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HIGHLIGHTS

Domestic affairs: Critical situation of the educational system is under the microscope of Cuban authorities. Two key speeches by Raul Castro dampen expectations of reform and point out a belt-tightening period ahead. Cuban authorities launch a harassment campaign against members of the opposition through frequent detentions.

Economy: The Canadian International Development Agency contributes to the UNDP's plans in Eastern Cuba. Raul Castro approves the lending of idle land to private farmers and cooperatives. Cuban biotechnology products are the second source of exports, over nickel and traditional products. Canadian Sherritt International Corp. cancels deep-sea oil exploration in the Cuban sector of the Gulf of Mexico. A high-ranking Russian delegation discusses in Havana the expansion of trade-economic relations.

Exile Community: Several Cuban exile organizations have launched a campaign to persuade President Bush to pardon a convicted member of Omega 7. A former official with the Cuban-American National Foundation is shot dead in Puerto Rico. The Cuban-American Blanco Herrera family claim that InBev has illegally been using the trademark beer name Cristal, which the family created on the island before 1959.

Foreign Affairs: President Raul Castro meets with Syrian Information Minister. Cuba's Foreign Affairs Minister attends NAM Ministerial Meetings in Venezuela and Iran. Fidel Castro calls on Colombia's FARC to release all hostages. Cuba and Mexico expect to reach an agreement on migration by late August. In a letter to Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez talks about US plots against his country and Cuba. Russian Deputy Prime Minister and a top security official meet Cuban President Raul Castro. Fidel Castro slams Edmonton in an Internet column addressing the case of two Cuban baseball players who defected in the Canadian city.

Security: News reports speculate on regular flights by Russian long-range bombers to Cuba. An article by Fidel Castro is the only Cuban official comment on the potential installation of Russian bomber bases on the island.

Terrorism: The Cuban Embassy in Lebanon welcomes a Lebanese terrorist being freed in a prisoner swap between Israel and Hezbollah.

US-Cuba Relations: Cuba accuses US diplomats of inciting opponents to hold public protests on the Fourth of July. A US Senate committee approves legislation that would undo travel restrictions to Cuba. Rev. Al Sharpton protests the jailing of Afro-Cuban political dissidents by the Cuban government. President Raul Castro warns the US that Cuba would stay focused on defence regardless of who wins November's presidential election. Senator Arlen Specter says he hopes to meet with Raul Castro.

LO MÁS RELEVANTE

Asuntos domésticos: Las autoridades cubanas mantienen en la mirilla la crítica situación del sistema educacional. Dos discursos clave de Raúl Castro disminuyen las expectativas de reformas y avizoran un período de severidades económicas. Las autoridades cubanas lanzan una campaña de hostigamiento contra la oposición mediante frecuentes detenciones.

Economía: La Agencia Canadiense para el Desarrollo Internacional contribuye con planes del PNUD en el oriente cubano. Raúl Castro aprueba el otorgamiento de tierras ociosas a campesinos privados y cooperativas. Los productos biotecnológicos cubanos son la segunda fuente de exportaciones, por encima del níquel y productos tradicionales. La compañía canadiense Sherritt International Corp. cancela sus exploraciones petroleras en aguas profundas del sector cubano del Golfo de México. Una delegación rusa de alto nivel discute en La Habana la expansión de las relaciones económicas y comerciales.

Comunidad de exiliados: Varias organizaciones de exiliados cubanos han lanzado una campaña para persuadir al presidente Bush de que conceda el perdón a un convicto miembro de Omega 7. Un ex dirigente de la Fundación Nacional Cubano Americana es asesinado de un disparo en Puerto Rico. La familia cubano americana Blanco Herrera reclama que InBev ha estado usando ilegalmente la marca de cerveza Cristal que su familia creó en la isla antes de 1959.

Asuntos exteriores: El presidente Raúl Castro se reúne con el ministro de Información de Siria. El ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba asiste a las reuniones ministeriales de NOAL en Venezuela e Irán. Cuba y México esperan arribar a un acuerdo sobre migración a finales de agosto. En carta a Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez dice de conspiraciones de EEUU contra su país y Cuba. El viceprimer ministro y un alto oficial de seguridad rusos se reúnen con el presidente cubano Raúl Castro. Fidel Castro critica violentamente a Edmonton en una columna en Internet referida al caso de dos peloteros cubanos que desertaron en esa ciudad canadiense.

Seguridad: Noticias especulan acerca de vuelos regulares de bombarderos rusos a Cuba. Un artículo de Fidel Castro es el único comentario oficial cubano acerca de la potencial instalación de bases rusas de bombarderos en la isla.

Terrorismo: La Embajada cubana en el Líbano da la bienvenida a un terrorista libanés liberado mediante un canje de prisioneros entre Israel y Hisbolá.

Relaciones US-Cuba: Cuba acusa a diplomáticos de EEUU de instigar a opositores a sostener protestas públicas en ocasión del 4 de Julio. Un Comité del Senado de EEUU aprueba una legislación que pudiera anular las restricciones de viajes a Cuba. El reverendo Al Sharpton protesta el encarcelamiento por parte del gobierno cubano de disidentes políticos afro cubanos. El presidente Raúl Castro advierte a EEUU que Cuba se concentrará en su defensa con independencia del vencedor en las presidenciales de noviembre. El senador Arlen Specter dice que espera reunirse con Raúl Castro.



DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

July 1: Fidel Castro sent a message to the Cuban players who will participate in the baseball competition of the upcoming Olympic Games in Beijing, China. A copy of the message, published by official newspapers Granma and Juventud Rebelde, was handed over to each player of the Cuban team before they traveled to Holland to participate in the annual Baseball Week of Haarlem that begins on July 4, and where they will face the national squads of the United States, Japan, Chinese Taipei and the host country, as part of their Olympic preparation. “To the glorious Cuban athletes who go to the Olympics: ‘Onwards at winners pace’ like in Ayacucho and Mal Tiempo. Our people’s love for their homeland travels with you,” the text reads (*ACN*, 1/7/08).

July 2: In Beijing next month, Cuba's powerful national baseball team will be among the gold-medal favourites in what could be the sport's Olympic farewell. After baseball, Cubans are passionate about boxing, the sport in which the country has won 32 of its 65 Olympic gold medals. Sports ministry officials are still reeling from a spate of defections that have plundered the island of five top boxers over the last couple of years. Absent from the Olympic baseball team will be Pan American Games infielder Alexei Ramirez, who defected in November and now plays for the Chicago White Sox. His new teammates call him the "Cuban missile." Another team considered a favourite for baseball gold is Japan, winner of the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006. Still, Cuban teams have won gold medals in three Olympics—Barcelona, 1992; Atlanta, 1996; Athens, 2004—and the silver in Sydney in 2000. Cuba reached the Classic final in 2006 in its first real test against big-league stars (*Sun Sentinel*, 2/6/08).

July 2: Laura Pollan Toledo, one of the most well-known leaders of the Ladies in White, said she has been the victim of harassment by Cuban state police. Independent journalist Carlos Serpa Maciera, who writes for *Miscelanea de Cuba*, said Pollan Toledo, who is married to imprisoned journalist Hector Maseda, told her that every time she leaves her residence she is followed and watched by Cuban police agents. “If I go to a store or to a mall, they follow me. They don’t hide from publicly watching me,” she said. Police agents have installed a security camera and flood lights in front of Pollan Toledo’s home,

which is also the main office for Ladies in White, a group of women whose relatives are political prisoners. Pollan Toledo said the harassment became more intense after a peaceful protest carried out by a dozen members of Ladies in White on April 21 in Havana. State police agents broke up the protest and forced the women to leave the Plaza de la Revolucion (CNA, 3/7/08).

July 2: Cuba accused American diplomats of planning dissident demonstrations on the island in honour of US Independence Day. Dissident Martha Beatriz Roque, who was accused of receiving funds from anti-Castro groups in Miami through the US Interests Section, said the latest Cuban government accusations probably signalled an imminent crackdown on the opposition. "They normally do this before launching a wave of arrests," she said. Roque said some dissidents planned to attend the annual Fourth of July reception at Parmly's residence. "This is the same reception we go to every year," she said of a gathering attended by diplomats and members of the foreign press. Cuba said Roque and other dissidents are mercenaries on American payroll. The government said "interventionist and illegal" actions by US diplomats include a recent videoconference at Parmly's home with dissidents and US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, a Cuban American. American diplomats provided dissidents with Internet access, cell phones, computers, money and "counterrevolutionary propaganda," the Foreign Ministry said ([Declaración del MINREX](#); AP, 2/7/08).

July 3: The Cuban Union of Journalists (UPEC) is holding its 8th National Congress next July 4 and 5 under the slogan "Learning, Reflecting and Informing," which emphasizes three major concepts of Cuban journalistic practice. The journalists' organization has 3,680 members, grouped in 174 local branches located in all media outlets throughout the country. Over the next three days, delegates and guests from all branches will be gathering at Havana's Convention Center to address the most important aspects related to the role of journalists in Cuban society, as well as the challenges in today's world (ACN, 3/7/08).

July 3: The 12 permanent working commissions of the Cuban National Assembly (Parliament), provisionally constituted last May, will be in session on July 7-8. According to Granma, these working bodies will be approved during the first ordinary period of sessions of the current legislature of the National Assembly on July 11. Miriam Brito, Secretary of Parliament, said that each commission will discuss specific topics related to the social and economic life of the country (ACN, 3/7/08).

July 3: At least 16 Cuban dissidents were released after police arrested them in earlier sweeps targeting government opponents across the communist island, opposition sources said. "At least 16 of around 20 of those detained are already free," said Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Commission of Human Rights and National Reconciliation CCDHRN. Sanchez, whose rights group is officially illegal, told the press that another four of those arrested had not yet arrived at their homes. "These were arbitrary detentions and we hope they will be of short duration," he said. "A very similar thing happened in 2003 but I hope this will be different," Sanchez said. "What happened in 2003 was costly for the government. I hope these will be short-term detentions." Leading dissident Martha

Beatriz Roque said earlier that as many as 40 government opponents had been targeted in the regime's roundup. Another opposition leader, Vladimiro Roca, called the sweep "a giant act of repression throughout the entire country." He said it targeted above all else dissidents in Havana "because we were planning to hold a meeting here and they did not give permission" for it. The brief arrests come just days after the European Union decided to formally lift sanctions against Cuba, imposed following a 2003 dissident crackdown on the island. The arrests suggest Raul Castro may also be as resistant as his older brother Fidel to granting political freedoms to the opposition, critics said (*AFP, Sun Sentinel*, 3/7/08).

July 3: Cuban social and economic development will be tackled by the island's Parliament in the first session of the present legislature. The goal is to systematize and expand links with voters according to the interest of supporting deputies, and to review the main programs implemented in the country. According to a report by Granma newspaper, the country will approve the 12 permanent working commissions of the legislative assembly and 85 parliamentary groups of solidarity, as well as study the work of several organizations and ministries. Before the plenary session, slated for July 11, participants will discuss specific questions such as energy conservation and efficiency on the island. Also on the list are solving difficulties in water supply, the production of food, the construction of houses, the coming school year, results of the mother-child program, dentistry services, regulated distribution of food, foreign investment perspectives, and the general evolution of economy. The analysis of the commercialization of agricultural products and results of the 2007-2008 sugarcane harvest will also be analyzed during this meeting (*Prensa Latina*, 3/7/08).

July 3: The final sessions of the 8th Congress of the Cuban Journalists' Union (UPEC) opened at Havana's Convention Center with the attendance of representatives of over 3,600 organization members. In tune with the 8th Congress' slogan "Learning, Reflecting and Informing," the session provided journalists with an update on important aspects like the performance of telecommunications and information technologies in the country. Presiding the session was Revolution Commander Ramiro Valdes, who is the minister for that sector. Journalists were also updated on the Cuban and world economy. During the session, the Cuban journalists approved the new statutes and the Code of Ethics of their organization after having proposed changes to the documents, which are aimed at reinforcing the role of their organization (*ACN*, 3/7/08).

July 4: Without the media, Cuba's Communist Party would not have been able to spread the message of the Revolution among the people, said Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo at the 8th Congress of the Cuban Journalists' Union (UPEC) underway at Havana's Convention Center. In nearly 50 years of aggression and economic blockade by the United States in an attempt to strangle the Cuban Revolution, the media has always sided with the Communist Party (PCC), even in times of scarcity and contradictions, said Lazo. It is essential to seek better mechanisms to eliminate the obstacles that prevent journalists from doing their job right, said Lazo, also a member of the PCC Politburo. Discussing information policy and the ways to make it effective has been on the table in previous meetings, but it is crucial under today's world

circumstances, he insisted. "There won't be any flirting with the enemy ideology," Lazo emphasized. A journalism which interacts with the people and which responds to their criticism is necessary, said Juventud Rebelde newspaper columnist Jose Alejandro Rodriguez, who also called for a journalism which is taken into account by social entities, especially organizations and employees that ignore or break the laws (*ACN, AFP, 4/7/08*).

July 5: With the presence of Cuban President Raul Castro, the 8th Congress of the Association of Cuban Journalists (UPEC) closed in Havana after two days of fruitful debate. The Congress was attended by 300 delegates representing 3,680 Cuban journalists. Cuban First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, Vice Presidents Esteban Lazo, Carlos Lage, and other top government and Communist Party officials attended. Also present at the closing ceremony were relatives of the five Cubans imprisoned in the United States. During the closing session, UPEC Vice President Aixa Hevia announced the Association's plan of action and presented special awards and recognitions. UPEC awarded Fidel Castro the Jose Marti National Extraordinary Award for his continuing and outstanding journalistic work, which dates back to the early 1950s and continues to date. The journalists also named President Raul Castro a member of the organization. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was named an honorary member of the organization. Chavez was also proposed as a candidate for the Jose Marti National Journalism Award (*ACN, 5/7/08*).

July 5: As many as 35 dissidents were arrested and approximately 70 targeted in all, but most have now been freed, economist Martha Beatriz Roque of the opposition group Agenda for the Transition. The regime's roundup was aimed at halting a meeting of pro-democracy advocates and clamping down on the dissidents' plan to mark the US Independence Day holiday on July 4, she said. "Almost all the people arrested have now been freed," she said. Those who were not detained received warnings from the government, were placed under house arrest, or barred from traveling to the capital, Havana, she said. "The objective of the operation was to prevent a meeting of the Agenda group, and to bar them from participating in the celebration of the United States' Fourth of July holiday," Roque said. The Agenda meeting was cancelled and the Fourth of July party went ahead without incident at the home of Michael Parmly, the US diplomat and chief of mission at the US Interests Section (USIS) in Havana, Roque said (*AFP, 5/7/08*).

July 7: A unique 16th-century Spanish settlement in Cuba and Mexico's Monarch butterfly reserve have received World Heritage status from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) during a committee meeting in Canada. Cuba's village of Camaguey, settled in 1528, contains large and small squares, serpentine streets, alleys and irregular urban blocks, which make it "highly exceptional for Latin American colonial towns" located on the plains, the World Heritage committee said. The town played a "prominent role as the urban centre of an inland territory dedicated to cattle breeding and the sugar industry," the committee said. With this latest addition, Cuba now has nine World Heritage sites (*DPA, 8/7/08*).

July 7: The 12 permanent working commissions of the Cuban National Assembly (Parliament), provisionally constituted last May, are in session on July 7-8 at Havana's Convention Center. Each commission discusses specific topics related to the social and economic life of the country. The Energy and Environment Commission discusses, among other themes, the problems that affect energy efficiency and conservation in the country. Meanwhile, the Commission of Industry and Construction analyzes the situation of investments to solve problems related to water supply, the national production of medicines and the housing program. Other commissions discuss topics such as the prospects of foreign investment, the commercialization of agricultural products, the results of the 2007-2008 sugar campaign, etc. The 12 permanent working commissions will be approved during the first ordinary period of sessions of the current legislature of the National Assembly on July 11 (*ACN*, 7/7/08).

