stores for farmers to buy tools, herbicides, boots and other supplies for the first time since the state took over all the country's shops in the 1960s. "For the first time, all supplies are not being assigned by the central government. It's a market crack in the monopoly and centralization that it is sure to spread," a local agriculture specialist said, asking not to be named. "It doesn't seem like much, but this is a very important first step," he said. State-run companies recently sent buyers abroad to purchase tools, hand held machinery and supplies such as fencing, seed and fertilizer, presumably to sell in their outlets across the country, a local business source said. The farmers will be able to buy supplies in Cuba's hard currency, the CUC or convertible peso, which is worth 24 times more than the Cuban pesos that state wages are paid in. (*Reuters*, 17/3/08)

March 19: Cuba fosters a stable political and social atmosphere and offers guarantees and incentive facilitating the development of economic and commercial relations, said Cuban ambassador to India Miguel Angel Ramirez. The diplomat spoke of the island's facilities and business perspectives at a seminar on India, Latin America and the Caribbean: Big Trade and Investment Opportunities. The event, which was organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and sponsored by the Foreign Ministry, have been attended by representatives from Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Dominican Republic, Surinam and Trinidad and Tobago and Indian businessmen. (*Solvision*, 19/3/08)

March 19: Compared to last year's figures for the same period, sugar production has increased by 29% during this year's sugar cane harvest, which will conclude next May, reported Liobel Pérez, chief spokesperson for the Ministry of the Sugar Industry. According to Pérez, during the 2007-2008 harvest, which began in December, "efficiency and sugar yield per hectare have been improved." He added that 53 sugar mills are currently in use, nine more than last year. (*EFE*, 19/3/08)

March 19: By unanimous vote, the Chilean Senate green-lighted two Free Trade Agreement initiatives with Cuba and Colombia, reported parliamentary sources. In the case of the island, it is the Economic Complementation Agreement between Chile and Cuba, signed in Montevideo, on December 20, 1999. Senator Roberto Muñoz Barra, president of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Commission, said that, according to Cuban government statistics, the island has been experiencing an economic growth, reaching 12.5 % in 2006 with an inflation rate of 5.5. (*EER*, 19/3/08)

March 19: Imperial Tobacco Group Plc, the maker of Davidoff and West cigarettes, said costs related to its takeover of Altadis SA will lop 140 million pounds (\$281 million) from the current fiscal year's profit. The company also said it will continue a partnership between Altadis and Cuba's government under which cigars made in the country are sold. Tobacco and cigar assets whose disposal has been ordered by the European Commission as part of the takeover have drawn interest from "a number of parties," Chief Executive Officer Gareth Davis said. The assets should be sold in coming months, according to the CEO, who spoke at an analyst meeting made available on the company's Web site. (*Bloomberg*, 19/3/08)

March 19: According to official magazine Bohemia, the Cuban economy will lose millions and domestic market prices will increase in 2008 due to the triple effect of the US embargo, the dollar devaluation and higher international market prices of food commodities. The critical international situation indicates that we are in for another pull of the belt, commented the article. "There is increased pressure on the domestic market," said the publication, in reference to the internal commercial network dealing in hard currency, which in 2007 already saw mark-ups in the prices of milk and mayonnaise, among other products. (*AFP*, 19/3/08)

March 19: The Cuban government said it planned to build 30 new hotels between 2008 and 2010 with the aim of increasing the number of rooms available to international tourists from 46,000 to 56,000. The hotels will be built through joint ventures involving the Cuban government and foreign companies, mainly from China and Spain, according to an article that appears on the Tourism Ministry's Web site. An official with that portfolio was quoted in the article as saying that other hotel projects currently are in the negotiation phase. Ten of the new hotels will be in Havana and will be located in the Marina Hemingway and Monte Barreto districts, the city's historical center and Tarara beach, where a complex will be built that will include apartments for rent, a marina and a hotel. The Cuban capital is the main destination for foreign tourists to the communist-ruled island and, together with the nearby Varadero resort, also on the northern coast, generates 70 percent of the nation's tourism revenue. (*EFE*, 19/3/08)

March 20: The Cuban tourism market will likely open up at the passing of Fidel Castro, which might cause problems for Barbados' tourism market. That concern came from Barbados' Minister of Tourism Richard Sealy at a post-Cabinet Press conference at Government Headquarters. "The morning that [Castro's] eyes don't open, and Cuba opens up in a big way, we can have some problems in this part of the world. "It is going to be largely untapped and will have a lot of potential as far as tourism development is concerned," he warned. "So we need to monitor it and continue to make sure that we are nimble and do what we have to do as policymakers to make it easier and more attractive to invest in Barbados," he said. (*Nation News*, 20/3/08)

March 20: Over 1,000 people have been evacuated due to flooding triggered by a storm in the eastern tip of Cuba. So far no deaths or injuries have been reported. According to the official press, huge waves crashed over the sea wall of the coastal city of Baracoa and destroyed more than 20 homes. The storm also damaged some 200 buildings, obstructed traffic and covered a considerable stretch of the local airport's runway with debris. The storm began with waves higher than five metres, causing extensive flooding, a phenomenon described by the Cuban AIN news agency as worst seen in the city in the past 50 years. Baracoa, which is located some 1,100 km east of Havana, and has a population of around 80,000, is Cuba's oldest city and the biggest tourist destination in the Guantanamo province. (*EFE, IANS*, 21/3/08)

March 21: Communist Cuba has issued what appears to be the first public report on prices and inflation in the private sector, in an unusually realistic acknowledgment of the key role the informal economy plays in island life. In its "Survey of Prices in the Informal Sector," the National Office of Statistics estimated that the cost of goods and services purchased from private sources rose 4 percent from February 2007 to the same month in 2008. According to the study, the goods and services most frequently obtained from private sources are rice, cheese pizzas, eggs, pork, manicures, vegetable oil, lard and the informal exchange of the regular pesos that government workers earn for the convertible pesos needed to buy items at more expensive stores. The report studied government-sanctioned markets where farmers may sell any excess agricultural goods after meeting production quotas, as well as commerce by licensed tradesmen and small business owners. It also considered illicit activities such as the surreptitious sale of food, medicine and other products stolen from state warehouses and factories. (*AP*, 21/3/08)

March 22: When ailing Fidel Castro resigned last month, stock prices of US companies that stand to benefit from more business with Cuba rallied. Six days later, those shares retreated as his brother Raul Castro, Cuba's first new leader in 49 years, was installed and picked old-guard revolutionaries to help him govern. That dashed forecasts of a rapid transition from communism to capitalism and the end to the embargo the United States has kept against Cuba since 1962. "Anyone who thinks there will be a for-sale sign up by a bankrupt Cuban government is wrong," said the manager of a Canadian company, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of doing business in Cuba. As Raul Castro moves to raise living standards, welcomes new foreign investment in mining, oil, tourism, possibly agriculture and even ethanol, opportunities will open up, said the

executive, but only for non-US companies. Within weeks of formally taking office, his government has moved to allow Cubans to buy consumer goods that were banned until now, such as computers and DVD players. The increased consumption longed for by Cubans will benefit European companies already producing goods in Cuba, such as ice cream and soft drinks by Nestlé, beer by the world's second largest brewer InBev, soap and shampoo by Anglo-Dutch giant Unilever, and cigarettes by Brazil's Souza Cruz, a subsidiary of the British American Tobacco group. Foreign businessmen have spent years struggling to make money in Cuba's inefficient state-run economy since it opened up to foreign investment and tourism after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. (*Reuters*, 22/3/08)

March 23: A fire has scorched some 500 hectares (1,234 acres) in the Hatibonico wildlife refuge in the eastern province of Guantanamo, Cuba's official AIN news agency reported. Area residents have joined firefighters and rangers in battling the blaze, which officials said was of "considerable proportions," some 970 kilometers (603 miles) east of Havana. "Currently, the flames are yielding to efforts to extinguish them and authorities are investigating the cause of the disaster," AIN said, adding that the blaze started in a dry strip west of Guantanamo Bay, where there are oddly shaped hills. The Hatibonico wildlife refuge's approximately 5,220 hectares (12,888 acres) are home to animals and plants considered to be "in danger of extinction," AIN said. (*EFE*, 25/3/08)

March 24: Cuba has begun decentralizing the state-dominated agriculture sector in what appears to be the first major move by new President Raul Castro to improve efficiency and cut bureaucracy. At meetings across Cuba, farmers are being told decisions ranging from land use to resource allocation and sales will no longer be taken at the 17-floor agriculture ministry in Havana but at the local level, farmers who attended said. In addition, local municipal offices will be streamlined and will take more into account the activities of private farmers and cooperatives, not just state farms, they said. Cuba watchers say this will provide more leeway for private initiative to raise food output, Raul Castro's top economic priority since he began running the country on a temporary basis in mid-2006. "This represents a major shift from a vertical to horizontal approach and a change in bureaucratic mentality from a national to territorial one," a local agriculture expert said on Monday, like others interviewed asking not to be named. "They are moving decision-making closer to the producers and recognizing that the private sector with just a fraction of the land produces 70 percent of our produce," he said. (*Reuters*, 24/3/08)

March 24: Carlos Lage, the man behind the Cuban economy, toured the eastern coastal city of Baracoa, promising funds to rebuild dozens of homes destroyed by 16-foot waves. Lage, who was passed up for the country's No. 2 political job last month, said the state would help rebuild the 47 homes destroyed last week by an onslaught of giant waves, the state press reported. In addition, nearly 200 damaged homes would be repaired. The storm, which originated in the Atlantic north of Cuba, destroyed a day care center, a farmers market, a park and some local government offices. About 1,000 families were left without electricity during the 20-hour storm. Lage, who did not say how much would be spent on the recovery effort, said Baracoa's picturesque seaside malecon would be

repaired and strengthened against future storms. Lage, joined by local officials, toured the damaged buildings and met with families who lost their homes. Local authorities said it was the worst natural disaster to strike the area in 50 years. (*Sun Sentinel*, 25/3/08)

March 24: Canadians continue to flock to Cuba, with seemingly little worry of any political fallout after longtime president Fidel Castro's handover of power to his brother Raul. Tourism industry representatives report "business as usual" in the Caribbean island's tourism sector, even following the February handover of the presidency to Raul Castro. "There is literally no impact at this point in terms of traffic," said Pierre LePage, executive director of the Canadian Association of Tour Operators. "The transition from Fidel to his brother has had more impact in the U.S. in the media and in terms of political impact. But in terms of Canadian clients, there is no difference." The Cuban Tourist Board in Toronto reported a 29 per cent increase in Canadian travelers this January and February compared to last year. The board said 660,387 visitors came from Canada in 2007. (*Ottawa Citizen*, 24/3/08)

March 25: The Cuban government has suspended the business licenses of 14 foreign firms for alleged illegal activities tied to state agencies controlled by GAESA, the powerful commercial consortium of the Cuban Armed Forces. According to sources within the Ministry for Foreign Commerce and the Cuban Chamber of Commerce, the foreign commercial representatives were notified of the cancellation of their business licenses March 17 and 18, following an internal investigation that questioned alleged irregularities in the agreements established between the Tecnotex company and retail chain TRD Caribe, both under the administration of GAESA. "There was an 'explosion' at Tecnotex for shady relations with foreign businessmen," said an employee of the foreign commerce ministry who requested anonymity. "More than just friendships were proven to exist; there were some shady dealings." The commerce ministry employee added that, "the decision came from the highest level," with instructions to act "quickly and energetically." Although a complete list of the foreign firms that have had their licenses revoked has not been made available, an individual employed by the Cuban Chamber of Commerce told the press that two Italian companies, Agridea and Bella SRL, have been blacklisted. Both companies provided merchandise to Tecnotex and TRD Caribe, among other government-controlled retailers. (*The Miami Herald*, 25/3/08)

March 25: In the course of the last year, trade between Cuba and Panama increased tenfold to reach 500 million USD, a sign of normalization in bilateral relations, interrupted in 2004, said the new Panamanian ambassador to the island, Luis Gómez. Today, trade volume with Cuba reaches approximately 500 million USD per year, Gómez told media representatives. According to Cuban official statistics, in March, 2007 that figure was scarcely 50 million USD. (*Reuters*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Turkish Energy & Natural Resources Minister Hilmi Guler said Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) could cooperate with Cuba in oil and natural gas exploration, as it does in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Libya. "TPAO is eager to join natural gas and oil exploration tenders in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Ecuador," Guler told reporters after meeting Marta Lomas Morales, the Cuban minister of Foreign

Investments and Economic Cooperation, in capital Ankara. Guler said the corporation will also carry out research in Cuba. "We may cooperate with Cuba in oil and natural gas exploration," he said. "Turkey will set up a technical team to deal with joint energy projects with Cuba and it will visit Cuba in coming days," he also said. (AA, 25/3/08)

March 25: The governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia finalized the constitutive agreement of the ALBA Bank, with a subscribed capital of 1 billion USD, reported the Venezuelan minister of finance, Rafael Isea. The agreement was signed in Caracas by representatives of the four countries that make up the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which the Dominican Republic joined last January, Isea said in a press release. (EFE, 25/3/08)

March 26: Cuba's new President Raul Castro has begun discreetly lifting some of the many restrictions on daily life as he tries to meet popular demands for better living standards in the socialist state. In the first month since he took over as president from his ailing brother, Raul Castro's government decided to allow Cubans to buy computers, DVD players and other appliances, including air-conditioners and toasters. Cuba's first new leader in half a century has also launched a restructuring of agriculture to reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks and boost food production. Allowing private farmers and cooperatives more leeway to buy tools, seeds and fertilizer is a step toward curbing the state's stranglehold on farming, local specialists said. Even as he begins making modest reforms, the low profile Raul Castro hasn't announced them in the Communist Party newspaper Granma or on state television. "These changes are already happening. Don't expect to see any announcements in Granma, that will never happen," one official said, asking like others interviewed that his name not be used. (Reuters, 26/3/08)

March 26: CIMEX, the main state-run business conglomerate in Cuba, is trying to satisfy the demand for farm implements with a "market test" being conducted in four provinces. Executives for the firm explained to the press that the program was begun last November with the sale in the CIMEX chain of stores of 23 types of agricultural tools and other items, with the aim of expanding it to other parts of the country before the end of 2008. The project is a response to the absence of conventional means of distribution outside the state apparatus to get these items directly into the hands of the rural work force. The items are priced in Cuban convertible pesos, or CUCs. One CUC is equal to \$1.08, while the ordinary peso is worth less than 4 cents. "The objective is to broaden our offerings and position ourselves in a new segment of the market that has demonstrated buying ability and need," said the director of the CIMEX stores, Lluraldi Caba. He offered no estimates about the size of the demand in the sector or data about the sales made to date, and he refused to provide information about where the products come from because - he said - of the risk for the country's economic activity as a result of the US embargo. Among the items being sold in the CIMEX stores in the provinces of Holguin, Ciego de Avila, Villa Clara and La Habana are machetes, files, tools, nails, sickles and hoes. (EFE, 26/3/08)

March 26: Turkish State Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek and Cuban Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Marta Lomas Morales signed

the 8th Term Joint Economic Commission Turkey-Cuba protocol. Under the protocol, the second loan --which was provided by Turkish Eximbank to Cuba and is worth of 15 million euros -- was opened to the use of Cuba. The total worth of the loan is 25 million euros. Cicek said that the protocol envisages cooperation between Turkey and Cuba to explore and produce natural gas and oil in third countries. He added that also the two countries will also start to cooperate in renewable energy, energy productivity, wind and sun energy, and biogas areas. (*Turkish Press*, 27/3/08)

March 26: Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo Hernandez said that he hopes to see a continuation of the historic friendship and collaboration between the peoples and communist parties of Cuba and the Ukraine. Lazo met with Piotr Simonenko, first secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party and his delegation on visit to the island. The vice president made special mention of his country's solidarity with over 23,000 children and relatives affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident, treating them at hospital facilities in Cuba. (*Granma*, 26/3/08)