July 8: Insults, shouts, coarse words, disqualifying phrases and aggressive reactions are some of the acts of violence that have become fairly commonplace in the island. Studies by local Family Guidance Centers, which are under the umbrella of the Federation of Cuban Women, have concluded that lack of affection and respect for children and older people are also expressions of psychological violence. Cuban intellectuals, experts and media representatives have expressed concern over the spread of acts of violence, mostly in public places. Two prime-time television shows (*Diálogo Abierto/Open Dialogue* and *Sitio del Arte/Art Site*) and a daily newspaper (*Juventud Rebelde*) have dealt with this issue in the last couple of months. María Josefa Ramos, a former Spanish literature teacher at a junior high school in Arroyo Naranjo municipality, City of Havana province, told the press that she had in the last few years found it more difficult to calm her students down than to make them understand the subject she taught. "They really loved my classes and read most literary works, but I was often powerless to keep them quiet. If they felt provoked, they used vulgar phrases and insults," she added. Laura Zulueta, an eighth-grade student in El Cerro municipality, City of Havana province, stressed: "If you get in somebody's way unintentionally, you will probably hear some coarse expressions and end up in a fight after school." Reynaldo González, National Literature Prize winner and editor-in-chief of *La Siempreviva* magazine, indicated that verbal aggression generates other forms of violence. "Can we expect them to react otherwise at a time when music and TV shows extol various forms of violence?" Ramos wondered (*SEMIac*, 8/7/08).

July 8: More than 50 per cent of all Cuban high school teachers have yet to complete their professional training, while in Havana only 19 per cent possess any previous teaching experience, indicated a report submitted before a national assembly of the People's Power Commission. The official daily *Juventud Rebelde* indicated that "it is a difficult situation, and there is a clear need for every young educator to be tutored through his or her first steps as a professional." The issue was discussed within the Commission for Youth and Children's Welfare and Equal Rights for Women, during a preliminary meeting of the ordinary session of the National Assembly (*EFE*, 9/7/08).

July 9: Cuba's National Housing Institute (INV) said that 40,000 of the island's 47,000 apartment buildings of more than three stories need some type of repair work, the official

media reported. INV President Victor Ramirez told members of Parliament that "the lack of materials are preventing the nation's building repair program from going forward as required," said Juventud Rebelde. He added that, even if this year's plan to build 50,000 new homes in the country is completed, that would cover no more than seven per cent of the accumulated demand, which includes some one million people in need of home repairs or of new homes. The official said that 22,558 new homes had been built by June, that is, 45.1 per cent of the annual target. Ramirez said a lack of transportation for moving construction material and the lack of productive capacity for undertaking new construction projects is hampering this year's housing program. Lawmakers, meanwhile, have said it is unacceptable for different organizations and institutions not to comply with their obligations in the housing program, especially considering they have said on more than one occasion that they were prepared to complete the work on schedule. (*EFE*, 9/7/08).

July 10: Former Cuban President Fidel Castro invited Colombian Nobel literary laureate Gabriel García Márquez and his wife to share lunch in Havana. In an article, Castro claimed that it was the best time he had had since falling ill almost two years ago. The article was first posted in Cubadebate, a Cuban government website, and published by the national press the following day (*Reuters*, 10/7/08).

July 10: Opposition activist Jorge Ramírez Calderón received a two-year prison sentence in Sancti Spíritus, after the Municipal Court of Trinidad convicted him of "failure to comply with a representative of the authorities." According to Nérida Lima Conde, wife of the dissident, it was a closed trial, with the authorities allowing only four relatives to attend. Lima Conde reported that her husband's arrest took place on July 4, when a fish vendor was shoved by two police officers outside their home. Reacting to the assault, the dissident stepped out and chastised the police officers, calling their actions abusive and uncalled for. From the moment he was taken into custody to his conviction, the opposition activist, who is a delegate from the "November 30" Democratic Party in Sancti Spíritus, remained on hunger strike to protest his arrest which he deemed a dereliction of justice (*Cubane*, 16/7/08).

July 10: Cuba plans to raise the retirement age for workers by five years as it tries to cope with an aging population, official media said. The proposal, to be presented on July 11 to the National Assembly, calls for increasing the retirement age for men from 60 to 65 and for women from 55 to 60, said state news agency AIN. Social Security Minister Alfredo Morales told an assembly committee the change would be implemented gradually over the next few years. He said it would be presented to labour groups for consultation and will likely be approved by the National Assembly at its next meeting in December. Cuba estimates 25 per cent of its population will be over 60 in the year 2025, a high proportion compared to other Latin American countries. Under current trends, Morales said Cuba will have 770,000 fewer working-age people in 2025 than it had in 2007. Government leaders are also studying ways to increase the birth rate in the nation of 11 million people, he said, while the government said in April it would increase social security payments to retirees by 20 per cent (*Calgary Herald*, 11/7/08).

July 10: Cuban President Raul Castro presided over a joint meeting of the Council of State and the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party to analyze, among other aspects, topics related to the economic and social situation in the country. Participants in the meeting paid particular attention to topics related to food production and the increase of efficiency in key areas of the country's production and service sectors. During the meeting, which was also attended by some guests, Raul exchanged ideas with participants on topics that will be discussed during the ordinary session of the Cuban Parliament on July 11 (*ACN*, 11/7/08).

July 11: Cuban President Raul Castro moved to dampen rising expectations, warning that global economic problems may slow increases in worker pay, one of the key economic reforms he has proposed since taking office. In a speech to the first National Assembly meeting since it elected him to succeed ailing brother Fidel Castro in February, Castro said he wanted to move faster to improve the daily lives of Cubans but that rising prices and a slowing economy forced him to be realistic. Castro said "the salary problem" was being studied and would be addressed "gradually and according to priorities" but that quick action may not be possible. "It will depend on the economic situation of the country, inevitably linked to crisis in the world today, which could worsen," he said. "It wouldn't be ethical to create false expectations. We would like to go more rapidly, but it's necessary to act realistically," he said. "Socialism means social justice and equality, but equality of rights and opportunities, not of income," the 77-year-old president said in a speech that was taped and later aired on national television. "Equality is not egalitarianism." Raul Castro's speech was preceded by National Assembly meetings in which government officials warned that belt-tightening would be needed due to rising prices of fuel and imports. They also said the government would decentralize a sagging construction sector to make it more efficient and consider raising the retirement age to help Cuba cope with an aging population. The proposal would gradually raise the retirement age from 60 to 65 for men and from 55 to 60 for women, but is not expected to be approved until the assembly meets again in December. Castro explained that before the beginning of the upcoming school year, the parliament will propose the authorization of the reinsertion of teachers at their full salary, which will not affect their retirement pension. Cuba's rubber-stamp parliament convenes for only a few hours twice a year, and rumours were rampant that Friday's session would see an easing of restrictions on travel abroad or a strengthening of wages by increasing the value of the peso, worth about 21 to 1 against the US dollar. ([Discurso de Raul Castro ante la Asamblea Nacional](#); *Reuters*, *AP*, *ACN*, 12/7/08)

July 11: The First Session of the 7th Legislature of the National Assembly adopted a draft bill aimed at strengthening the relationship between lawmakers and their voters. The legislative initiative, which was approved in the presence of Cuban President Raul Castro, stipulates twice-a-year visits by deputies to the municipalities where they were elected. The document points out that Article 84 of the Cuban Constitution states, among other aspects, that the members of Parliament must keep in contact with their voters, listen to their comments, suggestions and critiques, as well as explain Cuban State policies to their voters. The new bill is aimed at strengthening communication between parliamentarians and their voters as much as possible. Such exchanges

and visits would coincide with the sessions of Municipal Assemblies. The meetings would also be attended by local government officials (ACN, 11/7/08).

July 13: Several dissident groups honoured throughout the country the victims of the 13 de Marzo tugboat, sunk by Cuban Coast Guard cutters on July 13, 1994. According to Miami-based Cuban Democratic Directorate, former-political prisoner Francisco Chaviano was detained while on his way to one of the events, to be held on Havana's Malecón (a four-mile seaside promenade stretching from Old Havana to Vedado). Despite harassment and repeated official attempts to thwart them, the activists managed to carry out several activities in Santa Clara, Sancti Spiritus, Holguín, Las Tunas and Camagüey. As they do every Sunday, the Ladies in White attended mass at the Santa Rita church in Havana and prayed for the health of their imprisoned relatives, as well as for those who died 14 years ago in the tugboat incident (*Cubaencuentro*, 14/7/08).

July 14: Over 900 health professionals will receive their graduate diplomas from the Medical Science Faculty in Matanzas, among them the first 366 health technology specialists. Victor Junco, dean of this higher education center, told the local press that on August 2 a graduation of doctors, dentists, nurses and other professionals of this field will take place in Cuba. The Matanzas Faculty will be graduating 134 doctors (ACN, 14/7/08).

July 14: Cuba's best road cyclist, Pedro Pablo Pérez, six-time Vuelta a Cuba (Tour of Cuba) winner is in critical condition after being in a car accident. At the moment, the athlete, who had qualified for the Olympic Games in Beijing, is in the Abel Santamaria Hospital in Pinar del Rio province. The prognosis is reserved (ACN, 14/7/08).

July 14: The process of popular discussions of amendments to the Cuban Social Security Law started with a national seminar of the Cuban Workers Confederation (CTC). This new law is a great challenge to the Revolution and Socialism, said Alfredo Morales Cartaya, Minister of Work and Social Security, in his speech to CTC top representatives from all over the country. Cartaya referred to the necessity of preparing and qualifying everybody in charge of presiding over the meetings in every work place, who will be attended by MPs, retirees, Ministry of Work officials and Communist Party members. Among the new proposals is the possibility for retirees to go back to their former positions and earn full salaries on top of their retirement pension. Also the retirement age will progressively increase to 65 years for men and 60 for women, in a process that will take seven years to be fully implemented. The Council of State has already approved this measure for education retirees (ACN, 15/7/08).

July 15: Regarding the "measures" introduced by Raúl Castro's government, singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés, scheduled to perform soon in Madrid and Santiago de Compostela, said that "being allowed to own a (mobile) phone and stay at hotels is no sign of reform," reported Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*. "In terms of freedoms we are going backwards. We are returning to the past," said Milanés, after commenting that, although "the government said a year ago that many things were going to change," the situation remains "the same and people have grown very desperate. With his brother Fidel still around, voicing his opinions, Raúl Castro has not yet been able to show his true

colors," he pointed out. The musician claimed not to understand why "everything remains the same" on the island. There is "a new opportunity now, just as when the Soviet Union collapsed and we had the chance to work together to find our own path yet failed to do so. The people expects changes, and so does the world," he added (*Cubaencuentro*, 15/7/08).

July 15: With the purpose of highlighting Cuban culture's deepest roots and strengthen unity between the island and other nations that share similar cultural backgrounds, the Fifth International Yoruba Conference will be held from July 17-20 in Havana. In a press conference, the event organizer, Antonio Castañeda, president of the Yoruba Association of Cuba, said some 45 presentations will be made during the encounter on topics "ranging from spirituality to the most profound roots of our culture," as quoted by Granma. Castañeda added that there are 23 Cuban Yoruba associations based outside the country and that the majority of Cubans practice the Yoruba cultural tradition (*ACN*, 16/7/08).

July 16: Fidel Castro blasted the "rich and powerful masters" of the Olympics for dropping baseball from the games beginning in 2012, and said two recent defeats to the United States doesn't mean Cuba can't still win gold in Beijing. In a brief but confusing essay, the 81-year-old former president noted the "thundering indignation of the fans because of Saturday's hard defeat." He was apparently referring to Cuba's 4-1 loss to the United States on Sunday, during the championship game of the 24th Haarlem Baseball Week in Holland. That loss came after the Americans topped Cuba in the World Cup final in November. Cuba has nevertheless won three of the four Olympic gold medals since baseball became a medal sport in 1992—settling for silver only in 2000, when it was upset by the United States. Castro wrote that the latest incarnation of the national team has "not been defeated." "We haven't given up on them," he wrote. "We send them a message to raise their spirits. We should never allow the traitors to come visit the country showing off the luxury obtained through infamy. Let's blame ourselves for that," Castro also added, in reference to athletes who have defected ([El equipo olímpico de pelota](#); *AP*, 17/7/08).

July 16: The Cuban Minister of Computers and Telecommunications, Ramiro Valdés, called upon the sector's workforce to work harder and improve quality to facilitate the national economic recovery. During the closing ceremony of the 7th Congress of the National Union of Workers from the Telecommunications, Computers and Electronics Industries, Valdés added that the telecoms and computer workforce constitutes a powerful army against hostile aggression and is not entitled to errors or idle time (*Prensa Latina*, 16/7/08).

July 16: There are too few science majors among the more than 76,000 students set to graduate this year from Cuba's universities, the official press said. The daily *Juventud Rebelde* said that, of the 76,653 Cubans who are completing their university studies this year, there are just 22 mathematicians, 20 physicists, 29 geographers, 23 microbiologists and about 40 chemists, according to figures from the Higher Education Ministry. The head of that portfolio, Juan Vela, said that the number of graduates is particularly low in

some fields of study and stressed the need for a greater effort to encourage Cubans to specialize in areas that are "so necessary for the country's scientific development." In his review of the 2007-2008 school year, Vela said the new graduates include 38,000 education majors, 26,649 students bound for careers in healthcare, and 1,678 who studied computer science. Authorities acknowledge that the educational system on the communist-ruled island, long touted as one of the accomplishments of Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, is suffering from inadequate training, lack of interest by teachers and an "exodus" of professionals due to low pay (*EFE*, 16/7/08).

July 16: Eleven dissidents were briefly detained in Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo, as they were preparing to conduct a commemorative walk to mark both the 17th anniversary of the creation of the oppositionist Young Cubans' Movement for Democracy (MCJD), and the birthday of university student leader José Antonio Echeverría. Six dissidents were arrested in Guantanamo and another five in Santiago de Cuba (*Cubaencuentro*, 16/7/08).

July 17: The Cuban Education Ministry acknowledged a shortfall of 8,192 teachers in a report about the 2007-2008 school year in which it states that the training of instructors is one of the main challenges in the sector, official media said. Granma said in an article entitled "Many and difficult challenges for Cuban education" that dozens of retired professors and others who had left the profession have already begun to respond to the call by President Raul Castro to come back to teaching. Education is one of the main concerns of the government of General Castro, who succeeded ailing older brother Fidel in February. The *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper said that the report presented by Education Minister Ena Elsa Velazquez acknowledges that "the training of the teacher not only pedagogically, but also in the subjects he must impart, continues to be the Achilles heel for Cuban schools." The document is critical and details difficulties among middle school students ranging from spelling and writing to geometry, and it says that more than 50,000 students "are not fulfilling their scholastic duties." The report, called "conservative" by Velazquez, measured parameters like class attendance, learning problems, the care of study materials, and relations of the students with their classmates and teachers (*EFE*, 17/7/08).

July 18: Cuban President Raul Castro handed over the Cuban flag to the sport delegation that will attend the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing. The official ceremony took place at the Council of State headquarters in the presence of nearly all of the 160 athletes who will represent Cuba in the Chinese capital city, where they are competing in 16 out of the 28 disciplines included in the competition. The flag bearer of the delegation is wrestler Mijain Lopez, a 120-kg Greco-Roman style 2007 world champion, considered by specialists a favourite to climb to the top of the Olympic podium (*ACN*, 18/7/08).