March 27: The top United Nations human rights body called on Sudan to tackle human rights violations and prosecute those responsible for abuses. But in a diplomatic manoeuvre to avoid a divisive vote, the resolution proposed by Egypt on behalf of African countries acknowledged measures by Sudan to improve human rights even though they had not yet had the desired effect. The 47-member Human Rights Council, in which Islamic and African countries backed by Russia, China and Cuba, have an effective majority, passed the resolution by consensus. (*Reuters*, 28/3/08)

March 27: Cuba will host next year the 21st Latin American Congress on Poultry Farming, which will be preceded by several international events. In statements published by the digital edition of the *Trabajadores* weekly, Lazaro Quiros, director of the poultry farming industry on the island, announced that the congress will be attended by the main producers and specialists from the region. Also present will be representatives from the Latin American and the World associations of poultry farming, of which Cuba is a member. In parallel with the congress and under the maxim that food security is the guarantee of the future, Cuba will also host the Avimundo 2009 poultry-farming exhibition. This congress in Havana will be preceded by the 23rd World Congress on Poultry Farming, scheduled from June 30th to July 4th later this year in Australia, and by several international exhibitions. (*CAN*, 27/3/08)

March 27: Mexican tour operators wish to send 100,000 tourists to Cuba, which is a nine percent growth compared to 2007. A release of Cuba's Tourism Ministry office in Mexico said the goal involves the promotion of tour companies, hotel chains and travel agencies operating in Mexico. For the first time they will run prime time TV ads featuring the wonders of Cuban products, geography and hospitality. In addition to the media, they coordinate joint operation with Mexican tour operators. In addition to Havana and Varadero, the ads will show Cayo Santamaria, Cayo Coco and Cayo Largo, among other destinations in central and east Cuba. (*Prensa Latina*, 27/3/08)

March 27: Cuba and Belarus signed a final protocol agreement during the 7th Intergovernmental Commission of both parts from March 25 to 27, which was praised by the Cuban representative for its quality of trade. Vice minister for Cuban Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration, Ricardo Guerrero, noted that the agreement paves the way in several sectors and aids banking exchange. Víctor Anatolievich Gaisionok, vice minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic and president of the Belarus delegation to the Commission assured that Cuba is a strategic focus for his nation. The official also called for strengthening political and economic relations between both parts. The 7th Commission identified common interests in priority sectors of the national economy such as in informatics, communication, transportation, construction, iron and steel industry and biotechnology. (ACN, 27/3/08)

March 27: Cuba is taking economic actions to turn Basic Units of Cooperative Production, farmer associations working lands handed over by the state in usufruct, into the major providers of food for the population. During a recent meeting with local agricultural producers in this eastern city, deputy agriculture minister Alcides Lopez said that his ministry will allocate more resources for the Basic Units of Cooperative Productions or UBPC (by their Spanish acronyms), according to their profitability. The cooperatives will be given a specific credit line that will allow them to increase their technical capabilities, meet higher production schedules and create future potential to purchase the resources and items they need, the deputy minister said. Lopez pointed out that the salary system, directly linked to the contribution made by each worker, will be rigorously applied to all producers, according to the founding principles of the agricultural organization, which have been distorted in some entities. The Cuban government official underscored the social objective of the Basic Units of Cooperative Production, which is to guarantee food supply to nearby communities, where they will directly sell their produce and will reduce the participation of intermediary enterprises; those enterprises will become providers of services to the agricultural organizations. (ACN, 27/3/08)

March 27: The First Vice President of the Cuban Councils of State and Ministers, Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, visited several production facilities in the eastern province of Camaguey. After a two-day working visit to this province, Machado Ventura said he had been able to see enthusiasm among workers due to the economic recovery that the country is experiencing, including the availability of raw materials and the investments being carried out. "There is enthusiasm among workers and confidence in the recovery, of which they are a very important element," he said. "I am not exaggerating if I say that I saw confidence, stability and increase in some of the plans compared to past years. They have higher goals but they are very objective," he added. (ACN, 28/3/08)

March 30: The introduction of new disease-resistant tobacco varieties and more extensive areas under irrigation areas are some of the measures Cuba is currently applying to increase tobacco production. According to authorities linked to production and research, tobacco outputs have considerably increased in the last few years, while better results are expected from a raise in payments to tobacco producers. Raul Relova, head of Tabacuba Supervision and Control, said the country will step up irrigation from

the safest sources, which will result in a 30 percent or more increase of the agricultural output. TabaCuba will also rise up to 50 percent the price to be paid to farmers involved in tobacco production. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/08)

March 30: In ten years, Cuba could be able to generate 500 MW by wind energy, not to mention the power that could be obtained from other renewable sources that are now being tested in the country. Manuel Menéndez, head of the Group of Coordination and Support of the Council of State, spoke about advances in the Comprehensive Program for the Development of Alternative Energy Sources at the conclusion of the Eighth International Workshop of the Cubasolar agency. "We are studying all possibilities, but we have opportunities to move forward in obtaining energy from biomass, sunlight and wind, among other sources," he said. Regarding wind energy, measurements show favorable perspectives to continue the construction of wind farms in Gibara, Holguín, and in areas of Maisí, in Guantánamo. Menéndez said that the first wind measurements at 50 meters of height were recently finished in the northern coastline of Ciego de Ávila, within a series of research efforts that continue in this province. (*Cuba Headlines*, 30/3/08)

March 30: Forty-seven years after golf was virtually wiped off the island of Cuba, the game may soon make a comeback, the St. Petersburg Times reported. Cuban tourism officials are reportedly considering a major investment in new golf courses across the island to boost its sagging tourism industry. "The message coming from the Cubans is: bring us golf projects," Mark Entwistle, a former Canadian ambassador to Cuba who represents one investor group, told the press. A dozen golf projects around the island are on the drawing board, the newspaper added, each consisting of hundreds of villas and apartments built around the courses. (*The Miami Herald*, 30/3/08)

March 30: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said investments in Cuba will grow four times more than in the last 10 years. "Between 1995 and 1998, we had 1.5 billion pesos annual programs, but this year the country must invest over six billion pesos," Lage told the local press during a visit to Matanzas. According to Lage, this process is larger than in previous years, and of greater importance for the local economy and peoples' lives. "The country must invest with greater organization and efficiency. We can reduce costs, time, to do more and increase investments," Lage noted. Lage made the statement at the end of a tour of the western Cuban province of Matanzas, where he also visited cattle breeding farms, a food industry, a population settlement and a store under construction. Accompanied by the province's main authorities, Lage learned about plans to build hotels in the Varadero beach resort, located in the northern coast. (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/08)

March 31: The Chambers of Commerce of Naples, southern Italy, and Cuba have signed in Havana a bilateral collaboration agreement, aimed at developing the trade and economic relations, the local media reported. The agreement was signed by Vito Amendolara, deputy chairman of the Naples Chamber of Commerce, and Patricia Ponte for the Cuban Chamber. The accord is aimed at giving impetus to the exchange of information between Naples and Cuba, at encouraging trade opportunities, investments and cooperation, the local media stressed. It also envisages activities linked to business

training and personnel management. Under the accord, the two parties will jointly organise trade fairs and exhibitions in various sectors. The next step in the bilateral relations is the signing of a special agreement in the tourist and accommodation sector. (ANSA, 31/3/08)

March 31: The governments of Brazil and Cuba started a cooperation agreement to strengthen actions in the surveillance of medications. The document said the society needs knowledge on the fields of pharmaceuticals, medication inspection, bio-equivalence, clinic investigation and fighting falsification. Dirceu Raposo de Mello, president of the National Sanitary Surveillance Agency of Brazil, and Rafael Perez, director of the Center for Medication Quality Control of Cuba, signed the agreement in the presence of Cuban Ambassador to Brasilia, Pedro Nunez Mosquera. Perez said that the agreement is a result of the visit of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to Cuba and a mutual cooperation relation between the two agencies, to strengthen links between Cuban and Brazilian institutions. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Gradual recovery and modernization of the Cuban port system has borne its first fruits, mainly in Havana-based port facilities. In early 2007, port productivity reached below 1,000 tons a day, and today we have closed unloading with 1,707 tons a day, on average, Havana Port Investment Group Director Victor Arencibia told Cuba's main TV news show. He added that state-of-the-art handling equipment has increased the level of operation and reorganization in port facilities. Nearly 900 ships operated in Cuban ports in 2007, but there is still much to be done in merchandise unloading, Arencibia stressed. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Nuclear physicist and State scientific advisor to Cuba, professor Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart, visited South Africa to extend science and technology collaboration between the two countries from biotechnology to nanotechnology and energy technology. In a lecture at the Department of Science and Technology, Castro Diaz-Balart, son of the former Cuban president, highlighted the importance of the biotech industry in Cuba and how it has become one of the significant generators of income for the country. South Africa's Science and Technology Minister Mosibudi Mangena expressed admiration for Cuba's biotech advancement, which, he said, had allowed its people access to affordable healthcare. Cuba had also advanced biomedical applications of nuclear technology, and assisted innovation of new biotech products for health and farming. Mangena said that South Africa and Cuba had enjoyed scientific and medical exchange programmes since 2001, and looked forward to continued relations. (*Engineering News*, 31/3/08)

March 31: New municipal agricultural representations are being created along the island. According to official newspaper Granma, the Agriculture Municipal Delegations (Delegaciones Municipales de la Agricultura) will fight against illegalities, and will work on human resources, and of the efficient exploitation of fertile land. Aimed at decentralizing decision making in the agriculture sector, the first Delegation was inaugurated in the municipality of Moralitos, in San Jose, Havana province. (*Granma*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Colombian President Alvaro Uribe met with a Cuban official delegation and agreed on tightening bilateral ties. A statement from the presidency said that, “it was agreed to stress cooperation in sectors like agriculture and energy” during the meeting with the high-ranking Cuban officials. Uribe also welcomed the support Cuba is giving to Colombia’s efforts towards achieving peace, and thanked Fidel and Raúl Castro in this regard. Orlando Lugo Fonte, a member of the Council of State and president of the Cuban Farmers Association, headed the Cuban delegation. “We are willing to do all we can together for the benefit of our peoples”, Uribe said. (*AFP*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Russian Transport Minister Igor Levitin arrived in Havana to preside over the 8th Session of the Cuba-Russia Mixed Inter-Governmental Commission for economic-commercial and scientific-technical collaboration. Levitin, who visited the island in July 2007, when agreements were signed in the fields of aeronautics, will meet Cuban Government Minister Ricardo Cabrisas. Both officials will talk at the Cuban Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration Ministry (MINVEC) shortly before the beginning of the works of the Mixed Commission, the first made here between these two countries in the last eight years. The session will cover seven working groups: financial, energy, transport, science and technology, information and communications, economic collaboration and technical-military. Levitin is travelling with a delegation of over 100 governmental officials, entrepreneurs, and specialists, and will meet with Rogelio Acevedo, president of the Cuban Civil Aeronautics Institute (IACC), and will visit the installations of the Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering Center. Levitin has also planned an interview with Cuban Foreign Trade Minister Raul de la Nuez and a tour on port and railroad installations of the Cuban Transport Ministry. (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/08)



EXILE COMMUNITY

March 3: Ramón M. Barquín, a respected Cuban Army officer whose struggles to restore the rule of law in Cuba clashed with both the dictator Fulgencio Batista and later the revolutionary government of Fidel Castro, died at his home in exile in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. He was 93. Mr. Barquín, who held the rank of colonel in the Cuban Army, played a role in the events leading up to the triumph of Mr. Castro’s rebels. He was imprisoned after leading a group of professional officers in an unsuccessful coup d’état against Mr. Batista in 1956, eight months before Mr. Castro landed on the southeastern coast of Cuba to launch his revolution. When Mr. Batista fled the country before advancing rebel forces on January 1, 1959, Colonel Barquín, who had the support of United States officials, escaped from solitary confinement. Colonel Barquín assumed control of the Cuban armed forces at Camp Colombia, the country’s principal military base, in Havana. When the rebel leader Camilo Cienfuegos arrived at the Camp Colombia barracks on January 2 with orders to assume command of the army, Colonel Barquín did not stand in his way. For the next few weeks, Colonel Barquín helped to establish a new government. But his relationship with Mr. Castro quickly soured. Colonel Barquín and other moderates in the new government formally broke ties with Mr. Castro in mid-1960. He resigned and went into exile. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 5/3/08)

March 12: A Miami-based group that supports dissidents in Cuba said politically motivated arrests are on the upswing in the communist nation. More than 350 political arrests occurred last year in Cuba, while 200 people were detained this January alone, according to the Cuban Democratic Directorate, which receives funding from the US government and private sources. In February, the same month that Fidel Castro officially ceded the presidency to his younger brother Raul, another 50 people were arrested, said the group, which based its numbers on incidents collected by the Cuba-based Council of Human Rights Rapporteurs, which was formed last May. Several calls to the Cuban government's interest section in Washington went unanswered. Most of the detentions were brief, and during that same period some higher profile prisoners were released. But Janisset Rivero, the directorate's executive director, said during a news conference she believes the rise in arrests signifies "little change is likely under Raul Castro." (*AP*, 12/3/08)

March 13: The documentary "Un presidio plantado" (2007), which compiles testimonies from numerous Cuban political prisoners under the Castro regime, will debut in Miami. Financed by the Cuban Historical Memory Institute, the film was shot on location in Miami, New York, Washington and New Jersey and gathers testimonies by former inmates at the infamous Presidio Modelo, at Isla de Pinos. Directed and produced by Cuban-Americans Luis Guarda and Pedro Corzo, the documentary also describes the closure of this prison in 1967. (*EFE*, 13/3/08)

March 14: Under the banner "Latin-American Solidarity with Cuba," the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA) hosted in Costa Rica a conference that was attended by several former heads of state. A number of Cuban organizations both from the exile and the domestic opposition presented a "Common Position." In the document, the groups maintain that the destiny of the island is the responsibility of all Cubans, without exclusion, and reject any third-party interference. [[Posición común de los cubanos](#)] (*EER*, 14/3/08)

March 17: Members of Cuban organizations based in over 40 countries of the World will gather in Havana on March 19-21 during the Encounter of Cuban Representatives Abroad against the US Blockade and Terrorism. Carlos Zamora, director of the Consular Affairs and Cuban Residents Abroad Division of the Cuban Foreign Ministry told reporters that some 150 representatives from Europe, Canada, Mexico and the United States are expected to participate in the encounter called by the foreign ministry office. Last year, 20 percent of all Cubans based in other countries came to Cuba for the event, a figure similar to previous years, Zamora explained and he went on to announce that the encounter will focus on issues like the US economic blockade of Cuba and the actions taken to denounce its impact; the Bush Plan against Cuba and its measures against the Cuban family; and the solidarity movement with the five Cubans held for nearly 10 years now in US prisons. (*ACN*, 17/3/08)

March 18: On the fifth anniversary of the imprisonment of 75 Cuban human rights activists, a group of Cuban exiles in Puerto Rico asked that a plebiscite be held in Cuba

so that the "people" can decide on the country's future. With the slogan "No to succession, democracy now," the exiles departed from the Puerto Rican Parliament and walked down several streets in San Juan to commemorate the so-called "Black Spring" when the dissidents were detained, said Luis Alberto Ramírez, secretary of the Front for the Total Freedom of Cuba. (*EFE*, 18/3/08)

March 19: More than 100 Cubans living abroad, including some from Miami, are in Havana for a three-day meeting with Cuban officials, and some participants say Cuba's migration policy may be up for discussion. Although Miami participants have not publicly acknowledged invitations to the Havana conference, at least two controversial South Florida Cuban-American broadcasters, Francisco Aruca and Max Lesnik, said they were traveling to Cuba to cover the event. Aruca and Lesnik said they expect the meeting to deal with a hot topic on both sides of the Florida Straits: Cuban migration. "The meeting is expected to involve an exchange, opinions from Cubans living abroad, and the views of Cuban officials as what to do toward the future," said Lesnik. There's speculation among Cuba experts in South Florida that the government could use the meeting to announce new measures related to emigration. (*The Miami Herald*, 19/3/08)