July 18: Cuban activist Jorge Luis García Pérez has lost count of how many times he has been arrested since last year, when he finished serving every day of a 17-year prison sentence. García, better known as "Antúnez," thinks it is 15, equivalent to one arrest per month. The last detention came over the Fourth of July weekend, when about 200 other anti-government activists were also picked up on highways and at homes, hotels, airports,

bus and train stations around the island and prevented from attending a US Independence Day celebration in Havana. They were held for a few hours to a few days and sent home in what critics say was the latest and most massive illustration of a nationwide operation to crack down on opponents. "Raúl Castro's strategy is to create a mirage of change for the international community to mask the fact that acts of repression are increasing," Antúnez said in a telephone interview from Placetas, Villa Clara in central Cuba. "They arrest you and let you go tomorrow to hide the sense that there is a wave of repression. I'd call it a 'a light wave of arrests'. It's different, and we don't know what lengths it will reach. It's an extremely critical situation." Raúl Castro, who formally took over the presidency in February, has been hailed internationally for taking initial steps at reform in the months he's been in power. But activists argue that just as he allowed cell phones and computers for the first time, Castro launched a harassment campaign against members of the opposition through frequent detentions. The crusade appears designed to keep the overall number of political prisoners steady while sending a strong message that Castro has a firm grip on dissent (*The Miami Herald*, 18/7/08).

July 18: In a bid to avert the teacher shortfall on the island, the Cuban government has allowed retired teachers to return to work on a full, regular salary while retaining their retirement pension, reported the local press. "Until a new Social Security Law is passed, it has been deemed expedient to issue exceptional authorization for teaching personnel of retirement age, willingly reinstated to the practice of their profession, to receive the full pay grade of the position they fill, as well as their existing pension," informed the official media. ([Decreto Ley No. 260](#); *Reuters*, 18/7/08)

July 19: Three moderate Cuban dissident groups formerly affiliated with the "Progressive Arch" coalition, joined forces to establish a new social-democratic party under the slogan "A New Country: Building a Citizens' Cuba." "This is a new, broad-base Social Democrat party, open even to Christians and liberals who identify with the values of socialism," said party leader Manuel Cuesta Morua. Another member of the new party's leadership, Leonardo Calvo, explained that it brings together the Social Democrat Coordinating Committee (in exile), the People's Party and the Socialist Democrat Current. All deliberations are conducted in an Old Havana residence, where approximately 50 dissidents, representing "300-400 full members and thousands of volunteers" will "lay the groundwork and establish the guidelines for future initiatives," added Calvo (*Télam*, 19/7/08).

July 19: Former President Fidel Castro said in a commentary published in the official online journal *Cubadebate* that he did not believe that Cuba's educational system is "so bad." "I don't believe, in the first place, that we're so bad," said Castro in the article—also published the next day in the official press—after the Cuban government issued a decree calling back retired teachers to the classrooms in the face of a deficit of secondary school instructors. In recent months, government officials and the local press have reported on some of the problems confronting the education sector, such as the shortfall of 8,192 teachers or that "the training of teachers not only pedagogically but also in the subjects they must teach, continues to be the Achilles heel of Cuban schools." "We don't become discouraged by the news of enemies who twist the meaning of our words and present our

self-criticisms like tragedies," Castro said. "It would seem that our country has the most education problems of any in the world," he added, referring to the remarks of others regarding Cuba's educational system ([La educación en Cuba](#); *EFE*, 20/7/08).

July 22: The Latin American Federation of Rural Women in Cuba (FLAMUR) has launched the Women's Civic Center project. According to FLAMUR Vice President Maria Antonia Hidalgo Mir, it is an orientation effort focused on women and major issues affecting them. The project consists of a three-pronged action plan: a series of lectures on domestic violence, alcoholism, environmentalism and human rights advocacy; capacity-building courses on methods for non-violent civic struggle and micro-company implementation; providing shelter for battered women who fall victim to domestic violence (*Cubamet*, 22/7/08).

July 23: Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdes is in Madrid to launch his latest album, "Canto a Dios", which pays tribute to the victims and survivors of hurricane Katrina that devastated the city of New Orleans in 2005. The album merges symphonic music with jazz and African rhythms and revisits some of his previous compositions such as "Nanu", for which he received one of his five Grammy nominations, and "Claudia", a piece he first recorded with legendary Irakere in 1979. He said that after Katrina he wanted to sing to the victims. "It is a prayer, a request to God for peace, to ask that events such as Katrina do not happen again" (*ACN*, 23/7/08).

July 23: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque spoke in the eastern province of Guantanamo at a military discharge ceremony for future diplomats. Perez Roque presided over the observance in which the youth were formally released from their military service after having served with the Border Brigade of the Antonio Maceo Order, on the perimeter of the US naval base in Guantanamo. The youth are expected to become diplomats after they complete studies at the International Relations Institute, which reopened classes after more than ten years. During the ceremony, which was also presided over by the first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party in Guantanamo Province, Luis Antonio Torres, several university graduates were promoted to reserve officers in Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) (*ACN*, 23/7/08).

July 23: The first houses made out of oil-derived materials were assembled in Santiago de Cuba. The group of petro-houses makes up the second residential community in the country slated for this type of housing as a result of the agreements signed between Cuba and Venezuela on social services promoted in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). The project comes as Santiago de Cuba prepares to celebrate, on July 26, the 55th anniversary of the attack on the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes garrisons, reported *Granma* newspaper. Engineer Amilcar Parra from a Venezuelan international brigade working on the project said the petro-houses are excellent in providing viable, efficient, and rational technology for poor and developing nations (*ACN*, 23/7/08).

July 24: In the past year, Nereida Rodriguez Rivero says she has been punched in the mouth, almost thrown from a moving bus, and stabbed on the street in her otherwise sleepy rural hometown. In May, government agents took all the books out of the

independent library that she continues to re-stock and run out of her home. But—as is often the case in Cuba—the punishment for her dissent is not limited to her alone. Her daughter Yuricel Perez Rodriguez was summarily fired from her position at a state-run children's library last year. "They said I wasn't safe for children because I took books to [political] prisoners," said Ms. Perez Rodriguez. But this mother-daughter duo will not be backing down. "If you show fear, they will eat you," says Ms. Rivero, a regional head of the Latin American Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR), a Cuban group dedicated to pushing for political rights. "They won't swallow me whole." "People are showing up asking us to help them more and more," said FLAMUR's country director, Belinda Salas Tapanes. "They come to us for networking. We don't have much more than that to help them." FLAMUR last year collected more than 10,000 signatures demanding that the Cuban peso be the only unit of currency, thereby eliminating the present two-currency system. Twenty women work for FLAMUR in Havana, communicating openly by phone, despite government surveillance. Norvis Ortero Suarez, who lives in a tiny apartment, is one of them. "We're always under surveillance," says Ms. Suarez calmly, explaining that she works with other women to bring political prisoners food, medicine, books, and moral support. But, at times, she becomes the prisoner. Rivero and other dissidents say it's hard to envision a Castro-led regime rolling back political restrictions, given the repression they've experienced. But they say that they wouldn't be battling the system if change wasn't possible. "Raul's Cuba is already very different than Fidel's," says Tapanes. "I think change is already happening and Raul is implementing China-style reforms. But I'm not happy with that. The change has to be radical" (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 24/7/08).

July 26: President Raul Castro used a speech on the 55th anniversary of the beginning of the Cuban revolution not to unveil any new changes but to call on everyday Cubans to prepare for tough times in the days ahead. Citing the global economic downturn and the rising cost of oil, Mr. Castro said Cuba and other countries in the developing world face severe challenges that would require belt-tightening and patience. "We must bear in mind that we are living in the midst of a true world crisis which is not only economic but also related with climate change, the irrational use of energy and a great number of other problems," he said. There was speculation that Mr. Castro, who officially took over the presidency in February from Fidel Castro, his older brother, would use Cuba's important July 26th holiday—which commemorates a failed raid on a military barracks—to extend the rash of modest changes he had announced in recent months. But he seemed eager to dampen expectations. "We are aware of the great number of problems waiting to be solved, most of which weigh heavily and directly on the population," he said, adding later, "Regardless of our great wishes to solve every problem, we cannot spend in excess of what we have" ([Raul Castro's speech](#), *The New York Times*, 27/7/08).

July 26: The first secretary of Cuba's Communist Party in Santiago de Cuba, Misael Enamorado said that only the people's hard work and their capacity to counter the most difficult situations make it possible to keep going forward, strengthening the confidence in the Cuban Revolution and faith in victory. Speaking at the central rally marking National Rebelliousness Day in Cuba, July 26, which was presided over by Cuban President Raul Castro, the Communist Party official said that the people of Santiago de

Cuba are proud of hosting the central celebrations for the 1953 attacks on the former Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes Garrisons, an action that sparked the Cuban Revolution. A major task is that of exploiting idle lands by handing them over to those who are willing to work. Enamorado underscored the need to better attend to farmers' needs, increase productivity, and look for ways to encourage agricultural producers. He said that a bigger effort is being required of farmers, cooperative workers, campesinos, technical personnel and leaders in the agricultural sector, though he added that the people have worked in many other projects, along with those linked to the economic and social development of the country (ACN, 27/7/08).

July 27: Hospitality and diligence prevailed in welcoming the first batch of Cuban athletes and officials, who arrived in Beijing for the Olympics, scheduled to run August 8 to 24. This first group included President of INDER (the National Sports Institute of Cuba), Christian Jimenez, as well as wrestlers, athletes, weight lifters, shooting athletes, cyclists, rowers, volleyball players, archers, divers and fencers. The delegation will also include members of sports federations, coaches, medical staff and Cuban sports notables such as Teofilo Stevenson (boxing). Other delegates will be arriving in the next few days, depending on completion of their preparation in European and Asian countries (ACN, 27/7/08).

July 28: Cuban President Raul Castro inaugurated two painting exhibitions by national artists in Santiago de Cuba in honour of the 55th anniversary of the attack on the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes garrisons. The initiative behind the exhibits, entitled Viva Cuba Libre (Long Live a Free Cuba) and Absuelto por la Historia (Absolved by History), came from a group of artists led by Alexis Leyva Machado (Kcho) and including Alberto Lescay, Eduardo Roca (Choco), Roberto Fabelo, Ernesto Ranzaño, Juan Moreira, Alicia Almeida, Diana Balboa, Alicia Leal, Sándor Gonzalez, Zaida del Rio and Angel Guerra (ACN, 28/7/08).

July 28: A group of farmers in western Cuba says it will no longer accept government-provided rations of rice and beans and wants others to help the economy by following this lead, the state-run newspaper Trabajadores said. Cuban President Raul Castro has told Cubans the country must cut costly food imports and that the heavily subsidized food ration for each Cuban is "irrational and unsustainable." He has not said if or when the food ration would be eliminated (*The Gazette*, 29/7/08).

July 28: Some 60 per cent of Cuban labour leaders do not understand collective agreements, according to survey results published by the official journal of the communist-ruled island's only legal union, the CTC (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba). Trabajadores weekly said a survey of 2,620 workers and more than 930 CTC officials found that among the latter group, "barely 40 per cent said they had some knowledge of the items that should make up" a contract. Results of the survey, conducted in September 2007 by the Labour and Social Security Ministry and the CTC, indicate that collective bargaining agreements do not play a role in relations among management, workers and the union. In the case of the rank and file, only 32 per cent had taken part in the discussion and approval of an agreement, 32 per cent had no knowledge of their

agreement and only 32.8 per cent said compliance was discussed with the union. Of the nearly 1,000 state-owned companies visited by survey takers, 795 had current labour contracts, a situation that can be considered "really positive," the newspaper said. Alfredo Machado, head of the CTC, said there was no effective monitoring of union officials, and the latter lacked "knowledge and training." The survey results also showed that few workers know they can take their grievances with management to higher authorities, and that managers who violate labour laws can face criminal prosecution (*EFE*, 28/7/08).

July 29: Even though Havana's bus fleet has doubled in size, Cuba's public transportation system remains troubled, according to the island's state-run media. "If the people complained about the lack of buses before," the criticism now is aimed at the "quality of service" and problems with paying fares, the Cuban Communist Party daily *Granma* said. According to the newspaper, daily transit ridership in Havana has risen from 450,000 in December 2006 to more than 846,000 today. "The city is moving at a good pace; but it can do much better," *Granma* said, adding that it had received letters and messages about problems like "competition between buses for fares," failure to use established stops, filth and "incorrect or missing change" after collecting fares. Transit officials told the press the Cuban capital's public transportation system has 335 new buses that started running in 2007. The new fleet includes 175 high-capacity articulated vehicles belonging to Metrobus, which operated Havana's now-retired "camels," the two-humped converted tractor-trailers with a capacity for 285 passengers that were introduced in 1994 as Cuba struggled to adjust to the loss of economic subsidies from the former Soviet Union. The new vehicles' introduction creates the need to increase the number of inspectors in Havana—which currently employs 80 and expects it will need 400—monitoring drivers' behaviour, fare collection and compliance with schedules and routes. Due to the lack of inspectors, officials plan to install GPS tracking devices on some 70 buses to "reduce lack of discipline" (*EFE*, 29/7/08).

July 29: A group of nine Cuban non-violent opposition activists delivered to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a letter addressed to Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, demanding that their rights be respected, including their right to travel abroad freely. In the letter, the dissidents denounce that, in refusing them permission to travel outside Cuba, the government violates a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. They add that this refusal is also in violation of migratory agreements signed by Cuba and the United States in 1994 (*Radio Martí*, 29/7/08, *Cubaencuentro*, 31/7/08).



ECONOMY

July 1: Cuba is participating in the International Exhibition Zaragoza 2008, with a wide gamut of offers in its exhibition, according to an official report issued by the country's Tourism Ministry. The information, published by the cubatravel.cu Web site, also points out that 105 nations are represented at the Fair, which will be held for three months under

the slogan of "Water and Sustainable Development". Debates are centered on technical, scientific, and social aspects of sustainable water. The event's promoters said it will be one of the largest events on the issue ever held (*ACN*, 1/7/08).

July 1: Cuba has invited Indian firms to invest in a planned 150,000 barrels a day refinery in the island nation, India's oil ministry said in a statement. It also sought India's help in upgrading and expanding its existing refineries at a meeting in Madrid, between Indian Oil Minister Murli Deora and his Cuban counterpart Yadira Garcia Vera, the statement added. The statement said the two countries have finalised the India-Cuba Hydrocarbon Agreement for co-operation in the oil and gas sector without elaborating its details. ONGC Videsh Ltd, the overseas investment arm of state-run explorer Oil and Natural Gas Corp, has stakes in nine exploration blocks in Cuba, and total ownership of two (*Reuters*, 1/7/08).

July 1: Cuba's Basic Industry Minister Yadira Garcia told participants at the 19th World Petroleum Congress (WPC) underway in Madrid about Cuba's Energy Revolution, a project begun in 2004 for better managing and conserving energy. Garcia played a video with program data and targets and the evolution of the energy sector in Cuba. She went on to explain that to date more than 23 million electrical appliances have been replaced by new low-consuming ones, including water pumps, refrigerators, and TV sets. The program is widely supported by the people and the government, said Garcia during a ministerial session on the second day of the WPC. Energy saving and renewable energy sources are the focus of interest in the country, she stressed (*ACN*, 1/7/08).

July 1: Russian energy companies OAO Gazprom (OGZPY) and OAO Lukoil Holdings (LUKOY) may revive Soviet-era ties to enter the oil-rich Gulf of Mexico through its Cuban backdoor. Gazprom and Lukoil "are interested in" Cuban hydrocarbons acreage, the country's Basic Industry Minister Yadira Garcia told Dow Jones Newswires at the World Petroleum Congress in Madrid. She said no deal had been signed but that the two companies have looked into offshore acreage in the Cuban part of the Gulf of Mexico. One person close to state-owned Gazprom said that the company's oil arm, Gazprom Neft (SIBN.RS), is interested in possible Cuban projects. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supplied Cuba with cheap oil, as well as thousands of other goods and commodities (*Dow Jones*, 1/7/08).