March 19: The Cuban government is considering reforms to make migration regulations more flexible, which may include the possibility of longer stays abroad and even the elimination of exit visas, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said. "We are firm in our commitment to make ever more fluid the relationship between Cubans living abroad and Cuba, and making the procedure and the regulations on that issue faster," Perez Roque said during a meeting in Havana with Cubans living abroad. When asked whether relaxing laws on exit permits and the extension of stays abroad - now with an 11-month limit - are among reforms to be mentioned by Raul Castro when he formally becomes the country's president in February, Perez Roque admitted that such issues "are being considered." The meeting was also a chance to discuss ways of combating the US economic embargo on Cuba, he added. According to the minister, the main obstacle to completely normal ties is the US policy that limits Cubans living there to one visit to Cuba every three years. The meeting included 129 representatives of Cuban organizations in 34 countries that are "committed and active" in Cuba's "main battles," Perez Roque said. The meeting wraps up on March 21 with a resolution of support for Cuba's "Five Patriotic Heroes" -- five Cuban agents now serving long sentences in the United States on espionage charges. Havana has waged a high-profile propaganda campaign for their release. [[Discurso de Felipe Pérez Roque](#)] (*DPA, The Miami Herald, BBC*, 19/3/08)

March 20: The Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented a new Web site on emigration, during the conclusion of a conference on United States aggression. Representatives of the Cuban Diaspora meeting in Havana observed the design of the web page (<http://www.nacionyemigracion.com/>) offering information on consular services. According to Otto Vaillant, informatics director of the chancellery, this useful website is an important voice of Cubans abroad. This page was decided upon during the 3rd Conference of the Nation and Emigration in 2004 and includes a calendar of events, photo galleries and cyber-debate forums on Cuban issues. The 129 delegates from 34 countries also witnessed the launching of the journal "Correo de Cuba" that includes, in

this issue, an article by Gerardo Hernandez, one of the five anti terrorist Cubans jailed in the United States. At this venue the participants ratified their commitment to work towards the liberation of these patriots who suffered trumped up and politicized trials. (ACN, 29/3/08)

March 20: A group of Cuban exiles living in different countries issues a statement calling for “peace, reconciliation, and concord among all Cubans”. The over 40 signatories reject “hate and mutual resentment” that have prevailed throughout Cuba’s national history and have led to “violence and fratricide struggles”. The document makes a call to the governments of Cuba and the United States to lift all restrictions against free movement of Cubans. It reaffirms the principle of non-violence, national reconciliation, and calls for an amnesty “which includes all Cubans on all sides of the political and ideological shores”. [[Declaración de Concordia](#)] (*El Nuevo Herald*, 21/3/08)

March 21: Cuban culture and national identity was the topic of discussion of a panel held by Cuban émigrés during the meeting of Cubans Residing Abroad against the Blockade and Terrorism, which concludes at the Hotel Nacional in Havana. “It would be very reductionist to say that the identity of the Cuban nation is only on the island, and that it is only the heritage of those of us that live here,” said Miguel Barnet, national literature award, when describing factors that comprise Cuban culture. Cuban Cultural Minister Abel Prieto, who presided over the second day of the gathering, said the panel was a special conversation with the 129 compatriots from 34 nations attending the meeting. Also speaking were Nancy Morejon, another national literature award winner; Eduardo Heras, author; Pedro Monzon, coordinator of the Cuban chapter of the Network of Networks in Defense of Humanity, as well as academics Milagros Martinez, Nelson Valdes and Felix Masud. The culture minister noted that Masud “has defended our culture in the United States.” (*Prensa Latina*, 21/3/08)

March 22: Participants in the meeting of Cuban Residents Abroad against the Blockade and Terrorism sent a message to Fidel Castro, expressing their pride for being Cubans. "This pride stems to a great extent from the work we have been building for 50 years under your wise leadership," the text says. "You can be certain that, just like us, there are hundreds of Cubans worldwide, who feel an everlasting appreciation for you, because of your life of sacrifice and devotion to our people," it adds. The Cuban emigres wished Fidel Castro good health, "so that we can count on you for many more years." [[Mensaje al Comandante en Jefe](#) y [Declaración final](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 22/3/08)

March 22: Cuban-born jazz musician Israel "Cachao" Lopez, credited with inventing the mambo, has died in Miami at the age of 89. The bassist and composer left Cuba for the US in the early 1960s and continued to perform until his final months. The mambo emerged from his improvisational work with his late brother, multi-instrumentalist Orestes Lopez, in the late 1930s. A family spokesman said Lopez died with his relatives around him. Cuban-American actor Andy Garcia, who made a 1993 documentary about the musician, praised him as the "musical father" of Cubans. "He is revered by all who have come in contact with him and his music," Garcia said in a statement. "Maestro (...) you have been my teacher and you took me in like a son". "I will continue to rejoice with

your music and carry our traditions wherever I go, in your honour." After he emigrated in 1962, Lopez performed at New York's Palladium nightclub with the leading Latin bands of the day. He collaborated with Latin music stars including Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez and Gloria Estefan. In the 1990s, thanks partly to Garcia's documentary, Lopez came back to international attention and released several successful albums. In 2003, he was honoured with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. In 2004, he received a Grammy Award for his album *Agora Si*. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/3/08)

March 22: A small group of Cuban expatriates and their supporters who gathered on Parliament Hill, Ottawa, rejected the new leadership of Raul Castro and accused the Canadian government of being an enabler of the communist regime in Cuba. It started with the recognition of Castro by former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who treated Castro like an "elected official instead of a dictator who took over the country," said Maurice Sambra, a sculptor and painter. "No government since then has recognized the brutality of the regime that usurped the human rights of the people and stole the assets of the country to maintain power." Sambra called on the government to intervene for the Cuban people and to press for the freedom of political prisoners and dissidents. "We want Canada to exert pressure by not allowing Canadian enterprises to invest in Cuba, which supports the enslavement of the workers. The Cuban government has a new leader, Raul Castro, but we don't want him or his regime. We want true freedom for the people of Cuba." David Levy is originally from Argentina but after living for a period in Cuba has been concerned for the Cuban people ever since. Levy thinks that it is important for Canadians to know what is happening in Cuba because "95 per cent of the money you spend goes to a regime that has never been elected. Levy said that while the Canadian government is aware of the situation in Cuba, it continues the "legacy left by Trudeau," treating Castro like an elected representative of the people of Cuba. "From then until now, Canada has continued to trade with Cuba, and promoted tourism and investment in Cuba. All these things support the "nomenklatura" which has stolen the people's assets. We don't understand why the robbers of the country are recognized as legitimate rulers." Sambra said the constitution that was in place before Castro took power should be brought back, which he said Castro changed "to suit his needs." (*Epoch Times*, 23/3/08)

March 24: Caller after caller on South Florida Spanish-language radio talk shows complained that cardinal Tarcisio Bertone had missed an opportunity to press for democratic change in Cuba. Bertone's visit marked the 10th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba in which he urged the international community to help churches on the island and called on Castro's communist government to open up to the world. Unlike the late pope's calls for change, though, Bertone did not publicly question Cuba's human rights record or meet with dissidents or their families. The cardinal's silence on human rights is raising concerns that the Vatican has turned its back on Cubans seeking democratic change after 49 years of the Castro brothers' rule. Ninoska Pérez Castellón, a Radio Mambí commentator and a director of the conservative Cuban Liberty Council, said she wasn't surprised by Bertone's seeming inability to confront Cuba's dictatorship. Many exiles, after all, have long been upset with the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, because he does not speak out against the regime. "The church is paying a price for the actions of Cardinal Bertone and Cardinal Ortega in

Havana (...) with a very comfortable relationship with the Cuban government," said Pérez Castellón. María Cristina Herrera, founder of the Cuban Studies Institute and a Catholic, noted that exiles have long helped island churches. "Aid to church people in Cuba has been going on for a long time. But it has been done largely in silence." At St. Agatha Catholic Church in West Miami-Dade, a group of parishioners, mostly Cuban-born women, sells pies, breads and sweet rolls each Sunday after Mass -- all to help a church in Holguín, in eastern Cuba. (*The Miami Herald*, 24/3/08)



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

March 2: The President of the Republic of Mozambique, Armando Emilio Guebuza, arrived in Havana for an official visit at the invitation of Cuban President Raul Castro. The visitor was welcomed at the Jose Marti International Airport by Education Minister Luis Ignacio Gomez who was accompanied by Deputy Foreign Minister Yiliam Jimenez and the island's ambassador to the African country, Eva Seoane, among other officials. (*Prensa Latina*, 2/3/08)

March 3: Cuban President, Raul Castro, met with the President of the Republic of Mozambique Armando Emilio Guebuza, who is paying an official visit to Cuba. Following an official welcoming ceremony for the visitor at the Revolution Palace in Havana, Raul Castro and Armano Emilio Guebuza held talks on the development of bilateral relations and on issues of regional, multilateral and international interest. Present at the encounter were Cuba's First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura; Vice-president Esteban Lazo; Health Minister Jose Ramon Balaguer; the member of the Secretariat of Cuba's Communist Party Central Committee Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz; Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Minister Marta Lomas; Education Minister Luis Ignacio Gomez, First deputy Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez; deputy Foreign Minister Yiliam Jimenez and the Cuban ambassador to Mozambique Evangelina Seoane. The President of the Republic of Mozambique was accompanied by several high-ranking officials. (*ACN*, 3/3/08)

March 3: A Spanish language edition of a book on Canadian- Cuban relations by Canadian researchers John M.Kirk and Peter McKenna was presented at the Friendship House in Havana as a symbol of the excellent ties existing between the two nations. The Spanish edition of "Canada-Cuba Relations: The Other Good Neighbor Policy" ("Sesenta años de relaciones bilaterales Canadá-Cuba") was printed by Cuban Ciencias Sociales publishing house. (*ACN*, 3/3/08)

March 3: Cuba highlighted that the fact of being a founding member of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) proves that, in the end, reason defeats force, and principles impose over power and money. In his speech at the opening of the top-level segment of the Seventh HRC Session, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said that after 20 long years of "fighting devils" we end old coercive styles of the group. The island's official noted that the United States, with several pretexts to legitimate its aggression against

Cuba in the former Commission turned "into failed State in this matter, responsible for the most dangerous crimes and violations of human rights." " Perez Roque reiterated his country's will to cooperate with the HRC, "with non-discriminatory and universal human rights mechanisms, with the strict respect to our sovereignty." The Cuban official adopted other reasons to support the UN organization, among them the abuses of outrages committed by Israel against the Palestinian people, the existence of 900 million hungry people and 800 million illiterate persons. [[Statement by Perez Roque](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 3/3/08)

March 4: The 10th International Meeting of Economists on Globalization and Development Problems will focus on integration on its second day of discussion. Topics like the situation of the Latin American and Caribbean economies, employment, social exclusion and regional integration will be addressed by Jorge Mattar, from the Mexico-based Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and Pablo Fajnziber, from the World Bank. Other lecturers are, Norman Girvan, former general secretary of the Association of Caribbean States, and Antonio Romero Gomez, director of Relations for Integration of the Latin American Economic System. Economist Oscar Ugarteche stressed that Latin America has made significant progress in regional integration. Chile's Orlando Caputo, from the Center of Studies on Transnationalization, Economy and Society, stated that Latin America is aware of such changes, with deepening unequal development and underdevelopment. We have been witnessing the failure of neoliberalism and the asphyxiation of economic reproduction, he noted. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/3/08)

March 4: Fidel Castro waded into the growing dispute between Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, backing Ecuador but aiming his fire mainly at arch-enemy the United States. Cuban allies Ecuador and Venezuela broke diplomatic ties with Colombia after its forces killed a rebel inside Ecuador in a raid that sparked troop deployments and warnings of war. "Imperialism has just committed a monstrous crime in Ecuador," Castro wrote in his latest column for Cuban state-run media, this one on his relations with Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa. "Deadly bombs were dropped in the early morning against a group of men and women whom, with few exceptions, were sleeping (...) they were Yankee bombs, guided by Yankee satellites." Fidel Castro blasted the Colombian and US rationale for the attack -- that the FARC is a terrorist organization. "The concrete accusations against these human beings do not justify the action (...) absolutely no one has the right to kill in cold blood," he said. "If we accept this imperial method of war and barbarity, Yankee bombs guided by Yankee satellites could fall on any group of Latin American men and women in the territory of any country," Castro said. He insisted Cubans "are not enemies of Colombia" but said "to remain silent would make us accomplices (...) Ecuadorean territory was occupied by troops that crossed the border." The Cuban government, now headed by his brother Raul, has yet to comment on the Latin American crisis. [[Rafael Correa](#)] (*Reuters*, 4/3/08)

March 4: The European Union welcomed as a "positive development" Cuba's decision to sign two UN human rights pacts, in an unprecedented gesture days after Raul Castro took over as president. The Slovenian president of the EU said that, "in becoming a State Party

to these legally binding international human rights law instruments, Cuba is freely assuming the obligations contained in these international documents". "The Presidency looks forward to the implementation of these legally binding human rights obligations by Cuba", it concludes. (*EU Press Releases*, 4/3/08)

March 5: The European Union's top development aid official started a four-day trip to Cuba in a bid to heal strained relations with Havana. Louis Michel's mission, which was planned before the official hand-over of power from Fidel Castro to his brother Raul, will be the first high-level visit of an EU official to the Caribbean island since 2005 and the first since Raul became president. Officials at EU headquarters say they are keen to hear out senior Cuban officials on whether changes, including economic and political reforms, are in the works now that Fidel has retired. Michel's spokesman, John Clancy, said the European Commission wanted to see "the resumption of an open and constructive political dialogue" with Cuban leaders, a move Havana remains hesitant to endorse after the EU slapped political sanctions against the island in 2003. The EU has since suspended those measures, but ties have remained icy. Clancy said Raul's appointment as president "constitutes a new situation" and Commissioner Michel has expressed his willingness to engage in a constructive political dialogue with President Raul Castro. He added that Michel was "particularly interested to learn more, to listen, to hear about" Raul's intentions over possible political administrative and economic reforms that might happen. Clancy said the EU was eager to resume talks on a wide range of issues related to climate change, the environment and on closer cooperation with Cuba on humanitarian aid issues. Michel was scheduled to meet senior Cuban lawmakers and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. (*AP*, 5/3/08)

March 6: Mozambican President Armando Emilio Guebuza wound up his official visit to Cuba with the certainty that relations between his country and the Caribbean island have strengthened, the head of State said in Havana. "I'm satisfied with this visit," said Guebuza, adding that bilateral cooperation is growing in various directions, especially in the healthcare and education sectors. The African leader and his delegation closed their agenda with a tour of the Iberostar Varadero Hotel. Cuba's deputy minister of Tourism, Maria Elena Lopez, updated the visitors on the development of this industry in Cuba. (*ACN*,6/3/08)

March 6: The Slovene presidency of the European Union (EU) is confident that significant changes will take place in Cuba. "We have seen some cosmetic changes, but no substantial transformation. We are still confident that they will come around," indicated the Foreign Minister of Slovenia, Dimitrij Rupel. In declarations following an EU - Canada ministerial meeting in which international issues were discussed, the Slovene chancellor stressed that the Union is "in favor of promoting democratic reform and human rights" on the island. As regards the political prisoners, he expects that issue "to be removed from the agenda as soon as possible," referring to their release from prison. (*EER*, 6/3/08)

March 6: Cuba, through its ambassador Juan Antonio Fernandez and in its capacity as current chair of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), is promoting a resolution to

condemn Israel at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva. The resolution, which condemns the new escalation of violence and Israel's recent aggressions in the Gaza Strip, will be presented under the auspices of the NAM, the Arab League, the Islamic Conference and the African group. It will be another effort to condemn Israel during the Seventh Session of the HRC that will conclude on March 28th. The text condemns the Israeli violation of human rights and its constant military attacks and raids in the occupied Palestinian territories, and particularly its massacres in the Gaza Strip. (*Prensa Latina*, 6/3/08)

March 6: The European Union's top development aid official arrived in Cuba to sound out the plans of its new President Raul Castro and relaunch ties that were largely frozen under his brother Fidel Castro. EU Aid Commissioner Louis Michel is expected to meet over the next day or two with Raul Castro, who succeeded his ailing brother on February 24 as communist Cuba's first new leader in almost half a century. "This first transfer of power constitutes a new situation. Michel has expressed his willingness to engage in a constructive political dialogue with Raul Castro," John Clancy, a spokesman for the EU official, told the press in Brussels. "Michel is keen to listen and to learn about President Raul Castro's possible intentions to undertake some restructuring of the state administration and a number of economic reforms." Brussels froze relations with Havana in 2003 after Cuba jailed 75 dissidents in a political crackdown and executed three men who hijacked a ferry to flee to the United States. Fidel Castro then told the EU that Cuba did not need its aid. (*Reuters*, 6/3/08)

March 7: Capitalism is a formidable system of economic terrorism now exercised as a habitual practice, Cuban economist Osvaldo Martinez told the 10th international meeting on Globalization and Development Problems. The director of the Cuban World Economy Research Center reminded the nearly 1,200 delegates from 55 countries and 24 international organizations that capitalists have rationalized economic terror and converted the victims into the guilty. In his closing remarks at the Havana Convention Center, Martinez said that with unbridled speculation, without bombs or bullets, capitalism provokes hunger, poverty, unemployment and exclusion. Defenders of capitalism do not seek to repair social shames, nor use technical and scientific progress to eradicate them, he added. (*Prensa Latina*, 7/3/08)

March 7: Fidel Castro welcomed the resolution of a dispute between Ecuador and Colombia reached at a Mercosur summit, saying in a statement that the only loser was US "imperialism." Noting that no US diplomats were present at the gathering, Castro wrote that "peace was immediately sealed, along with the knowledge that we are not obligated to wage war among nations that share solid ties of brotherhood." "I underscored the importance of this meeting in one of my reflections. It did not take place within the OAS. Most importantly, US diplomats were not in attendance. In one way or another, despite the profound ideological and tactical differences, everyone shone and showed the virtues that earned them important positions in office", Castro wrote. [[El único perdedor](#)] (*AP*, 8/3/08)

March 8: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez made his first visit to Cuba since the presidency passed from Fidel Castro to his younger brother Raul, state television reported. Broadcast footage showed Raul greeting Chavez when he arrived in Havana the night of March 7 along with Yolanda Pulecio, the mother of French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt, and Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba. The two women have conducted an international campaign for the release of Betancourt, who is the highest-profile hostage held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the rebel group known as the FARC. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque told reporters that Chavez had met with Raul Castro. But he did not mention that the women had accompanied the Venezuelan president to Cuba and it was unknown if they were at the meeting. Chavez made the unannounced visit on his way home from a summit in the Dominican Republic, where he and the presidents of Colombia and Ecuador agreed to end a bitter dispute over a Colombian cross-border raid on rebels in Ecuadorean territory. (AP, 8/3/08)

March 8: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez paid a visit to his close friend Fidel Castro, making his first trip to Cuba since the ailing 81-year-old was replaced as president by his younger brother Raul. "I talked for a long time with Chavez today," the elder Castro said in a statement distributed by the Foreign Ministry. In the unannounced trip after the summit of Latin American leaders in the Dominican Republic, Chavez also met with Raul Castro, Cuban officials said. Before returning to Venezuela, Chavez told Cuban state television that he found Fidel "happy, splendid and full of ideas." Castro wrote that the Venezuelan president was "euphoric from that battle for peace and his role" at the summit, where Andean leaders agreed to end a bitter dispute over a Colombian raid on rebels in Ecuadorean territory. He also joked that Chavez initially didn't want to see him because he didn't want to risk giving him the flu. Castro said that he was not going to reveal all the topics he discussed with Chavez. "I had a long conversation with Chavez. We are like brothers. The decision to publish what we discussed is not mine to make, as it has never been and will never be. Venezuela is not Brazil", he said in a reference to the five articles he wrote on his conversation with Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva during the Brazilian President's visit to Havana. [[La visita de Chávez](#)] (AP, *Prensa Latina*, 9/3/08)

March 8: The European Union's top development aid official said he found a new "open-mindedness" in Cuba, but he and his hosts noted that EU diplomatic sanctions remain a hurdle to improved ties. EU Aid Commissioner Louis Michel spoke on the second day of the first trip to Cuba by a senior European official since ailing communist stalwart Fidel Castro handed power to his brother Raul Castro last month. "In my opinion, the time and moment is right to have a dialogue with Cuba," Michel said in a joint news conference with Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. "I decided to come to Cuba in these important times because the normalization of relations between Cuba and the European Union is a very important question," the development and humanitarian aid commissioner said. "The first obstacle to normalization is the sanctions" that the EU imposed in 2003 and suspended two years later, Michel said, adding that they should be reviewed "to see if they can be eliminated." The sanctions were imposed after the Cuban regime arrested 75 dissidents in a crackdown. Michel said he would have to brief the European parliament and Council of Europe about his trip and try to convince them to

remove the sanctions. Perez Roque said his conversation with Michel was "positive" but that "obstacles that need to be removed remain." "We are not yet immersed in a political dialogue," he said. "We considered the possibility of reaching an agreement for a political dialogue that includes all topics ... including the human rights issue," the foreign minister said. [[Joint communiqué](#)] (*EUBusiness, Reuters*, 8/3/08)

March 9: For many years, the word cancer was taboo in Cuba. "No one would say 'cancer' and that was part of the problem," says Dr. Rolando Camacho, speaking from Havana. For the last decade, Cuban health educators have been working to dispel the secrecy and shame about cancer. At the same time, Terry Fox – the Canadian hero who boldly showed the world the effects of cancer (he wore an artificial leg) and how one could fully live with cancer – played a pivotal role in turning Cuban thinking around. On March 15, in the 10th Terry Fox Run for cancer research, 2.5 million Cubans are expected to walk, run, ride, roller blade – do whatever they can – remembering a young Canadian who has become a hero in their own country. Camacho, who heads Cuba's National Oncology Group, says Terry's message echoes the objectives of the island nation's national health program: "If you don't accept cancer as a common disease you will not fight against it." He's watched as participants swelled from about 800 in 1998 to 2.3 million in 2007, becoming the world's largest outside of Canada. (*The Toronto Star*, 9/3/08)

March 9: Representatives of the Cuban domestic opposition claimed disappointment regarding the visit to the island by the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, whom they criticized for returning to Brussels without meeting with them. The leader of Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), Oswaldo Payá, said that if Michel's attitude "reflects the stand that the European Union (EU) is going to take from now on, then it will be abandoning an ethical position and ignoring the rights of the Cuban people." Oscar Espinosa Chepe, member of the group of 75 dissidents imprisoned in the spring 2003, lamented that Louis Michel's visit turned out to be "disappointing." According to Martha Beatriz Roque, leader of the Assembly to Promote Civil society, opposition activists do not even know "what the purpose of the visit was." (*EER, El Nuevo Herald*, 10/3/08)

March 10: The UN special rapporteur on the Right to Nutrition, Jean Ziegler, presented a report in Geneva, that called on the United States to end its 45-year-old economic embargo against the communist-ruled island. Ziegler recommended to the United States "in a very firm manner" that it lift "the illegal blockade against Cuba." "Cuba should have free access to export markets assured, and the unnecessary costs and inconveniences that the embargo causes in the food import system should be eliminated," he said. The Swiss sociologist visited the island last fall at the invitation of Cuban authorities. (*EFE*, 10/3/08)

March 10: Cuba's culture minister said that Chile will have an "important role" in the 2009 International Book Fair on the island, where it will be the specially invited country, and announced that the event will pay homage to singer-songwriters Violeta Parra and Victor Jara. Abel Prieto told the official Prensa Latina news agency that "Chile will play

an important role" at the fair, the island's biggest cultural event, and said that "some preliminary ideas have already been sketched out" with the president of the Writers Society of that country, Reinaldo Lacamara Calaf. With regard to the homage to the Chilean musicians, the culture minister recalled that Cuban singer-songwriters Silvio Rodriguez and Pablo Milanés have a great devotion for Violeta Parra, and considered her to have had a lasting influence on the work of the two founders of the island's Nueva Trova (New Troubadour) movement. As for Jara, Prieto stressed his standing as a "symbol of art" against fascism and his "exceptional values." (*EFE*, 11/3/08)

March 11: Cuba said before the UN Human Rights Council that it is ready to invite other special rapporteurs to visit the island after the trip of Swiss sociologist Jean Ziegler, the international body's special rapporteur on the Right to Nutrition. Cuban envoy Juan Antonio Fernandez Palacios thanked UN special rapporteur Jean Ziegler for his request directed at Washington to end the embargo, and he expressed Havana's desire to invite other rapporteurs if "the constructive environment continues in the heart of this new entity and if unfair campaigns are not relaunched." Fernandez Palacios thus referred to the new UN Human Rights Council, which, after replacing the Commission on Human Rights, eliminated the mandate of the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cuba. "Pressure never has worked and never will work," the Cuban ambassador added. (*EFE*, 11/3/08)

March 11: Fidel Castro may have retired after 49 years as Cuba's leader, but he is still busy preparing editions of his memoirs, now aimed at Asian readers. The Communist Party newspaper *Granma* said that editions in Hindi, Farsi and Sinhalese are underway, following publication of his memoirs in China. "Many of the great challenges facing humanity will have no solution without the active and pivotal role of China," Castro wrote in the prologue to the Chinese edition, which was published in Mandarin. The memoirs, written in question-and-answer style, give a definitive account of Castro's views on major events since he seized power in 1959, from the Cuban missile crisis to Cuba's military role in Africa and the fall of Soviet communism. [[Al pueblo de China](#)] (*Reuters*, 11/3/08)

March 11: The President of Uruguay, Tabaré Vazquez, highlighted the benefits received by his people thanks to the Cuban cooperation for the inauguration of a modern ophthalmological center in Montevideo. During a ceremony held in Paso de los Toros, a central locality in Uruguay, Vazquez said: "we have a top level ophthalmological center thanks to the cooperation of our Cuban brothers and sisters and the government of the island." The Hospital of the Eyes, as Uruguayans call it, was inaugurated last November by President Vazquez. (*ACN*, 12/3/08)

March 11: The ambassador of Mexico to Havana, Gabriel Jiménez Remus, declared that his country is intent on maintaining relations with Cuba, "regardless of whom is" at the helm of the government on the island. "It is of no consequence who is at the head of the Cuban Government. We respect the principles of the Republic of Cuba and its domestic regime, no matter who is in charge," said Jiménez during a press conference held to

announce the upcoming visit to the island of the Mexican Foreign Secretary, Patricia Espinosa. (*EFE*, 11/3/08)

March 12: Reporters Without Borders has initiated the first Online Free Expression Day. "From now on, we will organize activities every 12 March to condemn cyber-censorship throughout the world," Reporters Without Borders said. "A response of this kind is needed to the growing tendency to crack down on bloggers and to close websites." "Today, the first time this day is being marked, we are giving all internet users the opportunity to demonstrate in places where protests are not normally possible. We hope many will come and protest in virtual versions of Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Cuba's Revolution Square or on the streets of Rangoon, in Burma. At least 62 cyber-dissidents are currently imprisoned worldwide, while more than 2,600 websites, blogs or discussions forums were closed or made inaccessible in 2007." (*RWB Press Release*, 12/3/08)

March 12: A message from five Cubans who remain held in US prisons since 1998 was read at the UN Council of Human Rights Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Olga Salanueva, wife of Rene Gonzalez, one of the Cuban Five- as they are internationally known -, read the document signed by her husband and Gerardo Hernandez, Antonio Guerrero, Ramon Labanino and Fernando Gonzalez. The president of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Leila Zerrougui, recalled that almost three years ago the office she heads declared the detention and imprisonment of the Cuban Five illegal and arbitrary. (*ACN*, 12/3/08)

March 12: Having a close relationship with Cuba that transcends decades of political turbulence on both sides of the Atlantic, the Czech Republic is among the countries spearheading the discourse regarding Cuba's future following Fidel Castro's resignation. As one of the European Union's sharpest critics of the totalitarian regime in Cuba, the Czech government views the conclusion of Fidel Castro's reign as a positive development. In a February 18 statement, the Czech Foreign Affairs Ministry expressed hope that this development would steer Cuba toward political and economic reforms that would "lead this beautiful country out of the freeze-up of the past years," and urged the new Cuban leadership to reject the repressive tactics that characterized Fidel Castro's reign. According to the ministry statement, "future development should be aimed toward the liberation of all political prisoners, initiating a dialogue with the political opposition and holding a free election." Although ambitious in its recommendations, the Foreign Affairs Ministry's views echo the international community's skepticism toward Cuba's new leadership. "There is a whole club of young [communists] under Raúl Castro," Foreign Affairs Minister Karel Schwarzenberg said in a February 21 interview on his party's Web site. "These people are between 25 and 40 years old, and they are just now getting to power. If a whole generation leaves with the old master, they have an immense opportunity to take its place." (*The Prague Post*, 12/3/08)

March 13: The President and scientific director of Canada's Terry Fox cancer research center, is in Havana to attend the 10th Marathon of Hope scheduled for March 15. Victor Ling is going to give a lecture at the Cuba-Canada Workshop on Cancer at the Hotel

Nacional, in Havana. Also present on the Terry Fox Run along with Ling will be the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, Michael Chambers. Carlos Gattorno, director of the organizing committee of the Race, told the press, that some 30,000 people have volunteered to participate in the run, with the longest stretch being 3 kms and the shortest 1 km. The signal will be given at 10 am on March 15 through the national radio station Radio Reloj to start at the same time in all the municipalities of the country, as well as rural and mountainous communities. More than 5,000 runs are expected to take place throughout the country, said Gattorno. In addition, foreign visitors have been invited to join the race as well at all tourist facilities of the island, whose most important tourist market is Canada. (*AIN*, 13/3/08)

March 13: The Cuba Initiative has announced that Ian Taylor MP, the Conservative MP for Esher and Walton, has accepted an invitation to take on the role of UK Chairman of the organisation, in succession to Lord Moynihan. His counterpart in Havana is Ricardo Cabrisas Ruiz, Minister of State in the office of the President. Commenting on his appointment, Taylor said: "This is an interesting moment to attempt to create new momentum in the relationship with the Cuban government. I am convinced that with the proximity of Cuba to islands of considerable importance to UK interests, such as Jamaica, we have an opportunity to play a role in improving exchanges between our two countries." (*Caribbean Net News*, 13/3/08)

March 14: The Spanish government expects the new president of Cuba, Raúl Castro, to facilitate an opening in the island, said Trinidad Jiménez, State Secretary for Ibero-America. "The European Union has always supported political dialogue, which might entail criticisms, but is still important nonetheless," indicated Jiménez. "If (the Cuban government) ever considered implementing reforms, a dialogue would be required. I believe that now would be a good time," she added. "We all believe that politics cannot continue to be carried out the same way it has been conducted in the last 50 years," commented Trinidad Jiménez. (*BBC Mundo*, 14/3/08)