July 1: A business delegation from the Chamber of Industries of Nicaragua is in Havana to promote trade relations between Cuba and the Central American country. Humberto Arguellos, who heads the group of members of the private sector and officials from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Industry and Commerce, explained that they brought to Cuba a proposal that could reach \$20 million in imports. The Nicaraguan delegation is made up of businesspeople from the mechanical, meat, and leather shoe sectors, among others, from companies such as Industrial San Martín, Quibor, CAPSA and Delmor. Svetlana Contreras, coordinator of the visit, commented that the offer of exports could reach the figure of \$47 million, which they will discuss with the Cuban Chamber of Commerce (*ACN*, 1/7/08).

July 2: The Brazilian and Cuban state oil companies, Petrobras and CUPET, are on track to sign an oil exploration deal this year. Fidel Rivero, president of CUPET, is quoted by the *Estado*, a local newspaper, as saying "we are in the concluding phase of a deal. We hope to announce something in coming months." Cuba has around 240 million barrels of proved oil reserves and natural gas in its offshore waters in the Gulf of Mexico, and potential oil resources have been estimated by some as between 4-9 billion barrels. Several companies have been hovering, some more tentatively than others, around the island in anticipation of being allowed to explore the region. While American companies are barred from participating in activities in Cuba as a result of the US embargo on the island, European firms as well as some from Russia and China have been keen to engage in discussions with CUPET where possible (*Dow Jones*, 2/7/08).

July 4: Venezuela and Cuba signed an agreement to create a joint steel-making company called Aceros del Alba CA, which will make steel products in Venezuela, Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias reported. The company, whose \$1.5 billion investment will come from Venezuela, plans to produce 500,000 metric tons of stainless steel, the state news agency said. The steel-maker will be located in Venezuela's eastern state of Monagas, ABN said. The steel-maker will be 51 per cent owned by Venezuela and 49 per cent owned by the Cuban group, Acinox Steel Industrial Group, ABN reported. A ferronickel plant will be built in Cuba to provide the raw material for the steel plant, ABN said. The plant will be 51 per cent owned by Cuba and 49 per cent owned by Venezuela, the state news agency said. Rodolfo Sanz, Venezuela's Minister of Basic Industries and Mining, said the steel-making plant should begin construction this year and be operating in three years. Sanz signed the agreement in Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela with Herbert Ballart, president of Acinox (*Bloomberg*, 4/7/08).

July 8: The Cuban Parliament Food and Agriculture Committee reported a modest but promising increase in the domestic production of foodstuffs that are usually imported. "This is just the beginning of a program that must overcome numerous organizational limitations and obstacles and make better use of available resources to obtain a better second semester," said Committee President Leonardo Martinez as quoted by *Granma*. The committee members agreed on the need to develop a sound incentive, provide policy for farmers and, above all, consolidate advances to avoid backtracking (*ACN*, 8/7/08).

July 8: New Cuban President Raul Castro's promise to improve daily life is running up against soaring fuel and food prices for the import-dependent country. Belt-tightening is in order, the official media said. "Adjustments and restrictions are inevitable" warned Radio Rebelde, leading off its national morning newscast with coverage of a parliamentary hearing on the economy. No information was available on what adjustments and restrictions were under consideration except that they involved social spending and retail prices. Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez told the hearing on July 7 the economy was performing relatively well, with industrial production up 6.2 per cent over the first half of 2007, agriculture 7.5 per cent, and tourism 14.5 per cent, among other key sectors. At the same time he said wages continued to rise more than productivity in an economy more than 90 per cent controlled by the state. Rodriguez warned there was no escape from soaring prices given the country imports 50 per cent of

its fuel and more than 50 per cent of its basic food stuffs. "The substantial increase in the prices of fuel and food on the international market so far this year and projections for the remainder will inevitably force adjustments and restrictions on the economy and plans for next year," Granma quoted Rodriguez as saying (*Reuters*, 8/7/08).

July 8: President Raul Castro will allow private contractors back into Cuba's transport sector, after almost a decade on the sidelines, to try to jumpstart the stalled system, official media reported. Private drivers were barred from operating in Cuba back in 1999 with no explanation, sparking outrage from drivers. Their work was first made legal during a brief foray into open markets in the 1990s—after the collapse of the former Soviet bloc that subsidized Cuba's food and energy—when many forms of self-employment were permitted. Backtracking later ensued on most forms of self-employment. But Transport Minister Jorge Luis Sierra said on state media late Tuesday "a decision has been made, and is going to be implemented in the coming days" to re-legalize private operators, if not in a format seen before. "There will be two types of licenses: one for rural transport and one for certain urban areas," Sierra said on Radio Rebelde. Licenses "will be approved one at a time, the fuel will be given (to the operator), prices, routes and schedules will be set. It's as if it were a public bus," Sierra told lawmakers set for their first working session since Raul Castro took the helm of Cuba. Sierra said Havana planned to spend \$2 billion on public transport improvements, about a quarter of which would be for 5,000 buses, mostly from China (*Reuters, Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 9/7/08).

July 8: Expectations that Cuba's new President Raul Castro would open up the country to more foreign investors have yet to see it materialize, according to testimony before a parliamentary commission. Granma reported there were fewer investment projects than when Raul Castro provisionally took over the government in July 2006 from ailing brother Fidel Castro. Granma, quoting testimony by a senior investment official, reported state companies are involved in 234 joint ventures and 12 cooperative production agreements that encompass approximately two per cent of the work force. At the close of 2005, the government reported there were 258 joint ventures and 115 cooperative production agreements. In July 2007 Castro called for more foreign investment, especially in agriculture, but to date the only new agreements signed and announced have been with Venezuela to perform risk assessment of oil exploration in Cuba's Gulf of Mexico waters. Cuba has formed 24 new ventures with Venezuela, which under socialist President Hugo Chavez has become Cuba's close ally and major benefactor. Officials say that despite fewer investors, direct investment has increased, as have venture revenues and profits (*Reuters, ACN*, 9/7/08).

July 9: Cuba is investing in sugar-cutting combines, trucks and other equipment and retooling mills in preparation for a big jump in output in 2008-2009, the official media said. "The country is planning a 25-30 per cent increase in sugar and molasses for the coming harvest and will meet refined sugar demand," testified Orlando Garcia Ramirez, Vice Minister of Sugar, before a parliament hearing as reported by the *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper. "It is investing in refineries, distilleries, electrical generation capacity; increasing storage space; and introducing high productivity sugar cutting combines," the

paper said. Cuba imported 22 Mann combines from Brazil for the recent harvest. The harvest runs from December through April when the rainy season begins, but this year mills ground into June due to an unusually dry May. The Cuban harvest is more than 80 per cent mechanized and rains hamper cutting machines and trucks entering plantations. Raw sugar production was 1.5 million tonnes for the 2007-2008 harvest, compared with 1.2 million tonnes the previous harvest; refined sugar doubled to 200,000 tonnes; and molasses for animal feed increased 300 per cent, the first increases in output since the industry was downsized by more than 50 per cent in 2003. Cuba consumes a minimum of 700,000 tons of sugar per year, and 400,000 tons are destined for China (*Reuters*, 9/7/08).

July 9: Antigua's Minister of Tourism Harold Lovell is looking at working with the Republic of Cuba in an exchange program to promote and enhance Antigua's tourism industry. Speaking at a recently held press conference, Minister of Tourism Harold Lovell explained that in February 2007, a Ministry of Tourism delegation visited Cuba and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Cuba's Ministry of Tourism. "Under that memorandum of understanding, we will seek to establish ways in which our experiences can be shared with Cuba and the Cuban experience can be shared with Antiguans and Barbudans," Lovell said. "Insofar as our experience is concerned, we discovered that in the area of yachting, we are fairly well developed." According to Lovell, they had the opportunity to visit the yacht club in Havana while a team from Cuba visited Antigua's yacht club. During those meetings, they looked at ways in which they can help with major regattas in Cuba, similar to the Stanford Antigua Sailing Week (*Antigua Sun*, 9/7/08).

July 9: Cuba is deepening its main seaports to handle larger and heavier ships and trim its costs for shipping. Dredging is underway in Havana, Santiago and Cienfuegos ports, which together receive about 85 per cent of cargo imports, National Port Authority officials told the weekly business newspaper *Opciones*. When projects are finished next year, the three ports should average depths of 11.5 meters, or 37.7 feet. That will allow ships to carry bigger loads and let larger ships enter, cutting transport costs by at least \$50 million a year from today's less efficient service by smaller and lighter vessels, *Opciones* reported. The newspaper did not disclose the price tag for dredging, which includes at least one contract with a Dutch firm. The projects come as cargo centers worldwide vie to accommodate a new generation of mega-ships (*Sun Sentinel*, 9/7/08).

July 10: The 4th Cuba-Chile Joint Intergovernmental Commission is underway in Havana. Both parties are expected to sign bilateral cooperation accords. The meeting is taking place at the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation until July 11. Cuba and Chile resumed diplomatic relations in April 1995, 20 years after such links were broken following the military coup that overthrew the democratically-elected Chilean government of Salvador Allende (*ACN*, 10/7/08).

July 10: Jose Luis Rodriguez, Vice President of the Cuban Council of Ministers and Minister of Planning and the Economy, gave details about the progress of the government program to overhaul and expand the country's daycare facilities as part of efforts to curb stagnant population growth levels. Luis Rodriguez addressed participants at a technical

workshop sponsored by the National Statistics Office (ONE) in salute of World Population Day. He said that daycare capacities have increased by 9,300 additional spaces for the coming school year, and will continue to rise in the following years. The minister said that the daycare initiative is part of a series of new measures aimed at improving childcare and support offered to workers with children. "Today, 53 per cent of mothers have full time jobs and the challenge is to support our women so they can continue to raise families without losing the ground they have won in the labour sector" (*Granma*, 11/7/08).

July 11: Carlos Lage, Vice President of the Council of State and Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers, is heading the Cuban delegation attending the Fifth Summit Meeting of PETROCARIBE, to be held from July 12-13 in Maracaibo, Venezuela. Also joining the Cuban delegation are Yadira García, Minister of Basic Industry; Lina Pedraza, secretariat member of the Communist Party Central Committee; Marta Lomas, Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation; and Alejandro González, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. The meeting will be one more step towards the creation and implementation of a comprehensive cooperation model in the field of energy, which will cover the supply of reasonably-priced fuel, the training of human resources, the development of alternative sources of energy, as well as conservation and efficiency issues (*Granma*, 11/7/08).

July 11: The general secretary of the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), Paraguayan Hugo Saguier-Caballero, will visit Cuba at the invitation of Cuban Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Perez Roque on July 13, according to a press release posted on the ALADI website. Saguier-Caballero and Perez Roque will meet to analyze improvements in the integration process of the region; the working schedule for the gradual and progressive establishment of a Free Trade Area; and Cuba's role in the association. The officials will also have the chance to discuss the program of the vice-ministers meeting to be held from August 4-5 at ALADI headquarters in Montevideo (*ACN*, 11/7/08).

July 11: Two cooperation agreements between Cuba and Chile, aimed at strengthening relations between the two nations, were signed at the offices of the Cuban Ministry for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation (MINVEC). The first, an act of the fourth Inter-Chancery Meeting, was signed by Alberto Van Klaveren, undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Chile, and by Cuban Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Alejandro González. The second document, a product of the fourth meeting of the Joint Commission of Cooperation, was signed by Cristina Lazo, General Director of Chile's International Cooperation Agency, and by MINVEC Deputy Minister Orlando Requeijo. The group's work allows for the identification of projects and actions for the 2008-2010 period and comprises joint efforts in sectors such as health, biotechnology, agriculture and livestock production, fisheries, mining, civil defence, and education, in addition to covering heritage sites and historical centers, culture, sports, and trade (*ACN*, 11/7/08).

July 12: Venezuela and member countries of the Petrocaribe alliance, which provides low-cost financing on Venezuelan oil to the Caribbean, plan to increase natural gas production to 800 million cubic feet a day by 2014. The countries are also considering plans to build pipelines to transport natural gas from Venezuela to Suriname and Nicaragua, according to a statement on state oil company Venezuela's PDVSA website. Representatives from Petrocaribe member countries started a two-day summit in the Venezuelan city of Maracaibo. Members must pay within 90 days for a portion of the oil they import from Venezuela, the biggest crude exporter in the Western Hemisphere; the remainder can be paid out over as many as 25 years at 1 per cent interest. Petrocaribe includes 17 countries across the Caribbean and Central America. Vice President Carlos Lage heads the Cuban delegation (*Bloomberg, Granma, 12/7/08*).

July 13: Cuba acknowledged the Venezuelan government and President Hugo Chavez for having designed, launched and boosted the Petrocaribe oil integration initiative, because of the benefit it provides to the countries of the region. Speaking at the 5th Extraordinary Summit of Petrocaribe, held in the Venezuelan region of Maracaibo, Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said that the region has been privileged with the fact that Venezuela, being one of the world's largest oil producers and with the largest oil reserve in this part of the world, has launched an initiative based on strong solidarity principles. No other member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and no other country, among the large oil producers in the world, has been willing to share those benefits as Venezuela has been willing to, said Lage in his statement, as cited by Granma newspaper ([Discurso de Carlos Lage en Petrocaribe](#); *ACN, 13/7/08*).

July 13: Cuba and Venezuela will offer their experience in the Energy Revolution program to the PetroCaribe member countries, reads the Declaration of the Fifth Extraordinary Summit of PetroCaribe, which took place in Maracaibo, Venezuela. The text, read by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez during the final session of the event, notes that this experience will help the nations of the area to further advance in the creation of measures and policies of efficiency that contribute to the preservation and rational use of energy sources. According to Granma news daily, the PetroCaribe member countries also agreed on the creation of the Council of Ministers of Agriculture of PetroCaribe in order to pay special attention to food production. They also agreed to create a fund to finance food production initiatives in member countries in order to achieve food security. During the event, Guatemala's membership of the bloc was approved and it was announced that the next summits of the group will take place in Saint Kitts and Nevis and in Belize (*ACN, 14/7/08*).

July 14: The analysis of the state of bilateral relations and the implementation of bilateral agreements are the two main objectives of the 8th Cuba-Bulgaria Intergovernmental Session that began in Havana. The delegations are headed by Ricardo Guerrero, Cuba's Deputy Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, and by the Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Economy and Energy, Yavor Kuiumdjiev. During the meeting, both delegations will discuss the possibility of expanding bilateral cooperation to the education, culture, science and energy sectors. The meeting will conclude with the

signing of the Final Act of the session. Both delegations will also sign an Annex to the Agreement of Trade and Economic Cooperation and a Memorandum of Understanding between the State Agency for Information Technologies of Bulgaria and the Cuban Ministry of Communications (ACN, 15/7/08).

July 15: Cuba is looking to expand the country's oil refining capacity through a joint venture with Venezuela in the framework of solidarity, integration and cooperation between the two countries. Cuban Basic Industry Minister (Mining and Energy) Yadira Garcia Vera said that the project is being carried out in conjunction with Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and is expected to be completed in a period of three to four years, reported Juventud Rebelde newspaper. In statements to the Cuban press at the conclusion of the Fifth Extraordinary Summit of Petrocaribe, the Cuban minister spoke about the importance of the project in light of skyrocketing oil prices. She said the project would increase refining capacities in plants in the provinces of Cienfuegos and Santiago de Cuba (ACN, 16/7/08).

July 15: The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), delivered CAD \$5,450,000 to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to support projects in eastern Cuba, reported sources in the UN organ. Since 2004, Canada has endorsed 109 initiatives linked to areas such as agriculture and the response to natural disasters (IPS, 15/7/08).