March 14: Cuba and Mexico declared their once-chilly relations fully restored, and Cuba's foreign minister said he will soon deliver a formal invitation for Mexico's president to visit the island. "Relations between Mexico and Cuba are fully normalized," Cuban Foreign Minister Perez Roque said after meeting with his Mexican counterpart, Patricia Espinosa in Havana. Mexican President Felipe Calderon has said he wants warmer ties with Cuba -- which historically have been good but soured under his predecessor, Vicente Fox, who feuded publicly with Fidel Castro. Perez Roque and Espinosa signed a series of agreements to reactivate cooperation. The pair applauded Mexico's agreement last month to restructure US\$400 million (euro273 million) in Cuban debt in an effort to boost trade between their countries. [[Comunicado conjunto](#)]

March 14: As Raul Castro was formally invested as Cuban head of state, a Reporters Without Borders' special correspondent was in Cuba examining the state of press freedom, five years after the "black spring" of March 2003. On the eve of the fifth anniversary of this unprecedented crackdown, which made Cuba the world's second largest prison for journalists, the worldwide press freedom organisation - banned from

visiting Cuba - released the report of this visit. Five years after "black spring" in which 27 journalists were arrested and unfairly sentenced to prison terms ranging from 14 to 27 years in prison, 19 of them are still in jail in very harsh conditions, the report says. The report also stresses the extreme difficulties for those who are not in prison to manage to work as journalists in a country in which the state has a monopoly on news, printing and broadcasting. It also reveals however that the independent Cuban press has done better than just survive the "black spring" which almost crushed it. A new generation born out of an emerging civil society, has taken over websites and the very few underground magazines, people like the blogger Yoani Sanchez. [[Black Spring Five Years After](#)] (*Canadian Press*, 14/3/08)

March 15: The slower ones made it to the finish line in front of the Kid Chocolate sports center in Havana either walking or in wheelchairs, half an hour after Radio Reloj radio station gave the signal for the 10th Terry Fox Marathon of Hope to begin simultaneously in some 5,000 locations throughout Cuba. In all 169 municipalities of the country and the tourist resorts of Varadero, Cienfuegos, Ciego de Avila and Holguin, volunteers ran to raise funds for cancer research and pay homage to Terry Fox, who pioneered a cross-Canada run to raise money for this purpose in 1980. The president and scientific director of Canada's Terry Fox cancer research center, Victor Ling, and the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, Michael Chambers, attended the run in Havana. (*ACN*, 15/3/08)

March 15: Pope Benedict XVI approved the decree that will allow the beatification in the near future of Cuban priest Jose Olallo Valdes, the Vatican press office announced. According to the note from the Vatican, Benedict XVI signed the decree that attributes a miracle to the intercession of Valdes of the Hospitaller Order of St. John of God, who was born in Havana on February 12, 1820 and died in Camaguey on March 7, 1889. The postulant in the cause of beatifying the priest, Felix Lisazo Berruete, had announced that the Catholic Church confirmed the intercession of Olallo in the "miraculous cure" of a 3-year-old. Olallo Valdes attended to cholera patients during the 1835 epidemic in Camaguey, and during his visit to Cuba in 1998, the late Pope John Paul II expressed his hope that the Cuban religious could achieve sainthood. (*EFE*, 15/3/08)

March 16: The Russian frigate Pallada, which is making a voyage around the world, arrived in the Cuban capital city of Havana. The ship came from Venezuela almost a day earlier than planned thanks to the fair wind, Russian vice-consul in Cuba Alexei Nekrasov told the press. More than 100 cadets will board the ship during the brief stop in the course of a partial rotation of the crew. The Pallada crew will meet with Cuban officials, Russian diplomats and colleagues from the training vessel of the Far Eastern State Fishery Technical University. The current voyage of the Pallada, which is the quickest sailing vessel in the world, is dedicated to the 190th anniversary of the round-the-world voyage of Russian ships led by Fabian Gothlieb von Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev and the 50th anniversary of the Russian research in Antarctica. Four hundred cadets of Russian naval schools will be trained in three shifts aboard the Pallada during the 270-day voyage. (*Itar-Tass*, 16/3/08)

March 17: Michael Andrew Chambers, president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, said his visit to Cuba to participate in the Terry Fox "Run for Hope" gave him the opportunity to explore possible agreements with the Cuban sports institutions, in the near future. On his first trip to Cuba, Chambers said he felt "very impressed" after visiting several important Cuban sports centers, including the anti-doping laboratory, recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the World Anti-doping Agency. At a press conference, shortly before returning home, the Canadian sports official praised the enthusiasm he saw in Cuba for the celebration of the event honoring the memory of handicapped Canadian athlete Terry Fox and above all for the impressive participation figures received from the Cuban organizers. (*Periódico Ahora*, 18/3/08)

March 18: Cuba, on behalf of the Non Aligned Movement, noted the importance of intercultural dialogue in terms of human rights and outlined a means to brace it on world scale. At a United Nations Human Rights Commission (HRC) panel, Rodolfo Reyes, director of the Cuban Foreign Ministry for Multilateral Affairs, recalled the efforts at UNESCO to protect and develop cultural diversity. However, he regretted that neither the late commission nor the current Council have paid due attention to the issue resulting in what they consider to be a shortcoming. Reyes said Cuba protects and develops national cultures just as the sovereignty of states and bracing multilateralism help consolidate global cooperation based on solidarity and respect for diversity. (*Prensa Latina*, 18/3/08)

March 18: The Communist parties of China and Cuba are taking steps to further strengthen bilateral exchange as well as relations based on friendship and cooperation. For this purpose, Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, head of the Foreign Relations Department at the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, is in Beijing conducting a working visit. In his first day in the Chinese capital, Ramirez de Estenoz met with Wang Jiarui, head of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party. During his stay in the Asian nation, Ramirez de Estenoz will visit the Central School of the Chinese Communist Party, the Cuba-China Friendship School and facilities that will host competitions during next summer's Olympic Games in Beijing. (*ACN*, 18/3/08)

March 18: The president of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, expressed his public support for the demand that all political prisoners should be released in Cuba, reported the wife of one of those sentenced. Laura Pollán, a member of Ladies in White, read before foreign journalists the message sent by the head of State. According to the text read by Pollán Rodríguez, Zapatero said that "Spain will continue to do everything within its power to obtain the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, including her husband." The Spanish President also voiced his "admiration for the tenacious work of Las Damas de Blanco," wives and relatives of the prisoners. (*La Jornada, El País*, 18/3/08)

March 18: The European Union must publicly condemn human rights abuses in Cuba and demand an immediate release of all Cuban political prisoners, former Czech president Vaclav Havel and French philosopher Andre Glucksmann say in their statement

published by the Austrian daily Der Standard. The appeal entitled What Europe Owes the Dissidents of Castro's Regime was also signed by other members of the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba. The signatories include former Slovenian president Milan Kucan, former Lithuanian president Vytautas Landsbergis, former Estonian prime minister Mart Laar, former Canadian prime minister Kim Campbell and former Polish finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz. [[Europe Needs Solidarity Over Cuba](#)] (CTK, 18/3/08)

March 18: On the 5th anniversary of the largest crackdown against political opponents in Cuba, Amnesty International called on the new Cuban authorities to immediately release the 58 dissidents still being held in jails across the country. “Five years is five years too many. The only crime committed by these 58 is the peaceful exercise of their fundamental freedoms. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience. They must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director for Amnesty International’s Americas Program. [[Cuba: Five Years Too Many](#)] (AI Press Release, 18/3/08)

March 18: Whether to lift European Union diplomatic sanctions or not on Cuba created a lively debate in Ljubljana, during the fifteen session of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly of the African Caribbean Pacific Group and the EU. This brief debate was sparked by a question from Michael Gahler, from Germany, to Louis Michel, European Commissioner for development, asking him to draw up a balance sheet of his recent visit to Cuba (7-9 March) and to, “communicate his impressions on the future of this island in terms of democracy and human rights”. Michel said, “there is a sincere desire and real political will from the Cuban government to open a true partnership with the EU” but there is a blockage on the sanctions that are not understood because they have been suspended but not been gotten rid of. Michel appealed for these sanctions to be definitively lifted. Gahler sarcastically posed the question of what was a post Castro period and described the transition from Fidel to Raul Castro as a “monarchic succession”. He criticised Michel for not having met the democratic opposition. (*Agence Europe*, 20/3/08)

March 18: During the current month, the Cuban Embassy in Pakistan has held three meetings with groups of Pakistani students who were selected to study Medicine in Cuba, said a spokesman of the Cuban embassy. The spokesman said these students are part of the 1,000 free of charge-scholarships granted by the Cuban government to Pakistan after the devastating earthquake that affected the country in October 2005. These meetings took place in the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad and were organized by the Cuban Embassy with the cooperation of the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC), he added. (*PPI*, 18/3/08)

March 21: Cuba’s first Vice-President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura met with Kenny Davis Anthony, former Prime Minister of Saint Lucia, who is in Havana. The leader of the parliamentary opposition in the sister Caribbean island said he deeply admires Cuba for its “greatness in giving without asking for anything in return”, and mentioned the unconditional support given to his nation since the establishment of diplomatic relations

in 1979. Machado Ventura for his part praised the unity and strength of the Labor Party of Saint Lucia and called it an example to follow by other peoples. Both leaders talked about the agenda of the visiting delegation, which will return to Santa Lucia on March 23. Activities include a visit to the Infirmary School in Jaguey Grande, Matanzas, where young people from Saint Lucia study. The visitors will also tour the oil refinery of Cienfuegos and the new community of "petrocasas" (houses built from oil derivatives), a Cuba- Venezuela joint project, some 250 kilometers east of Havana. Kenny D. Anthony had previously visited Cuba as Prime Minister in May 2006. (ACN, 21/3/08)

March 21: Pope Benedict XVI donated the collection from a Holy Thursday Mass to a Cuban orphanage -- a gesture seen in Havana as a sign the Roman Catholic Church wants to be a key moral force in Cuba's future. On the heels of a historic leadership change and a high-level diplomatic visit from the Vatican, Pope Benedict's nod to Cuba is the latest example of how the church and this communist government have taken small, quiet steps toward healing a once-adversarial relationship. (AP, 21/3/08)

March 22: Cuba rejected criticism of China for its crackdown on recent riots in Tibet, which has led to calls for a possible boycott of this summer's Olympic Games in Beijing. In an e-mail statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, Havana also accused US-funded Radio Free Asia of being the principal voice behind talk of a boycott. "The government of Cuba condemns with all of its energy attempts to organize a crusade aimed at undermining this noble undertaking," the government said. Protests against Chinese rule in Tibet have drawn a harsh response from Beijing, and Chinese authorities say 16 people have died and 325 were injured. The Dalai Lama's exiled government says 99 Tibetans have been killed. Cuba's government added that it believes the Tibet riots were "promoted from outside the country," and expressed opposition to "any attempt to meddle in the internal affairs of China." (AP, 22/3/08)

March 22: A photo exhibition portraying the Cuito Cuanavale Battle was inaugurated, in Havana, by the general Antonio Enrique Luzon. The exhibition shows the "greatest moments" of the historic battle of Cuito Cuanavale that marks the defeat imposed by the ex-Peoples Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA), jointly with military officers of Cuba, on the extinct South African Apartheid regime. The ambassadors of Angola, South Africa and of Namibia accredited in the Republic of Cuba, Antonio Jose Condesse de Carvalho, Thenjiwe Mtintso and Claudia Grace Ushona, respectively, as well as other representatives of the diplomatic body, attended the ceremony. (ANGOP, 23/3/08)

March 22: The Russian sailing vessel Pallada left the port of the Cuban capital and headed for the Azores Islands (Portugal) to begin the second stage of its months-long sail around the world. The Pallada continues the travel with a new crew aboard after ending the first stage that was started in Vladivostok on November 2. In Havana, 110 new crewmembers, students from Russian nautical institutions, boarded the vessel. They replaced 126 crewmembers who took a flight to return home. The permanent crew and students, those who went ashore and newcomers, have very good impressions of Havana, Pallada captain Nikolai Zorchenko said. It is not the first port the vessel visited, and

Havana impressed the crew with its warm and friendly nature. Cuban authorities provided assistance for the stay and continuation of the sailing. The Pallada was the first Russian sailing vessel that visited Havana in the post-Soviet times. (*Itar-Tass*, 23/3/08)

March 23: Canadians who are interested in experiencing Cuban life first-hand should consider becoming a volunteer with the Che Guevara Work Brigade. While it's nice to visit the various tourists resorts, there is also another side of Cuba few people get to see and experience and they should consider it, said Fernando Duque Gomez, Canada Specialist from the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos, in Havana, Cuba. Gomez, who is on a cross Canada tour organized by the Canadian Network on Cuba, was in Fort Erie during a luncheon meeting at the May Wah Restaurant. "Sometimes people like to get out of the tourist resort and connect with the real people of Cuba. They should give it a try," said Gomez. The Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade is a non-profit project of the Canadian Network on Cuba for friendship and solidarity with Cuba. (*Review*, 24/3/08)

March 23: For his support of Africa's liberation struggles, Namibia granted the Order of Welwitschia to the leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro. According to Granma news daily, on the occasion of the 18th anniversary of the independence of Namibia, the medal was presented by Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba to Cuban Army Corps General Leopoldo Cintra Frias during a ceremony held in Windhoek, the Namibian capital. During the ceremony, Cintra Frias said that this medal represents the gratitude of the Namibian people and added that it is a well-deserved homage to all Cuban internationalists who died fighting in Africa and to the Cuban people, in general. (*ACN*, 24/3/08)

March 25: Cuban Public Health Minister Jose Ramon Balaguer arrived in Beijing on an official visit, invited by Chinese Health Minister Chen Zhu. His agenda in China also includes meeting with other officials of the sector, and presiding over the official opening of the China-Cuba Friendship joint ophthalmologic hospital of Hebi city, Henan province. A Cuban ophthalmologic team has already carried out thousands of inquiries in that population and its surroundings to learn of several eye pathologies, prior to the work to be started in the coming days. The hospital will have one hundred beds and the most modern equipment, to diagnose and treat eye afflictions. (*Prensa Latina*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Haiti's Senator Maxime Roumer thanked Cuba for its assistance to the development of his country in the area of renewable energy sources. In statements to the press in Ciego de Avila, the visiting Haitian senator said that the Cuban Society for the Promotion of Renewable Energy Sources and Environmental Respect, Cubasolar, and Haiti's Grand'Anse association have strengthened relations aimed at implementing Cuba's experiences in his country. Roumer, who heads Grand'Anse, is attending an international workshop on energy, environment and sustainable development underway in Ciego de Avila. "We believe that the Cuban experience will also contribute to lowering contamination levels with the treatment of residuals, the use of wind-based energy and the production of biogas," said Roumer. (*ACN*, 25/3/08)

March 25: Twelve Cubans landed on a remote Honduran island after spending almost two weeks adrift in the Caribbean aboard a makeshift wooden boat, Honduran officials said. The Cubans set out March 12 from the Cuban city of Manzanillo, heading for the United States aboard a boat equipped with two tiny outboard motors, armed forces spokesman Ramiro Archaga said. They landed on the Cisne Islands, 600 miles north of the Honduran capital. Soldiers stationed on the island are providing the Cubans with food, water and medical treatment until they can be turned over to immigration authorities on the mainland, Archaga said. (AP, 25/3/08)

March 25: The First Secretary of Ukraine's Communist Party, Piotr Simonenko, said the Cuban government has an iron will, as he referred to the medical assistance provided by the island to the victims of the Chernobyl nuclear incident for nearly 20 years. The Cuban authorities are the only ones that have kept a special treatment program over 18 years for the victims of the accident at the nuclear plant in April 26, 1986, said Simonenko, speaking with the direction board of the Paediatric Hospital of Tarara, located in the outskirts of Havana, in the municipality of Habana del Este. Simonenko thanked the doctors at the hospital who, in coordination with other national institutions, have provided treatment to more than 23,000 children, teenagers and adults from the Ukraine that traveled to Cuba accompanied by relatives. (ACN, 25/3/08)

March 26: The Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA) wants to meet with the Government of Raúl Castro to step up the political opening of the island, said its president, Manuel Espino. The organization submitted a request to that effect before the Cuban embassy in Mexico. Espino explained that his organization intends "to encourage the Cuban Government" to move towards democracy, "to reassure (Raúl) that he will lose neither face nor power," and that the ODCA is not going to "stir up resentment against him on the continent." (EFE, 26/3/08)

March 26: A new report released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), places Cuba 51st in a list of 177 countries regarding human development levels. The document, for the 2007-2008 period, is published every year by the UNDP and on this occasion places Cuba sixth among Latin American countries. According to Juventud Rebelde news daily, it also states that Cuba is included in the list of nations of high levels of human development, which is comprised mainly of industrialized countries. Susan McDade, resident representative of the UNDP in Havana, said that this report combines three aspects: a long and healthy life, education and decent living standards. [[The Human Development Index: Cuba](#)] (ACN, 26/3/08)

March 27: Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque is in Syria to participate at the 20th Arab League Summit on behalf of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM), chaired by Cuba. During his stay in Damascus the top Cuban diplomat will also hold talks with the heads of the participating delegations and meet with Syrian authorities. (Radio Habana Cuba, 27/3/08)

March 27: The UN Human Rights Council renewed the one-year mandate of its investigator for North Korea, overcoming objections from several countries. Countries

including China, Russia and Cuba had sought to end the post, which they characterized as unnecessary and unduly confrontational. They generally oppose country-specific human rights investigators. (*Reuters*, 27/3/08)

March 27: Cuban Public Health Minister Jose Ramon Balaguer and his Chinese counterpart, Chen Zhu, met in Beijing, China, to check on the state of bilateral cooperation in the health sector. According to Prensa Latina news agency, during the meeting, the officials expressed both countries' interest in further developing the exchange of experiences and cooperation in this sector. Also present were Chinese ministerial officials and the Cuban ambassador to Beijing, Carlos Miguel Pereira, as well as members of Balaguer's accompanying delegation. Balaguer also gave a lecture in the venue of the Chinese Public Health Ministry about the island's experiences on the development and advances in the training of specialists and the health services offered to the people. The Cuban Health Minister also visited the city of Datong, in the Chinese province of Shanxi, some 250 kilometres to the East of Beijing, where a third Cuba-China Friendship ophthalmologic hospital will soon be inaugurated. (*ACN*, 28/3/08)

March 29: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sent a message of greetings to his Cuban counterpart Raul Castro and to Fidel Castro. Al-Assad met for nearly 45 minutes with Cuba Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who traveled to Syria to attend the 20th Arab League Summit on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The statesman expressed gratitude for Cuba's historic solidarity with Syria and the cause of the Arab peoples, while praised the Caribbean nation's performance as the current NAM leader. Perez Roque, who concluded his two-day visit to Damascus, also met with Palestine National Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, and Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of Qatar. The Cuban minister told the press he had delivered a letter from Cuban President Raul Castro to the top authority of that Arab-Persian Gulf emirate. Perez Roque's agenda also included meetings with Bahrain's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Shaikh Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al- Khalifa, and Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal. Perez Roque spoke in the segment of the Arab League summit, on behalf of the NAM presidency, and rejected Islam phobia against Muslim countries, while exhorting the Arab community to work for unity. [[Discurso de Felipe Pérez Roque en la Liga Árabe](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 30/3/08)

March 29: Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Perez Roque, called for expansion of bilateral ties between the two states. During the meeting, which was held on the sidelines of the 20th Summit of leaders of Arab states being held in the Syrian capital, the two officials underscored the need for further promotion of mutual economic cooperation. The two foreign ministers also agreed on the date of holding a foreign ministers meeting of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Tehran in late July 2008. In related developments, Mottaki conferred with Secretary-General of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC), Abdul- Rahman al-Attiya. The two officials underscored the need to start negotiations on free trade between Iran and the PGCC states. The Iranian foreign minister then invited al-Attiya to pay a visit to Tehran in the near future to follow up the discussion. (*IRNA*, 29/3/08)

March 30: A US-based press freedom organization has criticized Venezuela's growing restrictions on freedom of the press, Cuba's jailing of journalists and US court pressure on reporters to reveal confidential sources. The Inter American Press Association wrapped up its midyear meeting in Caracas with a statement that accused Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez of using attacks and intimidation to curb criticism of his government. The IAPA also said Cuba's detention of 25 journalists amounted to a demonstration of total intolerance. The Inter-American Press Association held its first meeting in 1942. It monitors press freedom in the Americas. The group has members throughout the Americas, although many of its leaders are North American journalists. (VOA, 31/3/08)

March 30: Fidel Castro highlighted the labor carried out by the Cuban medical brigade in Peru, after the August 15, 2007 earthquake hit that Andean nation. In an article entitled "The Detachment Returns, Undefeated," the Cuban Revolution leader stated, "the glorious pages in history they have written cannot be erased. Such dignity and conscience are a bulwark against the rusted armaments of imperialism." "The earthquake," Fidel Castro wrote, "took place on August 15, 2007. It measured 7.9 on the Richter scale. The detachment arrived in Cuzco on August 18. Their two-month relief work plan had been designed to address the most urgent needs." "The real needs were to require more than double this time. They saw 153,292 patients, 65,299 of whom were visited in their homes. They remained in Peru until March 25, 2008, seven months and seven days," the article says. [[El destacamento regresa invicto](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Cuban official media published an extensive article by Fidel Castro on China's history, which gives details of Marco Polo's trip to Asia in 1298 until Japan's attack to China in 1904. In "China's victory (I)", Castro begins by asserting that, "without knowing certain basic historic elements, the topic I'm addressing couldn't be understood". "I will continue tomorrow", Castro wrote. [[La victoria china \(I\)](#)] (*AFP*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Reporters Without Borders today expressed concern that Cuban Internet users are struggling to get access to blogs on the desdecuba.com platform that hosts, among others, one of the most popular in the country, Generacion Y, a blog run by Yoani Sanchez. The platform (www.desdecuba.com) has been inaccessible from public connection points in cybercafés and hotels since March 20. The few private connections used for professional reasons or in secret, take at least 20 minutes to download the home page. Editing and moderating posts has become impossible. "It is hard to believe that after ten days desdecuba.com is simply having technical problems, even if there is a real problem getting an Internet connection from Cuba. This situation is in contradiction to recent steps taken by the authorities to ease access for Cubans to communications, especially the Internet," the worldwide press freedom organisation said. (*CNW Telbec*, 31/3/08)

March 31: Cuba plans to expand its medical cooperation program from the current 73 countries to 81 nations during this year, expanding its presence in the Pacific region, officials said. We are "working to train the new groups of aid workers who will travel soon to different countries," the head of the Public Health Ministry's aid unit, Alberto

Gonzalez, told state media. The new medical teams will be sent to the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Nauru and Papua New Guinea, all in the Pacific, as well as Congo and Benin, in Africa, and the Southeast Asian nation of Laos. Currently, Cuba has health cooperation agreements with 73 countries, the majority of them in Latin America and Africa, with a total of 36,578 doctors and other health-care workers in its medical brigades. (*EFE*, 31/3/08)



SECURITY

March 10: The lawyer of a Cuban-born Mexican researcher said that his client has no ties to Colombian rebels whose camp was bombed in a cross-border raid earlier this month. The March 1 attack on the FARC camp in Ecuador killed top rebel leader Raul Reyes and 24 others, triggering a diplomatic crisis during which Ecuador and Venezuela sent troops to their Colombian borders. Five Mexican university students are believed to have been at the camp during the attack. Mexican authorities are investigating whether Mario Dagoberto Diaz, a naturalized Mexican citizen and engineering research professor in central Mexico, is a Cuban intelligence agent who helped Mexicans connect with FARC guerrillas. The Mexican government neither confirmed nor denied the information. (*Sun Sentinel*, 11/3/08)

March 12: Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar was in Cuba in 1989 to meet with Cuban military officials, according to a former intelligence officer who escaped the island with his family to the United States. "Pablo Escobar was at my family's home in Havana on Feb. 22, 1989, and he took flowers to my mother as a gift because that day she was celebrating her birthday," said Daniel Abierno Govín, a former first lieutenant for Cuba's Interior Ministry (MININT). Abierno, 50, told the press that the meeting with the head of the Medellín cartel took place at his parents' home in the El Vedado neighborhood of Havana. "I saw him only once there and I can't say if he was in Cuba on other occasions, but I can assure you that he was at my house that day," stressed Abierno, who worked for MININT for 20 years. "They presented him as a friend of my sister, Rosa María, and later I learned who he was." Abierno's sister, Rosa María Abierno Govín, was a captain in the Cuban intelligence agency and the only woman included in the 1989 case against General Arnaldo Ochoa and other high-ranking Cuban officials. She received a 30-year sentence, charged with bringing cocaine to the island through computer shipments. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 12/3/08)

March 13: The 30th anniversary of the Cuban Military Mission in Ethiopia was commemorated in the Cuban Armed Forces' *Sala Universal* with a cultural-political ceremony presided over by Politburo members Army Corps General Julio Casas Regueiro, Minister of the Revolutionary Armed forces, and Esteban Lazo Hernández. Army Division General Leonardo Andollo Valdés, Second Chief of Staff of the FAR, recalled events from the Cuban military effort in Ethiopia, code-named "Operation Baraguá" at the suggestion of Fidel Castro. (*Granma*, 13/3/08)

March 15: South African Minister of Culture Pallo Jordan thanked the Cuban people for its outstanding participation in the crucial victory of Cuito Cuanavale, in Angola, which led to the defeat of the Apartheid regime. Jordan opened the ceremonies to mark the 20th anniversary of the historic battle that ended on March 23, 1988. Celebrations included a motorcade named Through the Path of History, from Liberty Park, Pretoria, to Cuito Cuanavale. Cuban Ambassador Esther Armenteros highlighted the deep pride felt by the Cuban people for having contributed to the independence of the African brothers under the principles of internationalism. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/3/08)

March 25: "We reaffirm our commitment to defend the values and principles of the revolution and socialism with the same firmness and decision with which our compatriots fought for victory at Cuito Cuanavale," said General Samuel Rodiles Planas, Hero of the Republic of Cuba, in Havana. Rodiles spoke at the ceremony held at the Universal Auditorium of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) for the 20th anniversary of the monumental battle in Angola. The observance was presided over by President Raul Castro. Rodiles said that the unity of Cubans, Angolans and Namibians brought about the fall of the hated Apartheid regime in South Africa, besides consolidating the independence of Angola and contributing to the freeing of Namibia and Zimbabwe. (*Granma*, 20/3/08).

March 25: Eighty scholars from 10 Latin American, European and Asian countries will converge on Havana from April 21-23 for the 1st International Security and Defense Conference. Convened by the Center for the Study of Defense Information of Cuba (CEID), the participants will analyze topics related to security and defense on the global, regional and national levels. The main subjects of debate are tied to security and defense in the Americas; the existing challenges and threats; the building of a new reliable system on the continent; human security; civil-military relations and the role of the armed forces in society, the influence of the United States in the hemispheric system and the possibilities for integration in this field. Manuel Carbonell Vidal, vice president of the CEID told a press conference that the topics of the event will be related to war and peace; armed conflicts; the arms race; the illegal trafficking of conventional weapons and military bases, *Granma* newspaper reported. (*ACN*, 25/3/08)



TERRORISM

March 10: Mexican authorities are investigating the alleged role of a man they suspect of being a Cuban intelligence agent in linking Mexican citizens to Colombia's insurgency. If their suspicions prove founded, it could be a sign that Cuba's intelligence services, which from the 1960s through the 1980s were active in destabilizing countries throughout the hemisphere, have found new life. The authorities suspect the man, Mario Dagoberto Díaz Orgaz, led a group of Mexican students to an Ecuadorian camp of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. Colombian forces attacked the camp March 1, killing a top FARC guerrilla and at least 26 others, including at least four Mexicans. The attack set off a weeklong diplomatic crisis between Colombia and two of its neighbors, Venezuela and Ecuador. Mexican intelligence officials say Mr. Díaz Orgaz left the FARC

camp before the bombing. Mr. Díaz Orgaz's suspected links with Venezuela could fuel concerns by Mexican and US officials that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's close ties to Cuba could be encouraging the efforts of Cuba's intelligence services. (*The Wall Street Journal*, 10/3/08)

March 15: Fidel Castro said it is "stupid" to think Cubans were involved with Colombian rebels whose camp was bombed in a cross-border raid in Ecuador early this month. In a statement, the 81-year-old dismissed allegations reportedly being investigated by Mexican authorities that Cubans were linked to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. "The stupid intention to mix Cubans in this matter is very clear," Castro said in the statement, which Foreign Ministry officials sent by e-mail to international journalists in Havana. Some Mexican and international media have reported that officials were looking into whether Mario Dagoberto Diaz Orgaz, a naturalized Mexican citizen and engineering research professor in central Mexico, is a Cuban intelligence agent who helped Mexicans connect with FARC guerrillas. The reports suggested Diaz may have led the students to Ecuador. Diaz's attorney has denied his client has ties to the rebels. [[Sed de sangre \(I\)](#)] (AP, 16/3/08)

March 16: The surprise appearance of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a Colombian senator and the mother of high-profile hostage Ingrid Betancourt in Havana last weekend suggests that Cuba may emerge as a player in the efforts to free Colombia's captives. Cuba has long been a go-between between Colombian rebels and the government they seek to overthrow. But Havana was uncharacteristically silent during the diplomatic crisis between Colombia and Ecuador, suggesting to experts that Raúl Castro could be trying to win Betancourt's freedom. When Latin American presidents across the hemisphere took to their microphones to rant about Colombia's cross-border raid into Ecuador, Cuba's new head of state was glaringly absent. He didn't summon masses of Cubans to march in front of the Colombian embassy to protest the bombing of a leftist rebel camp in Ecuador, never blasted Colombian President Alvaro Uribe at a public speech, and didn't even hold a press conference. In fact, other than a private phone call to the president of Ecuador, Castro did not say anything at all -- although his ailing and retired brother Fidel wrote a column on the dispute. The sudden visit to Havana by Chávez, Colombia's opposition Senator Piedad Córdoba and Yolanda Pulecio, the mother of Betancourt, hinted that Cuba is more engaged in Colombian issues than previously known. Córdoba, who has been deeply involved in the talks to release hostages held by the FARC guerrillas, said she plans to return to Cuba in two weeks to speak to Raúl Castro about a possible humanitarian accord with the rebels. (*The Miami Herald*, 16/3/08)



US-CUBA RELATIONS

March 2: The Coast Guard in Miami said it has plucked two ailing passengers from a cruise ship that was south of Cuba. Coast Guard officials said the 88-year-old man and 80-year-old woman were airlifted from the Holland America cruise ship *Westerdam* when the ship was about 80 miles south of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

Officials said a Coast Guard helicopter crew hoisted the two passengers on February 29. The man was taken to the Guantanamo Bay hospital and the woman was flown to a hospital in Miami. A spokesman for the Holland America Line is declining to comment. (AP, 2/3/08)

March 3: A planned trip to Cuba by a group of CUNY graduate students is drawing criticism from politicians and one of the school's board members. The nine students, who are enrolled in the Brooklyn College Graduate Center for Worker Education, left with City Council Member Charles Barron and the director of the center, Joseph Wilson, to study the communist nation's health care and education systems. "This is going to be used as a propaganda tool for Fidel Castro," Representative Vito Fossella said in an interview. "If anything is going to be accomplished of significance, the visitors should ask Fidel Castro when he is going to liberalize the economy, release political prisoners and dissidents, and hold fair elections." (*The New York Sun*, 4/3/08)