July 15: Plague-resistant sugar cane varieties and improved cultivation have dramatically reduced the presence of cane rust and smut in Cuban sugar plantations, boosting output, the country's top expert said. "Today we are at one of our best moments in terms of cane varieties," Ignacio Santana Aguiar, the director of the National Sugar Cane Research Center, said. Santana, interviewed by a local radio station, said 87 per cent of the country's sugar cane comes from Cuban-developed varieties to meet the country's specific conditions, compared with 47 per cent in 2001. "These varieties are more resistant to plagues and disease and mature more quickly," he said. "Four per cent of total acreage is affected by smut (*carbón de caña*), compared with 54 per cent in 2001. In terms of rust, we are at 15 per cent, compared with 60 per cent in 2001," he said. Cuban raw sugar output increased 24 per cent this year to 1.5 million tons, the first increase since the industry was downsized by more than 50 per cent in 2003. The sugar ministry said a similar increase is expected next year (Reuters, 15/7/08).

July 16: Mexico began negotiations with Cuba to manufacture the Cuban pentavalent vaccine and to exchange other pharmaceutical and sanitary products, said Mexican Secretary of Health José Ángel Córdova at the end of a working visit to the island. The official added that he is also contemplating a purchase of Cuban anti-retrovirals, as an option to reduce the costs of medication required to treat HIV patients (La Jornada, 17/7/08).

July 17: Cuba's milk production plan for the first semester of 2008 surpassed its target by four per cent, a clear sign of revival in this economic sector. This increase includes deliveries made by the Ministries of Sugar and Agriculture, as well as from private

producers, who supplied 60 per cent of all milk sold to the government, reported Granma. Officials from the Ministry of Agriculture gathered in Havana reported that though the results are encouraging, they are still far from the volumes achieved in past decades (ACN, 17/7/08).

July 17: With some rank-and-file Cubans just beginning to get a taste of high technology, albeit still slow and very expensive, they can look forward to getting high speed Internet links in 2010, according to new documents made public. Wikileaks released documents signed in 2006 by officials from Cuba and Venezuela outlining plans to build a fibre-optic cable between the two countries. "The contract between the two countries, which has been independently verified, adds weight to Cuban statements that the United States economic embargo of the island has forced it to rely on slow and expensive satellite links for Internet connectivity," said Wikileaks investigative editor Julian Assange in the report. "Cuba is situated a mere 120 kilometres off the coast of Florida. The proposed 1,500 kilometre cable will connect Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad to the rest of the world via La Guaira, Venezuela." The cost of the Cuba-Venezuela cable was not revealed, but it is expected to be several times the cost of a cable that could be strung between Havana and Florida; the Cuban government has estimated a Havana-Florida cable would cost \$500,000 (*InformationWeek*, 17/7/08).

July 18: President Raul Castro, looking to increase food production in socialist Cuba, has approved the lending of small amounts of additional state land to private farmers and cooperatives according to a decree published in the official media. Private farmers who have shown themselves to be productive can increase their holdings to up to 99 acres for an initial period of ten years with a possibility of renewal, said the decree published in Granma. Under land reforms put in place after the 1959 revolution, Cubans have been able to own small amounts of land. Cooperatives can add an unspecified amount of additional land for 25 years, according to the new law. The decree, which has been promised for some time by Castro, is the latest of several small reforms he has made to make Cuba's state-run economy more productive ([Decreto Ley No. 259](#); *Reuters*, 18/7/08).

July 19: Cuba's state oil company, CUPET, owes Venezuela \$4.6 billion for the 92,000 barrels a day the Caribbean island has received from its ally since 2005, the Caracas daily *El Nacional* reported. Venezuela's state-oil company PDVSA is waiting to collect the Cuban debt, along with bills yet to be paid by members of the Petrocaribe alliance that total \$7.2 billion, the newspaper said (*Bloomberg*, 19/7/08).

July 19: The Cuban pharmaceutical industry grossed USD \$350 million in 2007, moving up to the second-highest position in exports, right behind the nickel sector and surpassing traditional products such as tobacco, rum and sugar. According to the digital edition of the magazine *Bohemia*, "figures from of the Pharmaceutical Group of the Basic Industry Ministry, reveal that Cuba grossed approximately USD \$350 million in 2007, owing to foreign sales of some 180 pharmaceuticals, between generic and biotechnology products" (*EFE*, 19/7/08).

July 21: As part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) agreements, Cuba and Venezuela will create a fishing company to secure fish supplies for both countries. The Venezuelan government will invest \$500 million, which will be used to buy an initial ten boats—to increase the fleet to 29—as well as the fitting-out of three loading ports and the construction of shipyards and docks. Cuba's Pescavante and the Venezuelan firm Venezolana Agraria will be part of this joint venture, which is being funded by the Financing Fund, created between China and Venezuela with more than \$6 billion (ACN, 21/7/08).

July 21: Cuba's First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura met with the General Secretary of the UN Food Agriculture Organization (FAO) Jacques Diouf in Havana. During the meeting, Diouf, who is heading an FAO delegation to Havana, addressed issues related to the serious food crisis facing the world and the need to take urgent measures in order to face the lack of food on all continents. He said each country must come up with a response to the crisis. Diouf underscored the support given by Cuba to the FAO Special Food Security Program and sent his cordial greetings to Fidel Castro (ACN, 21/7/08).

July 21: The production of biofuels is depriving the world of around 100 million tons of cereals that could go to feed the hungry, the head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization said on a visit to Cuba. Increased oil prices and trade barriers have prompted farmers to rush to cultivate more profitable crops used for biofuels rather than for food, Jacques Diouf said in a speech at the University of Havana. "The result is nearly 100 million tons of cereals that have been removed from the food market to satisfy energy needs," he said. Diouf, who was in Cuba to study moves being made by the communist government to cope with the world food crisis, said corn and wheat outputs were being particularly hard hit. Traditional farming systems may be "radically" upended by the large and growing energy market, said Diouf, who is a fierce critic of biofuels. "The use of agricultural resources for the energy market may introduce a completely new paradigm in world agriculture," he said (AFP, 21/7/08).

July 23: Communist Cuba has begun offering private farmers equipment and other resources on credit along with more land, as President Raul Castro seeks to reform agriculture by loosening the state's grip. Just days after a government decree authorizing land grants to farmers, they are being called to meetings and asked what machinery and other inputs they need to make the best use of it. "They told us to present our requests immediately for what we need and that Venezuela, Iran and other countries had given credit to cover the resources," the treasurer of a private cooperative said in a telephone interview after attending a meeting in central Cuba. Hundreds of farmers were told at the meeting in central Cuba called by the Association of Small Farmers not to hold back on their requests. "We can ask for whatever we need. Machinery, spare parts, irrigation systems, wind mills, land clearing kits, you name it," the cooperative member said. Decision-making in the sector was recently decentralized, and redundant state-run companies merged. The state, which purchases 70-80 per cent of farm output, has doubled or even tripled the prices it pays. The remaining 20-30 per cent of production is sold on the open market. Cuba's 250,000 family farmers and 1,000 private cooperatives

produce as much as state farms do on just 25 per cent the land. "We were told new farmers, state farms and state cooperatives would also get resources, but that the private sector would be treated equally and the resources granted on credit," the cooperative member said, asking that he not be identified (*Reuters*, 23/7/08).

July 23: Deputy Minister of Transportation Antonio Puente said that 11 more of the 100 Chinese locomotives set to revamp the country's railway system will be up and running next week, pulling cars loaded with fuel, cement, containers, food and other cargo, reported the official daily *Granma*. The new locomotives are the same as the first 12 acquired from China in January 2006; another 40 will arrive in the coming months and the order will be completed by 2009. Twenty-eight Russian locomotives are also expected to arrive this year. The Cuban government announced last December the signing of five-year contracts worth over USD \$2 billion in the transportation sector. China has become the main vehicle supplier to Cuba, sending over Yutong passenger buses and cars, along with the locomotives (*ACN*, 23/7/08).

July 23: Jamaica stands ready to assist Cuba, as a relative newcomer to Caribbean tourism, grow its hospitality business, Edmund Bartlett said, announcing that the offer was to be formalised under an agreement with the Spanish-speaking nation. A memorandum of understanding is to be signed in Kingston next month, but Bartlett, Jamaica's minister of tourism, said he would not want to announce the details ahead of the formalities. The announcement came just ahead of Prime Minister Bruce Golding's declaration that the impracticality of the United States embargo against Cuba was glaringly obvious. "My hope is that within a short time we can see an end to the isolation of Cuba," he stated as luncheon speaker at "Cuba and its Neighbours: The Challenges of Change", hosted by CaPRI, a University of the West Indies think tank (*Jamaica Gleaner*, 25/7/08).

July 24: Cuba has begun raising silkworms for the production and sale of silk, cocoons and other derivatives. This experiment, underway at the Indio Hatuey Pasture and Forage Experimental Station in central Matanzas province, constitutes a baseline study still in the evaluation phase. In statements published on the Juventud Tecnica website, project engineer Roberto Carlos Fiallo said they have already raised five generations of worms and have tested this process for two years (*ACN*, 24/7/08).

July 28: Russian Deputy Minister Igor Sechin plans to travel to Cuba for talks on joint energy projects, Interfax reported, citing an unidentified Russian government official. Cuba has asked Russia to review the possibility of state-owned OAO Zarubezhneft developing two onshore fields, the news service said, citing the government official. OAO Lukoil is interested in upgrading two Cuban refineries, Interfax reported, citing unidentified people in Russia's largest independent oil company. Sechin's tentative Cuba travel dates are July 29 to August 3, the news service said (*Bloomberg*, 28/7/08).

July 28: After nearly two decades, Cuba is ready to resume the construction of the national highway with plans to complete three lanes in a 60 km stretch between the central provinces of Villa Clara and Sancti Spiritus by next year. Ernesto Capdet Wert,

director of Villa Clara's Highway Administration Center, said authorities are evaluating the state of the unfinished road located between kilometres 260 and 320 of the highway. The construction of the national highway was halted in the late 1980s because of the severe economic crisis resulting from the fall of the Soviet Union (ACN, 28/7/08).

July 28: Cuba generates 40 per cent of its electricity with fuel oil, diesel, and natural-gas powered engines, experts of that sector said. They told the Radio Rebelde website their goal was to gradually replace inefficient thermoelectric stations and change the traditional pattern of generation and fuel consumption. Experts at the latest assembly said that fuel oil batteries next to the Maximo Gomez thermoelectric station consolidates the use of that technology in western Cuba, as part of the country's energy revolution. The power of those generators is around 518 megawatts, which should reach 977.6 megawatts and increase the use of oil-accompanying gas. So far, investments in the National Electro-Energetic System to install new generators exceed \$2 million (ACN, 28/7/08).

July 28: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin is traveling to Cuba for talks on joint energy projects, Interfax reported, citing an unidentified Russian government official. Cuba has asked Russia to review the possibility of state-owned Zarubezhneft developing two onshore fields. LUKoil is interested in upgrading two Cuban refineries. Sechin, whose responsibilities include energy, was in China for energy talks (*The Moscow Times*, 29/7/08).

July 30: Canadian Sherritt International Corp's profit fell 39 per cent in its last quarter as weaker nickel prices and lower finished metals production more than offset record oil prices. The diversified mining and energy company also warned of higher costs at its Ambatovy nickel project in Madagascar, and said it had abandoned its four offshore oil concessions in Cuba. However, it maintained its forecasts for 2008 production of nickel and cobalt. Sherritt said it had given up its offshore oil exploration blocks in the Cuban sector of the Gulf of Mexico, due to the inability to attract a partner. Sherritt was one of several foreign companies that had signed exploration agreements with the country. On a conference call, Chief Executive Jowdat Waheed said the company's seismic testing did not make a case for drilling. "If we go ahead at this time, there is a drilling obligation for the deep sea well. And, given the seismic that we shot, we don't feel that spending \$150 million at this time is merited," he said (*Reuters*, 30/7/08).

July 31: Russia's delegation headed by Vice Prime Minister Igor Sechin is discussing in Havana a wide range of issues related to the expansion of trade-economic relations between Cuba and Russia. On the first day of the visit, Sechin, who co-chairs the Russia-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission, met Executive Secretary of the Cuban Council of Ministers Carlos Lage and held talks with Minister of Communications Ramiro Valdés and Minister of the Government Ricardo Cabrisas, who heads the commission from the Cuban side. The two sides are discussing projects which "will signify a new stage in cooperation between the two countries in the trade-economic sphere," Russian Ambassador to Cuba Mikhail Kamynin told the press in an interview. According to the Russian ambassador, "it is very important that working groups on specific directions have been created by decisions of the co-chairs of the Intergovernmental Commission that

convene in various ministries of Cuba." The two countries' officials are considering the development of cooperation in the spheres of energy, tourism, transport, the ore mining industry, agriculture, and banking (*Itar Tass*, 31/7/08).



EXILE COMMUNITY

July 6: Several Cuban exile organizations are launching a campaign to persuade President Bush to pardon convicted Cuban exile militant Eduardo Arocena, the reputed mastermind of Omega 7. Arocena, 65, was sentenced in 1983 to life in prison for gunning down a Cuban diplomat and for several bombings in the New York City area. A federal jury in Miami also convicted Arocena of planting nine bombs over a four-year period in the Miami area. Arocena's wife, Miriam, is spearheading the pardon campaign through a website, in which she asks for signatures for a petition to be sent to President Bush for a pardon before he leaves office. "After 25 years in prison in the United States, I have again taken up the cause seeking a presidential pardon for my husband, Eduardo Arocena," Miriam Arocena wrote in an open letter featured on the website. "My husband was sentenced severely, perhaps to more time than his actions warranted, for having violated some laws of the United States" (*The Miami Herald*, 6/7/08).

July 7: US officials arranged for a live video-conference for Cuban-American singer and anti-communist stalwart Willy Chirino to present his latest release from Miami to a group of political dissidents, musicians and other guests invited to the home of a US diplomat in Havana. About two dozen guests attended to speak with award-winning Chirino and hear a few tracks of "Pa'lante" or "Onward." Many thanked the singer for keeping Cuban culture alive outside the island and fighting for democracy. Miriam Leiva, a founder of the "Women in White" group seeking the release of relatives jailed on political grounds, called the video-encounter "very emotional." Though Chirino's music is "prohibited" on Cuban state radio and TV, the songs circulate widely among residents, often in pirated copies, and "is well loved," she said. The new album includes a song, "Que se vaya ya," or "Get Out, Already," urging an end to Cuba's Castro regime (*Sun Sentinel*, 8/7/08).

July 9: A Southern Florida cultural promoter will hold a musical gala on July 20 in benefit of well-known Cuban dissident Oscar Elías Biscet and the families of other prisoners of conscience in the island. The announcement was made by representatives of Yankiland United Movement of America (Y.U.M.A), promoter of the event. Biscet, a doctor sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment in 2003, is one of the emblematic personalities of the Cuban non-violent political opposition (*El Nuevo Herald*, 10/7/08).

July 10: Eight Cuban American exile groups are demanding that presidential hopeful Barack Obama remove two campaign advisors who were involved in the Elian Gonzalez case. Representatives of the organizations wrote a letter to Senator Bill Nelson (Democrat-Florida), Robert Menendez (Democrat-New Jersey) and Miami Mayor Manny Diaz with a call for Obama to get rid of senior foreign policy advisor Greg Craig and vice presidential vetter Eric Holder. The groups said the men's role in the campaign is a "great

offence" to the Cuban American community. "As you well know, both these men played prominent roles in what we consider a very dark page in the history of the Cuban exile community—the forced return of Elian Gonzalez to the communist island to live in tyranny," the letter states. Craig represented Elian's father in a battle over custody of the child. Holder was deputy US attorney general when Elian was ordered to return to Cuba (*Baltimore Sun*, 10/7/08).

July 17: Alberto Justo Rodríguez, Fernando Alonso Hernández and Luis Alberto Casanova Toledo—who now live in the Tampa Bay area—sued the Curacao Dry Dock Company, saying it forced them to work against their will while Cuban agents kept an eye on their every move. Court documents show that the dock's production manager was Manuel de Jesus Bequer Soto Del Valle, the nephew of Fidel Castro's wife, Dalia Soto Del Valle. Each Cuban worker got two pairs of overalls, a set of sturdy boots, a helmet and food commensurate with how hard he worked. Their labour fixing up American cruise ships at a Curacao dry dock was valued at \$6.90 an hour. But the 108 Cuban shipyard hands who worked double shifts in a joint venture between the Cuban government and the Curacao Dry Dock Company did not get to spend their wages. Their earnings were applied to the Cuban government's debt with the company, court records show. Documents reviewed by the press in an ongoing 2006 lawsuit filed in Miami by the workers offer a rare glimpse at employment terms normally kept secret between the Cuban government and the firms with which it does business. The documents appear to offer proof that the government's joint ventures abroad sometimes involve unpaid labour. Instead of a salary, the men got money for food and 400 Cuban pesos a month—about \$18 at the current exchange rate. The suit was filed under the Alien Tort Statute, which allows foreigners to file civil suits in US federal courts when a serious international law has been violated (*The Miami Herald*, 17/7/08).

July 25: Cuban exiles volunteered as members of the Miami Medical Team on one of their first missions to treat wounded contras, the US-backed rebels fighting Cuba-backed Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In the 25 years since, the Miami Medical Team has evolved into a "rapid response" international medical assistance group capable of deploying quickly to disaster zones, a sort of Cuban exile version of Doctors Without Borders. Now the group is preparing for what may be its biggest mission ever. Under a plan still being drafted, hundreds of team members would deploy in Cuba carrying tons of medical supplies as soon as a US-recognized post-Castro transition government is in place in Havana. "We'll be ready to go as soon as there's a real change in government," said the group's founder, orthopedist Manuel Alzugaray. As the contra war wound down, Alzugaray's team broadened activities beyond Latin America, patching up wounded anti-Communist guerrillas in other countries, from Africa to Asia. The team first went to Angola to assist the US- and South Africa-backed rebel army UNITA, whose soldiers fought Angolan and Cuban forces. Then team members traveled to Afghanistan to help CIA-backed Afghan insurgents fighting Soviet occupation troops. With the Soviet collapse in 1991, the team turned to disaster relief in Latin America—and to drafting the post-Castro Cuba deployment plan. "In the early 1990s, the wars of liberation from communism ended and the Cold War ended," Alzugaray said. "It was the training we needed for the reconstruction of Cuba, our goal now" (*The Miami Herald*, 25/7/08).

July 29: Several Cuban exile organizations have launched a campaign to persuade President Bush to pardon convicted Cuban exile militant Eduardo Arocena, reputed mastermind of Omega 7, whose group was blamed for numerous bombings in Miami and New York. Arocena, now 65, was sentenced to life plus 35 years in prison for gunning down a Cuban diplomat and for several bombings in the New York City area. Also, a federal jury in Miami convicted Arocena of planting nine bombs over a four-year period in the Miami area. After each bombing, Omega 7 would leave notes taking responsibility. They were often signed by "Omar," who was later identified as Arocena. Arocena's wife, Miriam, is leading the campaign for his release through a website, in which she asks for signatures for a petition to be sent to President Bush for a pardon before he leaves office. "After 25 years in prison in the United States, I have again taken up the cause seeking a presidential pardon for my husband, Eduardo Arocena," Miriam Arocena wrote in an open letter featured on the website. Arocena, also known as Omar, was Omega 7's leader. In September 1984, a jury found the 43-year-old former dockworker guilty of murder, attempted murder and of numerous bombings. He was sentenced to life plus 35 years and is now serving time in a federal prison in California (*The Miami Herald*, 29/7/08).

July 29: Authorities say a former official with a Cuban-American group that was once the foremost voice representing the exile cause in Washington was shot dead in a Puerto Rican suburb. Police say 64-year-old Emiliano Infante Segrera was killed in the afternoon of July 28, outside a suburban San Juan hardware store, by a gunman inside a car. He was a long-time trustee of the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation. Police Lt. Luis Diaz told the newspaper *El Nuevo Dia* that Infante appeared to be shot by an expert marksman. The killing is under investigation and no arrests have been made. Francisco Hernandez, the Foundation's president and co-founder, said that Infante devoted his life to promote democracy in the communist nation (*AP*, 29/7/08).

July 31: The pending merger of American beer giant Anheuser-Busch and Belgian company InBev that brews and sells beer in Cuba is thrusting John McCain into the middle of thorny Cuba-US relations. McCain's wife, Cindy, owns the third largest Anheuser-Busch distributor in the country, which means she would stand to profit by partnering with a company that is in business with the Cuban government. A Cuban exile family with a long tradition of brewing beer in pre-Castro Cuba claims that InBev has illegally been using the trademark beer name Cristal, which the family created in Cuba before its company was seized by Fidel Castro's government in 1960. "There are legal fig leaves that can be applied here, but the crux of the situation is that intellectual property rights are being trampled on," said Nicolas Gutierrez, an attorney for Key Biscayne's Blanco Herrera family. McCain's campaign did not respond to questions about whether Cindy McCain's distributorship in Arizona, Hensley and Co., would continue to market InBev products after the merger goes through (*The Miami Herald*, 31/7/08).



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

July 1: Panama's Supreme Court overturned a presidential pardon of four Cuban émigrés accused of plotting to kill Fidel Castro, including former CIA operative Luis Posada Carriles, officials said. The attorney in Panama for Posada, Rogelio Cruz, said he believes Panama may request his client's extradition from the US, where he is being held in jail. "Given the good relations between President (Martin) Torrijos and the Cuban government, I have no doubt that Panama will ask for the four anti-Castro militants to be extradited from the US," Cruz said. Posada was taken into custody after he illegally entered the US from Mexico in 2005, according to US prosecutors (*AP*, 1/7/08).

July 1: Police found 20 Cuban migrants hidden at two safe houses in the Mexican resort city of Cancun. One of the migrants said they had paid \$15,000 each to be smuggled into the United States. As he was being removed from the house, the Cuban told police he wanted his money back. The Cubans, 18 men and two women, were taken to a local jail and are likely to be handed over to immigration authorities. Federal police staked out the two homes after suspicious activity led them to believe there were clandestine drug labs inside, said Guadalupe Cerino, a spokeswoman for the Attorney General's Office. They obtained search warrants. But instead of drugs, they found the migrants hidden under tarpaulins (*AP*, 1/7/08).

July 1: Cuban President Raul Castro met with Syrian Information Minister Dr. Mohsen Bilal, who is on a working visit in Cuba. Both leaders spoke about several topics of international and bilateral interest and exchanged ideas about the excellent state of bilateral relations between the Cuban and Syrian governments and peoples. According to a note read on Cuban Television July 1, the Minister was accompanied by the Syrian Ambassador in Havana, Mohamad Chaker Kayat (*ACN*, 2/7/08).

July 2: Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque heads the Cuban delegation that will participate in the 7th Conference of Information Ministers of the Movement of Non Aligned Countries (MNOAL) that takes place in Margarita Island, Venezuela. According to Granma news daily, participants in the meeting will try to find ways to overcome the imbalance and inequity of the current world order regarding information and communications. They will also discuss topics such as the need to reduce the technological gap between North and South (*ACN*, 2/7/08).

July 2: The President of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcon, said that bilateral relations between his country and Brazil are at optimum level, while cooperation programs are expected to be at the center of such links. In statements to TV-Brasil and Brasil Agency, Alarcon stressed that bilateral relations between Havana and Brasilia had never been so excellent in all fields. He noted that a new context opens up amidst the new Latin American reality in which Brazil plays a significant role since it is one of the major economies in the world (*Prensa Latina*, 2/7/08).

July 3: Cuban and Mexican artists and intellectuals are sharing the "Caribbean Festival" program. The event opened its doors and will be held in the eastern provinces of Santiago

de Cuba and Guantanamo until July 9, according to the festival's Organizing Committee. The Mexican states of Campeche, Tabasco, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Yucatan and Tamaulipas are special guests of the "Fiesta del Fuego", as the festival is also known, Orlando Verges, director of Santiago's Casa del Caribe, said during a local television interview. Mexico is participating in the annual event with 18 dance groups, explained the representative of that Caribbean country and culture promoter in Santiago de Cuba - 967 kilometers southeast of Havana (*EFE*, 3/7/08).

July 3: The 7th Conference of Communication Ministers of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) is underway in Margarita Island, Venezuela, with the participation of delegations from some 100 countries. The meeting is attended by a Cuban delegation headed by Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, who delivers the opening speech in the inaugural session of high-ranking officials, Granma news daily reports (*ACN*, 3/7/08).

July 3: Panama's Vice President and Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro announced that his government is willing to request the extradition of Luis Posada Carriles and his accomplices, in compliance with the constitution and the laws in force. Legal advisors of the Panamanian Foreign Ministry are currently analyzing the Supreme Court's decision on June 30 to overturn the pardon granted by ex-President Mireya Moscoso in 2004 to international terrorists Luis Posada Carriles, Pedro Crispin Remon Hernandez, Gaspar Jimenez Escobedo, and Guillermo Novo Sampoll. "We will abide by the law and if this means resuming the process against the terrorists that had been convicted, we will fulfill our responsibility," said the foreign minister, as quoted by Granma. (*ACN*, 3/7/08).

July 3: The President of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcon, was received by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. According to Granma news daily, also present in the meeting were Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim and Marco Aurelio Garcia, advisor on foreign policies in the South American country. "Relations between Cuba and Brazil are in an excellent period and both sides are making efforts to further improve them," Alarcon told reporters at the Palace of Planalto. "We are both very happy for the agreements between our two nations and we continue working," he added. Alarcon noted that he spoke with Lula about several topics such as the Fourth Fleet of the United States, the recent Summit of MERCOSUR in Argentina, and the latest measures taken by the European Union against immigrants (*ACN*, 3/7/08).

July 3: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque advocated for a new world information order and denounced US actions against his country. Perez Roque told media reporting on the 7th Conference of Non-Aligned Movement Information Ministers, that communication problems won't be solved with palliative measures. He stressed that high-level experts have already approved a document and an Action Plan to be discussed by the ministers meeting on Margarita Island. The Cuban minister pointed out that the declaration will include the point of view of the 118-member NAM, the approval of Telesur Latin American initiative, the decision to strengthen a news agency network, and the broadcasting Bureau of the organization (*ACN*, 3/7/08).

July 4: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque spoke positively of the release of Ingrid Betancourt, a former Colombian presidential candidate kidnapped on February 23, 2002, by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). "It is a positive fact that should contribute to the peace process in Colombia, which Cuba fully supports," said the Cuban top diplomat before joining the 29th annual summit of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Antigua and Barbuda. According to Perez Roque, the conflict in Colombia delays and makes the integration of Latin American countries more difficult. Peace must be attained at the negotiation table, he added. In a news article by Fidel Castro published in the official media, he wrote that "Out of a basically humanist sentiment, we rejoiced at the news that Ingrid Betancourt, three American citizens and other captives had been released. The civilians should have never been kidnapped nor should the military personnel have been kept prisoners in jungle conditions. No revolutionary purpose could justify it," Castro wrote ([La historia real y el desafío de los periodistas cubanos](#); ACN, 4/7/08).

July 4: Cuba has reaffirmed its strong commitment to building economic, social and cultural ties with Antigua and Barbuda. This affirmation has come from Cuba's Minister of Foreign Affairs Felipe Perez Roque during his visit to the twin-island state to meet with heads of government who attended the 29th Summit of the CARICOM. Roque also met separately with Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, Minister of Health John Maginley and Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs Winston Williams. Roque pledged his country's continued support for the region through the maintenance and expansion of a number of co-operation projects. Some of the issues raised at the meeting by Spencer include the scholarship program, health, the road program, and issues in co-operation in tourism and sports. The PM also gave Roque an update on the current situation in CARICOM along with an analysis of the situation in the Caribbean. "We have been co-operating over the last three to four years with the CARICOM countries. In the last two years, we have replaced 7.5 million energy saving bulbs in all of the Caribbean countries, equivalent to a reduction in energy of about 250 megawatts. It is a very important contribution to the economy of the Caribbean community," Roque said during a press conference. The Cuban minister announced that his Caribbean nation will continue the eye care program project which allows Cuban doctors to perform eye surgeries. As part of its annual scholarship program, Cuba is offering 60 scholarships per year to Antigua and Barbudans over the next four years (*Antigua Sun*, 7/7/08).

July 5: Cuba's former President Fidel Castro called on Colombia's biggest guerrilla group to release all of its remaining hostages, even as he cautioned the rebels that they shouldn't give up their armed struggle. "I've energetically and frankly criticized the objectively cruel methods of kidnapping and holding prisoners in jungle conditions," the communist leader wrote in his latest "reflection", which was published by Cuban state media. "But I'm not suggesting to anyone that they put down their weapons." Castro's comments follow the Colombian military's rescue of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, three US military contractors and 11 other hostages who had been held for years by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The operation was a setback for the guerrillas and their 44-year-old movement. Castro said that those who have stopped

fighting over the past 50 years “didn't survive to see peace” ([La paz romana](#); *Bloomberg*, 6/7/08).

July 5: With Panama's Supreme Court recent ruling that a 2004 pardon of Cuban exile Luis Posada Carriles was unconstitutional, Cuba is hoping that the anti-Castro militant will be extradited to face justice. "We hope the next step is (...) the extradition of Posada Carriles to Panama to face the trial that was developing at that moment when he left for the United States," Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said. Posada Carriles, who is currently free at an undisclosed location in Miami, was arrested in Panama City in 2000, accused of plotting to kill former Cuban leader Fidel Castro. "Posada Carriles is a very, very dangerous terrorist," Roque said. Roque made the comments while wrapping up a two-day visit to Antigua, where he met with leaders of the 15-member Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (*The Miami Herald*, 6/7/08).

July 5: Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Perez Roque, met with Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, the incoming chairman of CARICOM, that will sponsor a Cuba-CARICOM summit in Santiago de Cuba in December. Roque touted his island's relations with its neighbours, saying that the decision 36 years ago by a handful of Caribbean countries to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba, despite a US embargo, “opened the path to this moment when Cuba has diplomatic relations and cooperation with practically all of the countries in the Americas.” Roque also said that like its English-speaking Caribbean neighbours, Cuba is feeling the pinch of higher fuel and food prices. "The international environment at the moment is a challenge for our small countries," Roque said. “Cuba has to import, like the rest of the Caribbean community, half of our energy consumption and half of our food for consumption. It's a challenge for us and we agreed the only way to face these challenges is through more cooperation” (*The Miami Herald*, 6/7/08).

July 7: Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo met with Esoop Pahad, Minister of the Presidency of South Africa, who is on an official visit to the Caribbean nation. During their meeting, both sides described bilateral relations between Cuba and South Africa as excellent and reiterated their willingness to continue developing and strengthening them. Lazo praised South Africa's solidarity with Cuba and particularly the construction of a Monument to the Freedom Fighters, which includes all Cuban internationalist fighters who died in Africa. The Cuban official briefed the visitor about the ongoing programs of the Cuban Revolution in the current political and economic international context. For his part, Pahad spoke of the difficult situation that Africa faces today due to the increase in oil and food prices (*ACN*, 8/7/08).