March 3: Fidel Castro blamed the US for bringing Colombia to the brink of a military clash with neighbouring Venezuela and Ecuador, writing that "genocidal plans of the Yankee empire" created tensions between the South American nations. Venezuela and Ecuador ordered troops to their borders with Colombia and withdrew their ambassadors from Bogota after Colombia killed a top rebel leader, Raul Reyes, on Ecuadorean soil on March 1st. "We can plainly hear the trumpets of war to the south of our continent as a consequence of genocidal plans of the Yankee empire," Castro wrote in an essay published in the Communist Party daily Granma. Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa had planned to fly to Havana to participate in an economic forum, but Castro wrote that the crisis caused "our dear friend" to cancel his trip. Castro's comments, at the end of a lengthy essay on other topics, echoed accusations by his friend President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela that Washington was to blame for the crisis. [[Los cristianos sin Biblias](#)] (AP, 3/3/08)

March 3: Reformed Church leaders from the Caribbean and North America have called on the US to lift its economic embargo against Cuba in the name of justice and 'right relationships'. The call came at the end of a four-day meeting of the Caribbean and North America Area Council (CANAAC) of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in the capital of Guyana, Georgetown. The US has, meanwhile, given no indication of an early end to its long-standing trade embargo against Cuba. CANAAC will demand an end to the embargo in a letter to US President George W Bush and Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in which they decry the embargo as a violation against the Cuban people and an exclusion that impoverishes and causes harsh suffering for women, men and children. The Roman Catholic Church said the US embargo against Cuba was "ethically unacceptable". (*Christian Today*, 3/3/08)

March 3: Growing ranks of US politicians, from nearly one-fourth of Congress to a presidential candidate, are urging a review of US policy shunning Cuba, challenging President George W. Bush's view that now is not the time. "Our policy leaves us without influence at this critical moment, and this serves neither the US national interest nor average Cubans," more than 100 House members, including nine Republicans, wrote

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. "After 50 years, it is time for us to think and act anew." Twenty-four senators wrote a similar letter to Rice. The embargo, said Representative Jeff Flake (Republican-Arizona) has been an enabler to decades of oppression. "We should not give Raul Castro the same benefits that we gave his brother, Fidel. We cannot continue to be the Goliath to their David." The Bush administration, however, has been adamant that a new Castro in power doesn't mean a new Cuba, and that changes in US policy hinge on Cuba first improving its human rights record and holding free elections. (*AP, Reuters, 3/3/08*)

March 4: Fidel Castro denounced that imperialism has just committed a monstrous crime in Ecuador, when deadly bombs were dropped in the early morning hours on a group of men and women who, almost without exception, were asleep. Castro was referring to the death of Raul Reyes, a guerrilla chief with FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces). "Any concrete accusations against that group of human beings do not justify that action", Fidel Castro stressed in an article entitled "Rafael Correa", released by Cuban official media. "They were Yankee bombs, guided by Yankee satellites," he outlined. [[Rafael Correa](#)] (*Prensa Latina, 4/3/08*)

March 4: Britain's Barclays is being investigated by the US government over possible breaches of rules banning banks from doing business with states on a terrorist blacklist. The bank said it had been contacted by the Department of Justice and the New York district attorney with questions about payments made in dollars through its New York branch. The payments may have been made by people or companies from states which are on the US blacklist of nations it believes sponsor terrorism. That list includes Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria. (*The Daily Telegraph, 4/3/08*)

March 5: Lloyds TSB Group Plc is being investigated by US officials over possible violations of sanctions against Iran, Cuba, Sudan and Libya, the Financial Times reported. The London-based bank said it's been contacted by the US Department of Justice, the New York State district attorney's office and the US Treasury, the newspaper reported. Officials are probing whether Lloyds TSB and other banks, including Britain's Barclays Plc, may have processed dollar payments for customers in the four countries, all of which are subject to US sanctions except Libya, from which they were removed in 2004. (*Bloomberg, 5/3/08*)

March 5: Fidel Castro's resignation may have some US tourism companies dusting off their Cuba files, but most industry experts agree it will be some time before American tour groups parade down Havana's "malecon". Even if a new US president defies the large and politically potent population of Cuban exiles in Florida by lifting the travel ban and easing the 40-year-old trade embargo on the island, the regime of Raul Castro, and its successor, would have to be receptive to a massive influx of capital to expand Cuba's tourism infrastructure. The largest island in the Caribbean drew 2.1 million visitors last year - most from Canada and Europe, the rest from South America. They stayed in the 70,000 rooms offered by resorts owned by Spain's Sol Melia Corporation, Jamaica's Superclubs and Sandals, Club Med and a handful of other international companies. A massive influx of American tourists would need many more rooms. The lack of adequate

hotel infrastructure means the first beneficiary of a US policy shift should be the US-dominated cruising industry, according to analysts such as Robin M. Farley of UBS Investment Research. (*Globe & Mail*, 5/3/08)

March 5: In his first week as Cuba's new president, Raul Castro met with the Vatican's No. 2 official, who said island leaders assured him they would allow some Roman Catholic broadcasts on state-controlled media. But US Christian groups that have worked for years in Cuba don't expect significant changes in the government's restrictions on religion now that the younger Castro has succeeded his ailing brother Fidel. Donald Hepburn of the Florida Baptist Convention, a Southern Baptist group that has worked for more than a decade with Baptist churches in western Cuba, said the convention's US staff person just returned from a visit to the island and heard little optimism there. "From talking to our Baptist leadership, they don't believe there's going to be any appreciable change in how the government deals with religious groups," Hepburn said. The Reverend Larry Rankin, director of mission and justice ministries for the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, said, "the expectation is very low of any great change." (*AP*, 5/3/08)

March 5: Steven Marshall, the owner of T&M and affiliated websites, is a British travel agent with an interest in Cuban culture who sells tours to Cuba to European tourists. Unfortunately for Mr. Marshall, his company has been blacklisted by the American government, and his hosting company Enom had shut down all his websites. The case also threatens to renew lingering concerns in the internet community over continued American dominance of the internet. Marshall is a British citizen living in Spain. He sells tours to tourists in Europe, which imposes no restrictions on travel to Cuba. His servers were located in the Caribbean. His only proven ties to the United States were domain registrations through ICANN-approved registrar Enom and his use of the .com top level domain, whose registry is, for all intents and purposes, owned by Verisign, an American company with close ties to the American government. (*The Register*, 5/3/08)

March 5: Four Cuban Americans living in Vermont are suing the US government claiming its restrictions on traveling to Cuba to visit family violate their civil rights. The lawsuit filed in US District Court in Burlington seeks to declare the travel restrictions on Cuban-Americans unconstitutional under the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment. The four plaintiffs are: Armando Vilaseca, who was born in Cuba and came to the United States with his parents in 1963. He lives in Westford; Yurisleidis Leyva Mora, a Cuban citizen and a legal permanent resident of the United States, living in Montpelier since April 2006; Jared Kingsbury Carter, also of Montpelier, married to Leyva Mora; Maricel Lucero Keniston, who was born in Santiago de Cuba and emigrated to the US in 1968. She lives in Perkinsville. It was Vilaseca who accompanied Lt. Gov. Brian Dubie on a trade mission in 2003, which laid the foundation for the eventual sale of Vermont cows and powdered milk to Cuba. The Westford resident, who served as Dubie's translator, said he can no longer visit his second cousins, step-aunts or his godson. While Vilaseca is in favor of lifting the travel ban for all Americans, he said the focus of the lawsuit is limited to Cuban-Americans. "Our piece is really strictly, very narrow focus on the regulations change in 2004 that didn't allow people like me to travel

back to Cuba once a year without any restrictions," said Vilaseca, school superintendent of the Franklin West Supervisory Union. (*Rutland Herald*, 6/3/08)

March 6: Cuba accused the United States of political manipulation of the migratory issue in order to destroy the Revolution, reads an article by Prensa Latina news agency. The allegation was made in an online debate forum about the role of Cuban residents abroad in defense of their homeland. In view of the US manipulation of the issue, Cuba's migratory policy is a matter of national security, which determines its defensive, restrictive nature, explained Carlos Zamora, director of Consular Affairs of the Cuban Foreign Ministry. "We are convinced that the aggressive White House policy will have to end and relations with Cuban citizens living in other countries should improve", said Zamora. (*ACN*, 6/3/08)

March 6: Tom Casey, Deputy Spokesman for the US Department of State, said that the US is not promoting engagement with Cuba, as the European Union does. During a daily briefing with the press, Casey said "it's up to the EU, just like it is any of its individual member states, to decide how it wants to conduct its diplomatic relations with Cuba or with any other country". And added: "We aren't promoting engagement or more engagement with Cuba at this point in time; specifically, because we believe it's important that this new regime show that it's going to be different than the government of Fidel Castro". "But this is a decision that the European Union has made and we certainly hope and expect that the message that Commissioner Michel as well as the message any other representative of a democratic country will bring to Cuba is the same one that we've been saying, that we want to see this government show that it's committed to change and do so by releasing political prisoners, by restoring human rights to the Cuban people and ultimately by committing themselves to free and fair elections". (*US State Department Press Release*, 6/3/08)

March 7: In an article published in official media, Fidel Castro rejected an "imperialist plan" to put President Hugo Chávez to trial in the International Criminal Court, and showed his support to Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa amidst a crisis with Colombia. "When I heard the official statement the Colombian officials in charge of the relevant legal steps made to the press, I had no doubt. This is no secret," Castro wrote. "What has been said about Chávez recently? They say he was elected in a vote by the majority of the people. But they add 'just like Hitler was,'" Castro said. He complained that such comments "do not explain a fact that is widely known, that Hitler was a genuine result of the capitalist system, which was stated in the Versailles Treaty and the imposition of sanctions, which in turn excited nationalism in the newly born German Republic." The former Cuban ruler quoted TV show *La Hojilla*, aired on Venezuelan official television channel VTV. According to Castro, *La Hojilla* produced evidence, including "information and statements which accurately reflect the imperialist plan to do with Chávez what they did with (Serbian leader Slobodan) Milosevic following the Kosovo genocidal war, namely judging him in the International Criminal Court." [[The International Criminal Court](#)] (*El Universal*, 7/3/08)

March 7: US President George W. Bush scolded major democracies that do business in Cuba and spurned calls to end hardline US policies now that Fidel Castro has officially given up power. "That sentiment is exactly backward. To improve relations, what needs to change is not the United States, what needs to change is Cuba," Bush said after meeting with relatives of imprisoned democratic activists in commemoration of the crackdown on dissidents by Cuban authorities in 2003. "They committed no crimes", Bush said. "They simply held views their government did not like, and they refused to be silent. In all, 75 people were given long prison terms. In the world of Cuban dissidents, that crackdown five years ago is remembered as the Black Spring", he added. "So far, all Cuba has done is replace one dictator with another. And its former ruler is still influencing events from behind the scenes," he said, referring to the recent handover of power from Fidel to his brother Raul Castro. "The international community applauded Cuba for signing a piece of paper, but on the abuses that same week much of the world was silent," said the US president. Washington had pushed Cuba to sign the treaty for years. The European Union, led by Slovenia as holder of the rotating EU presidency, welcomed the signing as "a positive development" even as some of Cuba's dissidents called it "a farce." "Unfortunately, the list of countries supporting the Cuban people is far too short and the democracies absent from that list are far too notable," said Bush, who did not name names but called silence in the face of abuses "a sad and curious pattern." [[President Bush Discusses Cuba](#)] (*AFP, Reuters, 7/3/08*)

March 8: The Cuban government called President George W. Bush a "furious and impotent spectator" with zero influence over changes in the communist country following Fidel Castro's retirement. "He can neither stop, interfere with or influence what happens in Cuba," Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said. Bush said that neighboring Cuba had replaced one dictator with another and vowed to maintain hard-line policies against Havana until it begins a democratic transition. Perez Roque said Bush's view that nothing had changed in Cuba was acknowledgment of the failure of his Cuba policy, which has tightened sanctions to financially undermine the one-party state. "President Bush's words yesterday show that he is just a furious and impotent spectator," the minister said, in the first official Cuban comment on Bush's statement. "I enjoyed listening to the frustration in his words." Perez Roque said Bush's lament that more of the world's major democracies had not joined the United States in isolating Havana was also recognition that Washington's policy on Cuba had itself become isolated. He spoke at a news conference with the European Union's top development aid official, Louis Michel, who was in Havana to try to relaunch EU ties with Cuba. Washington had opposed the visit. (*Reuters, 8/3/08*)

March 10: A bipartisan religious liberty panel in the United States has called on Cuba's communist government to institute protections for religious expression and other human rights in the wake of Fidel Castro's departure as president. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom said Castro's resignation after nearly 50 years as dictator over the northern Caribbean island provides an opportunity for Cuba's new leaders "to reform their repressive practices." The commission has "no illusions about Raul Castro's political views," USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie said in a written statement, but

the panel still called for change in Cuba and for the United States government to press for reform. (*Towers Online*, 10/3/08)

March 10: US President George W. Bush paid tribute to women who have defied the governments of Belarus, Cuba and Myanmar, promising US help as they "stand up for the freedom of their people." He honored the wife of jailed Belarus opposition leader Alexander Kozulin, Irina, who died of cancer, aged 48; ailing Cuban dissident Marta Beatríz Roque Cabello; and Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi. "Americans are inspired by the examples of these women," Bush said. "We will continue to support their work, and the work of women across the world who stand up for the freedom of their people." The US president's remarks came during a White House ceremony marking Women's History Month. [[President and Mrs Bush Celebrate Women's History Month](#)] (*AFP*, 11/3/08)

March 10: The American government did not allow a group of US musicians to participate in a festival in Cuba in a new attempt to harm relations between the two peoples. As a result of Washington's travel ban on the island, all twenty American musicians were not able to take part in the 12th International Electroacoustic Music Festival "Spring in Havana 2008," that is traditionally marked by the fertile creative exchange between US and Cuban artists. Organizers of the event were informed at the last minute that Bush's administration had denied the musicians permission to travel to Cuba, a Granma report said. Composer Andrew Schloss, who for many years has lived and worked in Canada, is the only US musician present at the forum. (*ACN*, 10/3/08)

March 11: Cuba sought support from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to speed the release of the five Cubans serving terms in US prisons. The proposal was submitted during an interactive debate with the president-rapporteur of the Group on Mercenary Use, the president-rapporteur for Arbitrary Detention, and the rapporteur on Toxic Products and Waste. Cuban delegate Yuri Gala reminded that three years ago the Advisory Council for Human Rights issued Opinion No.19/2005 unequivocally finding the arrest of Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, Fernando Gonzalez and Rene Gonzalez "arbitrary". (*Prensa Latina*, 11/3/08)

March 12: The United States administration in an annual report criticized the human rights situation in Venezuela and Cuba, but it highlighted both the progress made in Colombia and the efforts made in the Organization of American States (OAS) to promote human rights. The US Department of State said that in Cuba, "the regime continued to deny citizens basic rights and democratic freedoms, including the right to change their government, the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, and the right of association." [[Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Cuba](#)] (*El Universal*, 12/3/08)

March 12: Two more Cuban soccer players defected from the Under-23 national team in Tampa, bringing to seven the number who deserted the squad since their surprising 1-1 tie against the United States in an Olympic qualifying match the day before. Defender Yendry Diaz and midfielder Eder Roldan, both 20, sneaked away from the team hotel and

are with friends in Tampa, according to two sources close to the players. They plan to drive to Lake Worth, where they will join their five team mates who defected a night earlier. The loss of seven players cast into doubt whether the Cuban squad will be able to field a team for a match against Honduras and continue in the qualifying tournament for the 2008 Olympics. (*The Miami Herald*, 13/3/08)