July 8: The director of the Havana-based Carlos J. Finlay Institute, Francisco Dominguez, announced that Cuba will assist Equatorial Guinea in a national vaccination program. According to the website of the Cuban Foreign Ministry, Dominguez met with Prime Minister Ricardo Mangue and with the acting Minister of Health and Social Welfare in Malabo, the country's capital. Dominguez briefed his hosts about the different vaccines that Cuba produces, such as the pentavalent vaccine and others against tetanus and typhoid fever. The Guinean authorities not only discussed the acquisition of the

Cuban vaccines but they also asked for Cuba's assistance to develop a system of national vaccination (ACN, 8/7/08).

July 8: Acting in concert, several opposition groups asked the Embassy of France in Cuba to help move dissident Néstor Rodríguez Lobaina to Havana. Lobaina has been conducting a hunger strike for two days, demanding that the government of Raúl Castro respect his right to freedom of movement throughout the country. "We exhort the Embassy of France in Cuba, in its capacity as representative of the Presidency of the European Union's Council, to travel to Guantanamo (where the dissident resides) to assist in bringing Rodríguez Lobaina to Havana," said a press release by Agenda for the Transition, signed by opposition leaders Martha Beatriz Roque and Vladimiro Roca. Rodríguez Lobaina was detained on July 6 at the bus terminus in Baracoa, Guantanamo, from where he intended to travel to Havana, and was warned that he was not to leave the municipality "on orders from high in the government" (EFE, AFP, 9/7/08).

July 8: Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries and Cuba will seek to strengthen their relationship in a two-day summit planned for December. The Cuba-CARICOM Summit scheduled for December 7-8 in Santiago de Cuba will feature a series of meetings between CARICOM leaders and officials from the Cuban government. "In addition to the political discussion about the situation in the region, the international and multinational issues (...), we will discuss focusing on the cooperation program between CARICOM and Cuba," Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Perez Roque said. Arrangements for the meeting were discussed with Caribbean leaders during the CARICOM Conference of Heads Summit that concluded in Antigua. Roque said the final agenda will be confirmed with CARICOM officials later this year. "The summit will have as its main agenda the cooperation between the Caribbean Community and Cuba. The main programs today are training people, scholarships, health services, the cooperation and work to reduce the consequence of natural disasters, and programs for the efficient use of energy," Roque said. He noted that Cuba and CARICOM have over the years enjoyed a healthy relationship based on cooperation and respect (Caribbean Media Corporation, 8/7/08).

July 8: The Cuban Parliament International Affairs Commission approved a declaration condemning the European Union Return Directive for its criminalization of undocumented immigrants. The declaration, which was adopted by the permanent commission, reads that the scandalous action by the European Union authorizes the arrest of undocumented immigrants including children, who could face deportation to third countries, while they are banned from entering European territory for five years after they are deported (ACN, 9/7/08).

July 9: Cuban Ambassador to Mexico Manuel Aguilera de la Paz revealed that it was a third party that caused the greatest discord in the migratory negotiations between Mexico and Cuba. It is a piece of US legislation that grants Cubans the exclusive privilege of entering US territory without proper documentation. That law has come to be seen as a *de facto* green light for illegal migration and human trafficking, stressed the Cuban

diplomat, who expressed confidence that an agreement will be reached, even if it is not all that is aimed for (*La Jornada*, 10/7/08).

July 9: Cuban President Raul Castro met with Esoop Pahad, Minister of the Presidency of South Africa, who is on an official visit to the Caribbean nation. During their meeting, both leaders analyzed the development of excellent bilateral relations between Cuba and South Africa and discussed topics of regional and international interest. According to Granma, Raul also sent a message to South African President Thabo Mbeki. Also present at the meeting were the South African chargé d'affaires, Thando Nyawose, and Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo (*ACN*, 10/7/08).

July 10: The members of a solidarity-with-Cuba brigade from Quebec visiting Havana reiterated their support of the struggle being waged to obtain the release of the five Cubans imprisoned in US jails for nearly 10 years now. Brigade coordinator Ginette Moreau told the Cuban News Agency that their committee, named after Italian Fabio Di Celmo, one of the victims of terrorist attacks against Cuba in 1977, gives the Canadian people as much information as possible on Antonio Guerrero, Fernando Gonzalez, Gerardo Hernandez, Rene Gonzalez and Ramon Labañino, internationally known as the Cuban Five (*ACN*, 10/7/08).

July 13: The Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, said that “he would like” for Cuba to rejoin the regional body, from which it was cast out in the early 1960s. “I would like to see Cuba reinstated to the OAS,” said the former Chilean Foreign Secretary in declarations carried by Chilean newspaper *La Nación*, which interviewed him to find out if he would complete his run as OAS leader at the end of his term in 2009, seek re-election, or run for the Presidency of Chile (*TELAM*, 13/7/08).

July 14: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage Davila inaugurated a High Technology Diagnosis Medical Center in Maracaibo, Venezuela, where Cuban health personnel are currently making their contribution. Lage, who is also the Secretary of the Executive Committee of Cuba’s Council of Ministers, headed the Cuban delegation that participated in the Fifth Extraordinary Summit of PetroCaribe in Maracaibo. After the opening of the health facility, Lage said that the work of the Cuban health professionals in Venezuela “is one of the priorities of the Cuban Revolution” (*ACN*, 15/7/08).

July 14: The general secretary of the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI) Hugo Saguier Caballero, arrived in Havana on the invitation of Cuban foreign minister Felipe Perez Roque. During his visit to the island, ALADI's General Secretary is scheduled to meet with the Cuban foreign minister and other Cuban officials. Founded on August 12, 1980, with the signing of the Montevideo Treaty, ALADI is the largest Latin American group of integration, noted the official daily Granma (*ACN*, 15/7/08).

July 14: Mexico's Health Secretary, Dr. Jose Angel Cordova Villalobos arrived in Cuba for a two-day official visit. Cordova said the trip to Cuba will help to strengthen relations between the two countries in terms of health issues, reported Granma. “I think we can do

a lot of things together," said the Mexican official. He thanked the Cuban government and people for the humanitarian help provided to Mexico, which he described as "generous support." More than 50 Cuban doctors were sent to Mexico to provide assistance to the victims of flooding in Tabasco in November, 2007, the worst flooding ever in the state (ACN, 15/7/08).

July 16: The work of Cuban health professionals in Bolivia continues to have outstanding results, according to a communiqué released by the Cuban embassy in the South American nation. The document notes that in little over two years of cooperation, the Cuban doctors have offered more than 15,024,500 consultations free of charge to the Bolivian people. The communiqué added that, since 2006, the Cuban health professionals have saved 14,000 lives while eye operations exceed 266,000 among Bolivian, Peruvian, Brazilian, Argentinean and Paraguayan patients (ACN, 16/7/08).

July 16: Representatives from Cuban dissident groups asked the European Union (EU) to raise the priority level of the human rights improvement issue in its dialogue with Cuba, particularly after the European Council opted to lift its diplomatic sanctions against the island. The representatives from dissident groups and human rights organizations spoke before the European Parliament's Human Rights Committee, which also presented its position to the incumbent French EU presidency, represented by the Foreign Ministry's Deputy Director for Humanitarian and Social Affairs, Jacques Pellet. Adam Mascaró Payá, nephew of Cuban opposition leader and head of Movimiento Cristiano Liberación, Oswaldo Payá, read a letter requesting the EU give priority to the issue of human rights observance in its talks with Havana, "regardless of the status of relations." Amnesty International submitted to the French presidency a set of guidelines to avoid "complacency" and cast a critical eye on the human rights situation in Cuba, particularly the lack of freedom of expression and the imprisonment of "prisoners of conscience." While Reporters Without Borders (RWB) believed that lifting the sanctions "is an option," the organization felt that "it calls for similar steps" in return (EFE, 16/7/08).

July 17: Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega, speaking in a meeting in Managua, thanked the Cuban government and people for the solidarity with his country during its most difficult moments, Ortega said solidarity is the best expression of the socialism practiced by Cuba, according to a report posted on the website of the Cuban Foreign Relations Ministry. The Nicaraguan president highlighted the Cuban efforts during the celebration of the 28th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution in Estelí, 200 kilometres to the northeast of the capital. Previously, the Communication Council coordinator, Rosario Murillo, announced the visit of Aleida Guevara, daughter of Argentinean-born guerrilla fighter Ernesto Che Guevara, and relatives of five Cubans imprisoned in the US since 1998 (ACN, 17/7/08).

July 17: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said it is regrettable that US presidential hopeful Barack Obama is "dynamiting" the potential for dialogue with his country and Cuba that would exist if he were to be elected. "(Obama) says he would like to talk with the governments of Cuba and Venezuela if he becomes president, but the way he's going he's dynamiting any possibility of it. If there's something we have—and if he wants we can

lend him some—it's dignity," Chavez said. Chavez referred to the presumed Democratic nominee in an event Wednesday attended by candidates from the president's United Socialist Party who will be competing in Venezuela's November regional and municipal elections (*EFE*, 17/7/08).

July 17: Cuba's First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura met with a visiting delegation from the Workers' Party of Brazil (PT) that is led by its president, Ricardo Berzoini. The group is in Cuba at the invitation of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and it also includes the PT's General Secretary, Jose Eduardo Cardozo, and its Secretary of Foreign Relations, Valter Pomar. Also present in the meeting was Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, head of the Foreign Relations Department at the Central Committee of the PCC (*ACN*, 18/7/08).

July 17: Father Jesus Del Pino, pastor of Guaimaro in Camaguey, Cuba, lamented that only one Cuban youth, who is actually a Spanish citizen, is present at World Youth Day in Sydney, because the government of New Zealand denied visas to the rest of the Cuban delegation over fears of "possible illegal immigration." Father Del Pino said that in order to travel to Sydney, youth from Cuba would have had to make a stopover in New Zealand. Although Cuba's Communist government granted the young people permission to attend, New Zealand officials refused to grant them visas. Only Father Castor Alvarez, who was born and raised in Cuba but now has Spanish citizenship, was allowed entry. "It is sad and painful that out of fear of illegal immigration, governments deprive Cubans of the chance to participate in events that would strongly impact their lives," said Father Del Pino. "What hope is there for the Church in Cuba," the priest asked, if in addition to the restrictions imposed by the Cuban government, "limits are imposed on us overseas as well? [...] At least many other countries do open their doors to Cubans, and let's hope that this poor example does not spread, because it would be very sad to have to endure more restrictions, in addition to those that are present inside the country and those that result from the embargo-blockade," Father Del Pino added (*CNA*, 17/7/08).

July 18: A Cuban delegation of parliamentarians is participating in the sessions of three commissions of the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) that began in Panama. The group includes Osvaldo Martinez, Jose Luis Toledo and Jorge Gonzalez, presidents of the commissions of Economic Affairs, Judicial and Constitutional Affairs and Health Affairs of the Cuban Parliament, respectively. Also present in the sessions of Parlatino is Nidia Diana Martinez, president of the Parlatino Health Commission, who explained that this working group will discuss important topics for the region such as the situation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 22 member countries as well as other diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, dengue and malaria (*ACN*, 18/7/08).

July 18: Ghanaians living in Cuba have appealed to the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to intervene in the illegal sentencing of a Ghanaian pharmacist who was wrongly charged with human trafficking. Making the appeal through *The Chronicle*, the Ghanaian community in Cuba called on the appropriate Ghanaian authorities to immediately launch their own investigation into the imprisonment of the victim, Mr. Lawrence Zogli Goka, in Havana, Cuba. Spokesperson for Ghanaians living in Cuba,

Robert Fakye, said Lawrence Zogli is a Ghanaian citizen who resides in the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, a registered pharmacist, and a key member of the Ghanaian community in the Caribbean Island. He is also a father of two. On October 25, 2005, Lawrence arrived in Havana to visit his Cuban girlfriend, Angela, and their newborn baby girl, Laura, in Villa Clara. Mr. Fakye stated that on November 1, 2005, Angela was informed by the Cuban State Police that her boyfriend had been detained in Camaguey for his alleged involvement in human trafficking. He was detained for two weeks during which he was interrogated for the alleged crime, but he insisted on his innocence. He was later transferred to Havana, where he was remanded until he made a court appearance in January, last year. In January 2007, Mr. Zogli was tried in Camaguey and sentenced to nine years in prison. Since then multiple appeals have been filed but to no avail (*Ghanaian Chronicle*, 18/7/08).

July 19: Fidel Castro hailed Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday, calling the Nobel Peace Prize winner "a symbol of humanity's highest nobility." "Glory to you, Nelson, for 25 years from a solitary prison you defended human dignity!" Castro wrote in a brief note to Mandela that was published in the Communist youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* and appeared in other state-controlled media. "You knew how to resist and, without wanting to or trying to, you became a symbol of humanity's highest nobility." Mandela turned 90 on July 18. Fidel Castro won the gratitude of many Africans by sending 350,000 troops to battle the former white-dominated South African government in Angola's civil war, draining resources from the apartheid system. When Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first black president in 1994, he made Castro a guest of honour and praised Cuba's "selfless support for the struggle to free all of South Africa's people." Castro wrote to Mandela that "you will live on in the memories of future generations and with you, so will the Cubans who fell defending liberty and their brothers in other parts of the world." ([Mensaje a Nelson Mandela](#); *The Miami Herald*, 21/7/08).

July 23: The Minister of Education, Science and Sports of Equatorial Guinea, Anselmo Ondo Esono, advocated increasing Cuba's cooperation with his country in the education sector. Speaking during a ceremony to bid farewell to a group of Cuban teachers that worked for four years in this country, Ondo Esono thanked the Caribbean internationalists for their contribution. During the ceremony held at the University of Equatorial Guinea, the Minister said that he bid farewell to the Cuban specialists with happiness and nostalgia and added that he was sure that "those who will replace you will leave, as you have done, a Cuban mark in the generation that you have just formed." (*ACN*, 24/7/08)

July 24: A migratory accord between Cuba and Mexico is expected to come to fruition in August, after a two-day meeting to discuss the matter came to an end in Havana, showing "significant progress" but no concrete results. The Mexican Foreign Office's Undersecretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, Gerónimo Gutiérrez, said in a press conference that "as foreseen, there will be a third round of consultations and negotiations," scheduled to take place late next month in Mexico. He said that both governments want "the text of the Accord to be ready" for Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque's upcoming visit to Mexico on September 11-12 (*EFE*, 24/7/08).

July 24: Bishop Rene Sandigo, secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Nicaragua, has joined other Catholic leaders in criticizing Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for comparing Fidel Castro to Jesus Christ during a political rally in Managua on July 19. During the event organized by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to celebrate the anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution, Chavez said, "Fidel, our father who art on the earth, in the water and in the air." "I think these kinds of expressions are abusive and disrespectful towards the faith of Nicaraguans; the rejection by the clergy of the Venezuelan president's remarks is unanimous," said Bishop Sandigo (*CNA*, 24/7/08).

July 24: The Namibian Parliament demanded the immediate and unconditional release of the five Cubans incarcerated in the United States. The parliamentarians unanimously approved a motion in favour of Antonio Guerrero, Fernando Gonzalez, Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labañino and Rene Gonzalez, internationally known as the Cuban Five. The document points out that the Five "are Cuban heroes suffering unjust imprisonment in the US", as quoted by Granma. (*ACN*, 25/7/08).