March 14: A flurry of young athletes and artists from Cuba has sought asylum in the United States since an ailing Fidel Castro ceded power 20 months ago -- slipping away from minders, leaving behind families and striking out for new lives across the Florida Straits. While high-profile defectors from Cuba have systematically wound up in the United States in the five decades since Castro's rise to power, the most recent wave arrives against the backdrop of his departure from the political stage. The timing of the defections, say both Cuba watchers and some of the defectors themselves, underscores dissatisfaction with both the political and economic situation on the island and a belief that change under Castro's successor, brother Raúl Castro, may come more slowly than many had hoped. "The timing of the defections is significant," said Andy Gomez, senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban American Studies. "It shows that there is a frustration among Cubans, especially young Cubans, who see this change as simply a continuity of a different regime." "More and more people in Cuba are realizing that their work gives them possibilities, but in Cuba, professional artists always hit a ceiling," Isaac Delgado, a salsa singer who defected in 2006, said from his Key Biscayne apartment. "They don't let you fly. You don't have the possibility, like you do in every country in the world, to try and reach your maximum potential, to attain your dream." (*The Miami Herald*, 14/3/08)

March 15: US Senate hopeful for New Jersey Murray Sabrin said that, if elected, he would work to normalize trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba. His rival for the Republican nomination, Senator Joseph Pennacchio (Republican-Morris), insisted Cuba must first free political prisoners and respect human rights. Pennacchio said he favors limited school choice for failing urban schools. Sabrin said he would go much further and give tax credits to all parents with children in nonpublic elementary or high schools. Those key differences between the two candidates emerged during a fast-paced, hour-long debate that ended with Sabrin winning the endorsement of the Gloucester County Republican organization. Its convention in Sewell, which was open to all registered Republicans in the county, gave 86 votes to Sabrin to 56 for Pennacchio. (*Star-Ledger*, 16/3/08)

March 16: Fidel Castro affirmed "the empire" does not resign itself to being the only loser at the Rio Group meeting in Santo Domingo on March 7, and wants to set up the bloody muddle once again. "It is not difficult to demonstrate it," the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution pointed out in the first part of new reflections entitled "Thirst for Blood." Castro said it is "stupid" to think Cubans were involved with Colombian rebels whose camp was bombed in a cross-border raid in Ecuador early this month. The 81-year-old dismissed allegations reportedly being investigated by Mexican authorities that Cubans were linked to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and blamed "US imperialism" for the whole affair. "The stupid intention to mix Cubans in

this matter is very clear," Castro said in the statement published in the official media and distributed by Foreign Ministry officials to international journalists in Havana the night before. Some Mexican and international media have reported that officials were looking into whether Mario Dagoberto Diaz Orgaz, a naturalized Mexican citizen and engineering research professor in central Mexico, is a Cuban intelligence agent who helped Mexicans connect with FARC guerrillas. The reports suggested Diaz may have led the students to Ecuador. [[Thirst for Bood \(I\)](#)] (*Prensa Latina, Reuters*, 16/3/08)

March 17: Fidel Castro stated that imperialist leaders and officials are working feverishly, threatening everyone with their brutal strength, but the empire is unsustainable and it doesn't give up. In the second part of an article entitled "Thirst for Blood," the historic leader of the Cuban revolution said: "It is thirsty for blood. We must persistently denounce it!" "Why," Fidel Castro asks, "are you insisting on provoking fratricidal wars between the peoples of Latin America?" "In Iraq, more than a million people have died. How many deaths does the United States of America offer Latin America, a region with over 500 million inhabitants, to defend its democracy and its empire?," he stressed. [[Thirst for Blood \(II\)](#)] (*Prensa Latina*, 17/3/08)

March 17: South Florida is watching closely amid debate over drilling near its shores and concerns about US energy policy. Oil companies increasingly seek to tap Cuba's deep-water reserves now that oil prices are soaring and profits are more likely. "In 34 years following Cuba, I've never seen an issue like this — so strategically important to the United States," said Kirby Jones, president of Washington-based Alamar Associates, who advises US companies on Cuba and opposes the US embargo. Havana began opening to foreign investment in the early 1990s after the loss of Soviet aid, and Cuba now produces almost half the oil and natural gas it consumes. It drills mainly for heavy crude on or near shore with help from Canadian companies. But the big prize lies in deep-water reservoirs miles off the north shore in the Gulf of Mexico. By some estimates, the area holds almost as much oil and natural gas as the coveted Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska — enough to meet Cuban demand for years. Analysts say it will take several more years and hundreds of millions of dollars for the companies to figure out where to drill in waters often a mile deep. But if the pieces fall into place, offshore rigs could be working by 2012 not far from South Florida, said Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado, a Cuba energy specialist at the University of Nebraska in Omaha who has visited the island many times. "Cuba also could become a transshipment point for oil, refined products and exports for the region," Benjamin-Alvarado said. (*Sun Sentinel*, 17/3/08)

March 18: The president of the United States, George W. Bush, lent his support to the demand for the release of imprisoned Cuban opposition activists, reported the wife of one of the prisoners. Laura Pollán read before foreign reporters a message from the US President to the Ladies in White, wives of opposition activists arrested and sentenced in March 2003. "I admire your courage and determination in revealing these realities to the world in spite of the high risk involved," writes Bush in the letter read by Pollán. "I hope that your testimony helps bring more attention to the Cuban regime's lack of concern for human rights." (*La Jornada*, 18/3/08)

March 18: Fifteen Cuban migrants, including small children, landed at Dinner Key, Florida, according to television and fire rescue accounts. Aside from a touch of dehydration, they all appeared to be in good condition. "We are so happy to arrive here to the USA," said Osmati Biloto, who was on the boat from Cuba. "We are very tired. It's been a long trip, but I think it was worth it." Local authorities, including a Miami-Dade fire boat, were alerted to the group's arrival in Coconut Grove about 4:30 a.m., according to Lt. Elkin Sierra, a fire rescue spokesman. Border Patrol arrived before dawn to take the 15 men, women and children for processing. (*The Miami Herald*, 18/3/08)

March 18: Americans who get their medical degree in Cuba wouldn't be allowed to practice medicine in Florida under a bill being discussed by the House Health Quality Committee. The measure is aimed at students who accept scholarships from the Cuban government to attend the Latin American School of Medical Sciences in Havana. About 150 American students are currently enrolled in the school and would be affected. Information provided to the committee says eight American students have graduated from the school and are currently practicing in the United States, but none are working in Florida. Since no graduates of the program have Florida medical licenses, the bill would only affect those graduates who try to become licensed in Florida in the future. (*AP*, 18/3/08)

March 18: International human rights and journalism advocacy groups called on President Raul Castro's government to free critics still serving long sentences five years after a broad crackdown that landed 75 people behind bars. "It is time for Cuba to release these prisoners immediately and without conditions," said Matt Easton, of the New York-based Human Rights First, in a news release. "The world is waiting to see whether Cuba is really ready for change, or only going through the motions." The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said there are 22 journalists in Cuban jails, 20 of them since 2003. The committee's coordinator for the Americas, Carlos Lauria, said "This makes Cuba the country with most journalists jailed after China." Twenty-nine journalists were among 75 people arrested over a three-day span in March 2003. They were accused of working to undermine Fidel Castro's government and sentenced to long prison terms. Only a handful has been released. [[HRF: Time for Cuba to Release HR Defenders](#) and [CPJ: Cuba's Long Black Spring](#)] (*AFP, Reuters*, 18/3/08)

March 19: Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Republican-Florida), has introduced a bill (H.R. 5627) to "award the congressional gold medal to Cuban oppositionist Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, in recognition of his courageous and unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights in Cuba." The bill, introduced on March 13, was co-sponsored by Representatives Albio Sires (D-New Jersey); Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Florida); Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Florida); Dan Burton (R-Indiana); and Chris Smith (R-New Jersey). It was referred to the House Financial Services Committee. (*US Fed News*, 19/3/08)

March 19: Envoys from Cuba and Iran sharply criticized the United States at a UN Security Council debate on counter-terrorism, accusing it of supporting "terrorists" bent on attacking their countries. The Cuban ambassador to the United Nations, Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz, called on the Council to urge the United States to take action against

Luis Posada Carriles, 80, who is wanted in Cuba and Venezuela on suspicion of masterminding the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 people. The anti-Castro militant entered the United States illegally in 2005 and sought asylum. A judge dismissed the immigration case in June but the government is appealing. "There is no doubt today that the true intention was to prevent the details of his criminal actions under CIA orders from becoming public," Malmierca Diaz said during a council debate on counter-terrorism. He added that the US appeal had failed to mention Posada Carriles' "long terrorist record." The Security Council "must demand that the US government immediately sentence Luis Posada Carriles for his terrorist acts or extradite him to ... Venezuela, where he has long been wanted by the justice (authorities)," Malmierca Diaz said. Deputy Venezuelan Ambassador Aura Rodriguez de Ortiz accused the United States of ignoring a request made nearly three years ago for Posada's extradition, calling him "a known international criminal and terrorist and fugitive of Venezuelan justice." (*Reuters, AP, 19/3/08*)

March 19: Cuban and US labor lawyers and union representatives are gathering in Havana for the ninth occasion. The first session was headed by the General Secretary of the Cuban Workers Federation (CTC), Salvador Valdes Mesa, and the president of the US National Lawyers Guild, Dean Hubbard. The 9th Cuba-US Bilateral Encounter of Labor Lawyers will run until March 22 under the theme "In Defense of Labor Rights and Social Security and against Neo-liberal Policies." Highlighted on the agenda are the effects of the US economic, commercial and financial blockade of Cuba and the ways in which Cuban workers and unionists face the stiffening by the Bush administration of the US unilateral anti-Cuba measures. (*AIN, 20/3/08*)

March 20: USA Rice Federation joined Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture, ALIMPORT and Foreign Ministry officials in recent visits to seed rice production areas and a tour of a renovated rice mill in one of Cuba's western provinces about 90 minutes from Havana. The group discussed rice production issues in Cuba as well as trade opportunities for US rice. "We recognize the important work the USA Rice Federation is doing in developing the US rice market in Cuba, and we are open to imports of rice from the US as it has great acceptance with our people," said Hector Henriquez, vice president for the Ministry of Agriculture Rice Industries Group. Cuba's mills are in great need of repair and most experts and officials agree that milled rice would dominate future rice imports. (*Delta Farm Press, 20/3/08*)

March 23: Fidel Castro slammed US officials' recent "frenzied travels" around the world. "We see around us a great frenzy, as though we lived in Bedlam," Castro said in a column entitled "Bush in Heavens (I)," published in the official Juventud Rebelde newspaper. Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, has traveled to Brazil, Chile and Russia. The nation's vice-president, Dick Cheney, has traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter now the world's largest heroin producer thanks to a U.S. intervention there, Castro said. "In these hands lies humanity's fate with blood and profit," said Castro. Even John McCain, a presidential candidate from Bush's Republican Party, has joined the fray by flying to Iraq, he pointed out. [[Bush in Heavens \(I\)](#)] (*Xinhua, 23/3/08*)

March 26: Minnesota companies already export agricultural goods, including livestock, to Cuba but a state delegation is headed there to plant seeds for increased trade. Officials leaving on March 29, on a five-day trip to Havana, say Minnesota is positioning itself to meet the island country's growing food and agriculture needs. Minnesota exported more than \$18 million of agricultural products to Cuba in 2007. That included corn, soybeans, wheat, beans, dairy cattle and a distilled grain product from corn-based ethanol that is used as livestock feed. "That's not insignificant," said Agriculture Commissioner Gene Hugoson, who is leading the delegation. "But the bigger issue is what's going to happen down the road when US-Cuban relations finally get to the point of being normal." The trip comes less than a year after Hugoson and others visited Cuba on a similar trade mission. (*The Republican Eagle*, 26/3/08)

March 26: Jean Ziegler, an outspoken legal expert who has angered Israel and Cuban-Americans, was elected as one of 18 advisers to the UN Human Rights Council. A former U.N. expert on the right to food, Ziegler praised Cuba as a model for feeding its population and claimed Israeli security measures had reduced Palestinians to begging. The council's approval came over the opposition of a prominent Cuban-American in Congress, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. She had demanded the Swiss government withdraw its support for Ziegler's nomination because of what she called anti-Semitic statements and support for dictators. A statement from her office said, "Mr. Ziegler has drawn criticism for his unyielding support of many of the worlds most vicious dictators. He expressed 'total support for the Cuban revolution' and its leader, Fidel Castro, whose repressive regime has left hundreds of political dissidents to languish in jail." (*AP*, 26/3/08)

March 26: US National Telecom, through its wholesale subsidiary, has taken steps to benefit from the regime change in Cuba and began Interop testing of a voice traffic route to Cuba. The demand for voice traffic capacity to Cuba is at an all-time high, especially from prepaid phone card companies in Florida and New York. Millions of minutes of voice traffic are anticipated for these new routes, with the potential to bring in upwards of \$550,000 in additional annual revenue. Due to the trade embargo with Cuba, the subsidiary will legally operate like all other US telecoms by sending traffic to licensed non-US telecom carriers which in turn have direct connections to Cuba. USNT President G. Giagnocavo said, "Because of our experience in other Latin American countries, I am confident that the ability to handle voice traffic to Cuba will give us a decided advantage over many other telecom companies." (*Market Wire*, 27/3/08)

March 27: The president of the Cuban Journalists Union (UPEC), Tubal Paez, denounced in Caracas, Venezuela, the permanent media aggression carried out from the United States against the island. Paez, who heads the Cuban delegation to a Latin American conference on media terrorism that began in the Venezuelan capital, recalled that some 2,900 hours of radio and television programming are broadcast every week from the United States to the island with all kinds of manipulated information. The event on media terrorism is being attended by professionals from 14 countries. (*CAN*, 28/3/08)

March 28: Federal investigators are looking into allegations that a former White House aide misused funds that were supposed to help dissidents in Cuba, casting a shadow over the controversial pro-democracy program. Felipe Sixto, who came to the White House in July and was recently promoted to special assistant to President Bush, resigned March 20 while disclosing he was suspected of a "conflict of interest" involving pro-democracy funds while previously working for the Center for a Free Cuba, the White House said. Frank Calzon, director of the Washington-based independent group, said he had received information in mid-January indicating that Sixto, his former chief of staff, had been improperly diverting government grant money intended for pro-democracy causes. White House spokesman Blair Jones said the White House learned of the allegations from Sixto when he resigned from his post. "Our understanding is that Mr. Sixto allegedly had a conflict of interest with the use of USAID funds in his former employment," Jones said. US AID's inspector general is investigating, and the Justice Department has taken the matter under advisement while deciding whether to prosecute. Florida Republican Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Mario and Lincoln Diaz-Balart said in a joint statement that they were "deeply disturbed by any allegation of misuse of taxpayer funds" and urged the Department of Justice and the USAID's inspector general "to move thoroughly and swiftly in investigating all the facts in this matter." (*McClatchy-Tribune, Sun Sentinel*, 28,30/3/08)

March 29: Authorities say 46 migrants have landed ashore in Hollywood beach, Florida, and will be allowed to remain in the United States. Smugglers brought the migrants to Hollywood, a community more than 20 miles north of Miami. US Border Patrol Agent Lazaro Guzman says the group left from Sagua la Grande in Cuba. They will be released once they have been interviewed. Under US "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy, Cubans who reach land are allowed to stay in the United States; those captured at sea are returned to the island. (*The Miami Herald*, 29/03/08)

March 30: The US has demanded to see a Swiss contract for natural gas supplies from Iran to see whether it violates an American sanctions law against Tehran, the US Embassy in Switzerland said. A posting on the US Embassy Web site raises the question of whether neutral Switzerland's position as representative of American interests in Iran and Cuba could be affected. "At this time, the Swiss have a mandate as our protecting power in Cuba and Iran," the Web site said in response to a "frequently asked question" on whether the Swiss role was "in jeopardy." The Swiss have represented US interests in Havana since diplomatic relations with Cuba were broken nearly 50 years ago, and in Tehran since Iranian militants seized the US Embassy in 1979. (*AP*, 30/3/08)