July 26: Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez sent a letter to Fidel Castro on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the attacks on the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes garrisons. "Fidel Castro is making an incalculable contribution to the battle of ideas," said Chavez in his letter, in direct reference to the reflections that Fidel is currently writing. Chavez stressed Castro's abilities to expose US imperialism and its strategy based on lies, its systematic manipulation and distortion. "Your article is illuminating in the sense that it reveals that they are plotting a new aggression against Cuba," he said in reference to Castro's reflection titled "Machiavelli's Strategy", where the Cuban leader refers to news published by Russian newspaper *Izvestia* on the possibility that Moscow could use Cuba as a refuelling base for nuclear-capable bombers." Finally, in his letter Hugo Chavez said he fully agrees with Castro that there is no need for explanations, much less excuses or pardon, and that in this regard Venezuela sides with Cuba. ([Carta de Chávez a Fidel Castro](#); *ACN*, 28/7/08)

July 27: Cuba said that the Non Aligned Movement is more alive than ever, and considers unity the key to its importance and its role to be increasingly indispensable in the world. "It is essential for us to close ranks in defence of our rights," Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Abelardo Moreno said at the opening of the gathering of high ranking officials of the 15th NAM Ministerial Conference in Tehran. Speaking on behalf of the presidency of the movement, Moreno said that risks, threats and difficulties faced are similar and with common origins. "We have to show the world our strength, our capacity to face together the big challenges imposed on us by a world ruled by the most powerful," he stressed. He noted that since the 14th summit in Havana in 2006, the movement has consolidated its role in international discussions (*ACN*, 28/7/08).

July 27: Deputy Culture Minister Fernando Rojas heads the Cuban delegation that arrived in Bolivia to participate in an International Meeting of Intellectuals and Artists for the Unity and Sovereignty of Bolivia that runs from July 28-30. The event is also being attended by world renowned personalities such as Brazilian Frei Betto, Belgians Francois

Houtart, Armand Mattelart and his wife Michelle Mattelart as well as Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal and American William Ramsey Clark (*ACN*, 28/7/08).

July 28: A meeting in support of the Cuban people took place in one of the halls of UNESCO's building in Beirut, Lebanon, on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the Moncada and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes garrisons. Parliamentarian Nasser Nasrallah, representing Nabih Berri, the president of the Lebanese Parliament, was the first orator of the ceremony, which was also attended by legislator Abbas Hashem and representatives from other local organizations, such as the Lebanese Communist Party, headed by Khaled Hadade, its General Secretary; and Maurice Nahra, president of the Council and of the Lebanon-Cuba Friendship Association. Also participating were representatives from Islamic denominations and Palestinian organizations, representatives of NGOs, friends of Cuba and Cubans living in Lebanon (*ACN*, 28/7/08).

July 28: Paraguayan President-elect Fernando Lugo met in Asuncion with Aleida Guevara, daughter of Argentinean-Cuban guerrilla Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Aleida is visiting Paraguay on the invitation of the future government, reported Granma. The meeting took place at the headquarters of the Patriotic Alliance for Change, the political coalition backing the former Catholic Bishop, who takes office August 15. Aleida Guevara said that during her conversation with Lugo they analyzed the main challenges facing Paraguayans and especially the Indigenous Peoples. She said the continent has a debt owed to the Indigenous Peoples that should be settled, and called Lugo "a man in touch with the social needs of his people." Upon arriving in Asuncion the day before, Guevara, a pediatrician by profession, noted that she lives in a socialist country and in a fairer society than that lived by other peoples of the region. "I would be delighted for all of Latin America to share the same privileges that we Cubans have had over the years and hope such advantages come to Paraguay," she said (*Reuters*, *ACN*, 28/7/08).

July 29: The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) rotating president, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque, called on NAM member states to strengthen the role of the international body in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). "We should strengthen the role of NAM in the UNSC in order to help establish durable peace and security at international level," he was quoted by Iran's official IRNA news agency in his address to the 15th Ministerial Conference of the NAM which opened in Tehran. NAM members could play a much more active role in UN human rights affairs and help materialize the legitimate goals of countries of the South, he said, adding that "if NAM is to play a much stronger role, it should wield veto rights." He also said that NAM members have coordinated stands on those countries which seek to make peaceful use of nuclear energy. Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki called on NAM member states to support Iran's non-permanent membership at the UNSC. The 15th Ministerial Conference of the NAM opened at the Conference Hall of the Organization of the Islamic Conference with an inaugural speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Representatives from 118 members, 15 observer members and eight international and regional organizations, including 60 foreign ministers, attended the meeting (*Xinhua*, 29/7/08).

July 29: Tanzanian Vice President Ali Mohamed Shein met in Dar Es Salaam with Cuban Ambassador Felipe Ruiz O'Farrill, who will conclude his diplomatic mission in that African country in August. Shein spoke about the strong historical bonds of friendship that exist between the two states and expressed his gratitude for Cuba's cooperation with his country during more than 40 years, reports the Cuban Foreign Ministry's website. He also highlighted the School of Medicine project in the city of Zanzibar, which opened last year with a staff of Cuban healthcare professionals and curriculum and the support of the University of Matanzas in central Cuba, which contributed teaching staff at a rate of one per every five students. The Cuban diplomat presented details on the development of the first stage of the literacy campaign directed by two Cuban professors and spoke about the upcoming 15th session of the Cuba-Tanzania Joint Intergovernmental Commission scheduled for September 2008 in Havana, with the participation of Tanzanian Foreign Minister Bernard Membe (*ACN*, 29/7/08).

July 29: Cuban and Venezuelan film industries agreed to exchange their respective experiences in movie preservation after signing a professional cooperation accord in Caracas. The agreement was inked at the research center of Caracas' National Cinematheque Foundation (FCN) by its director, David Rodriguez, and the head of the Cuban Cinematheque, Manuel Herrera. Herrera told a local radio that the agreement suggests ideas for joint productions and for the creation of bilateral programs in professional training (*ACN*, 29/7/08).

July 30: Cuba's efforts to stop some of their best players from defecting at international tournaments have failed. Two prominent players from their 2008 IBAF World Junior AAA roster were missing. Starting pitcher Noel Arguelles and infielder Jose Iglesias were last seen on the night of July 27 at their team meal at the University of Alberta's Lister Hall. "Rumours were swirling around a couple of days ago," said tournament chairman Ron Hayter. "There were denials everywhere and when everything settled down nobody thought anything about it. Both players ate the pre-game meal, then went back to their rooms at the university and got dressed to go on the bus, and they didn't get on the bus." It's become familiar territory for Cuba, which has faced the prospect of defections at many international tournaments. Arguelles and Iglesias will leave a big hole in the Cuban line-up. Arguelles was the ace of their pitching staff, while Iglesias was one of their hottest hitters. And rumours have circulated that two more players might have defected (*Canadian Press*, 30/7/08).

July 30: Prosperity in developing countries will only be possible with substantial change in the current international economic and political order, said Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque at a Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that concluded in Iran. Boosting South-South cooperation is what can lead to progress of the NAM nations amid the complex world situation, Perez Roque told *Prensa Latina*. The Foreign minister noted that developing nations have the Group of 77 plus China for economic coordination, but said the Non-Aligned Movement can also work hard in this area. Perez Roque headed his country's delegation to the NAM meeting where he received numerous shows of support and recognition for Cuba's efforts as the NAM chair, a position the country has held since 2006 (*ACN*, 31/7/08).

July 30: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage met in Havana with a large Russian delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin. "We are pleased with the state of relations between our two countries and convinced we can do much more (...) Friendship, not money, is our greatest asset and forms the base of the solid relations between our countries," said Lage. Lage added that in a changing world, economic relations may take on a different dimension, but not friendship. Lage told the visitors his government is pleased that Russia decided to name Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin as the co-chair of the Russia-Cuba Intergovernmental Commission. On the first day of a three-day visit to the island, the Russian delegation took part in meetings with Cuban authorities to identify and agree on projects and plans of cooperation. Joining Lage for the meeting with the Russian delegation were Communist Party Politburo members Ramiro Valdes Menendez, Minister of Telecommunications; Yadira Garcia, Minister of Basic Industry; and Jorge Luis Sierra, Minister of Transportation; as well as other ministers and officials (*Escambray*, 31/7/08).

July 31: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin and a top security official met Cuban President Raul Castro as part of a three-day visit focusing on building commercial ties, official media said. The talks were conducted in a "cordial and friendly atmosphere" with both sides expressing the hope of bolstering already positive relations, said the statement carried by the Cuban press agency, Prensa Latina. The meeting with Raul Castro, 77, successor to his ailing 81-year-old brother Fidel who handed over power in February, also included Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia's Security Council and former head of the country's powerful Federal Security Service, the statement said. The meeting comes after Russia's defence ministry denied last week a newspaper report it was considering basing bomber aircraft in Cuba in retaliation for US missile defence plans in Eastern Europe. The official communiqué from the talks made no mention of the subject, saying that representatives from both countries supported expanding commercial and financial ties (*AFP*, 1/8/08).

July 31: Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes and his band of young musicians, accompanied by singer Mayra Caridad Valdes, were a big hit at the Byblos International Festival, held outside Beirut, Lebanon. Chucho's Afro-Cuban jazz quintet played on an open-air stage at the old port of Byblos, 42 kilometres from Beirut. The other members of the band were Lazaro River, percussionist Yaroldy Abreu, and drummer Juan Carlos Rojas. The audience was moved by the interpretation of singer Mayra Caridad Valdes, who surprised many with her scat treatment of Cuban genres (*ACN*, 31/7/08).

July 31: The government is evaluating the possibility of expanding throughout Colombia the literacy program that Cuba is carrying out in one province of the Andean nation, a Cuban senior official said. Cuba's Deputy Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, Orlando Requeijo, said in the Caribbean coastal city of Cartagena that Havana has received requests from Colombian regions interested in the initiative. Cuba is conducting a literacy program in the northeastern Colombian province of Boyaca, said Requeijo, who added that the work has been carried out in a "very successful manner." Requeijo, who traveled to Cartagena to attend the 8th Mixed Commission for the

Scientific, Educational and Cultural Cooperation of Colombia and Cuba, joined Colombian Deputy Foreign Minister Adriana Mejia in signing a document extending the bilateral cooperation to 2010 (*EFE*, 31/7/08).

July 31: Cuba announced its willingness to expand its cooperation with the Commonwealth of the Bahamas during a meeting held in Havana to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the declaration of independence of this Caribbean nation. Elio Gamez, vice president of the Havana-based Cuban Friendship Institute (ICAP) said that there are currently 45 Cuban teachers making their contribution in 10 out of the 700 islands that comprise the neighbouring archipelago, and added that Cuba is willing to increase its assistance to the Bahamas—where more than four per cent of the population is illiterate—in the education sector. Gamez stressed that Havana hopes that more youths from the Bahamas will benefit from scholarships in Cuba. “Our cooperation will strengthen the ties between our peoples, which share a common history, cultural roots and aspirations.” He said. For his part, Carlton Leroy Wright, ambassador of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas in Cuba, expressed his satisfaction at the economic, cultural and sports achievements of his country and thanked the Cuban contribution in this regard (*ACN*, 1/8/08).

July 31: Cuban First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura met with a delegation from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) headed by its director, Dr. Mirta Roses Periago. During the meeting, Periago, who is also the regional director of the World Health Organization (WHO), spoke of topics such as the fulfilment of the Millennium Goals, food security and climate change. According to a press note read by Cuban television, other topics discussed included the HIV/AIDS pandemic, South-South cooperation, the work of PAHO in Cuba, and actions to celebrate World Health Day and the anniversary of the WHO. They also analyzed the current situation and plans of cooperation with the Cuban Health Ministry, among other topics (*ACN*, 1/8/08).

July 31: Former Cuban leader Fidel Castro slammed Edmonton in an Internet column addressing the two baseball players who defected during a junior tournament in the city. Castro, in a column in Cuba's daily Internet newspaper Granma, said the actions by pitcher Noel Arguelles and shortstop Jose Antonio Iglesias should be classified as a "despicable betrayal". "Edmonton has become a dumping ground," an English translation of Castro's comments reads. "The Cuban athletes were badly taken care of. That city has the privilege of hosting that championship every year. We should analyze whether it is worth attending that tournament." Arguelles and Iglesias have not been seen since their game against Team Canada on July 24. Team members confirmed to the press the two teens likely defected. Both are 18 years old. Fidel also insinuated Canada "stole" their athletes and blamed the rich paycheques in the U.S. for luring them over. The closest the former leader has ever been to Edmonton is a stopover in Vancouver in 2003. Edmonton mayor Stephen Mandel defended the city Friday and offered to fly the former leader to the city for free. "I'm not sure Castro can really have a handle on Edmonton since he's never been here," he said ([El equipo asediado](#); *CTV.CA, The Montreal Gazette*, 1/8/08).



SECURITY

July 21: Russia may start regular flights by long-range bombers to Cuba in response to US plans to build missile defence sites in Eastern Europe, the newspaper Izvestia reported, quoting an unidentified "highly placed source." Both the supersonic Tu-160, a nuclear bomber known as "White Swan", and the strategic bomber Tu-95, known to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as the "Bear", are capable of flying as far as Cuba, the paper said. "There are such discussions, but they're only discussions," the paper cited a "highly placed" source on the staff of Russia's long-distance strategic aviation command as saying. "I'm not going to say that there's nothing behind" the talks. Russian military transport aircraft regularly fly to Cuba, the paper said, carrying out orders for private companies. The measure would be a response to the United States "deploying missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic." It was not clear whether the official meant permanently basing the bombers in Cuba or using the island as a refuelling stop, but former top defence ministry official Leonid Ivashov told the newspaper that Cuba was best used for brief stopovers. Cuba should be used "not as a permanent base, this is unnecessary, but as a stopover airfield, a refuelling stop," Ivashov was quoted as saying (*AFP, Bloomberg, 21/7/08*).

July 21: Russian Defence Ministry officials poured cold water on a newspaper report that suggested Moscow could use Cuba as a refuelling base for nuclear-capable bombers. Izvestia newspaper quoted a "highly placed source" as saying Russia could land Tu-160 supersonic bombers in Cuba as a response to a planned US missile defence shield in Europe which Moscow opposes. The Kremlin declined immediate comment. The Defence Ministry questioned the story, saying it was written under a false name and quoted a source at an organization that did not exist. "Were our strategic bombers ever deployed in Cuba before?" a Defence Ministry official asked when contacted by the press by telephone and asked whether bombers would be "returning" to the Caribbean island, 150 kilometres from the US coast. Izvestia editor-in-chief Vladimir Mamontov stood by the story and said several of his journalists had worked under pseudonyms because of the story's sensitivity. "The first remark was really made by a very competent person," Mamontov told the press. Some Russian experts dismissed the possibility of a new Cuban crisis. "It's very silly psychological warfare," said Alexander Golts, an independent military analyst, in a telephone interview. "Putin and Medvedev are very militant in words but very cautious in practical issues. They have not taken any step that can be seen as a real threat to the West, and I cannot see any reason to raise this threat against the US. But if it's true, it looks like a repetition of the Caribbean crisis" he said, using the common Russian term for the Cuban missile crisis (*Reuters, The Washington Post, 21/7/08*).

July 22: Russia would cross "a red-line for the United States of America" if it were to base nuclear-capable bombers in Cuba, a top US air force officer warned. "If they did I think we should stand strong and indicate that is something that crosses a threshold, crosses a red line for the United States of America," said General Norton Schwartz, nominated to be the air force's chief of staff. He was referring to a news report in Russian

newspaper Izvestia that said the military is thinking of flying long-range bombers to Cuba, and possibly establishing a base there (*AFP*, 22/7/08).

July 22: The White House declined to comment on a news report that Russia may start regular bomber flights to Cuba in response to US plans for missile defence sites in Eastern Europe. "I don't think there have been any reports from, official response from, the (Russian) government, so I wouldn't comment on it," spokeswoman Dana Perino told reporters. But US President George W. Bush told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev just two weeks ago that the planned US missile shield poses no threat to Russia, the spokeswoman said. "The president repeated that our missile defence system should not be seen as a threat to Russia, we want to actually work with the Russians to design a system that Russia, and Europe and the United States could work on together as equal partners and we'll continue to do that," she said (*AFP*, 22/7/08).

July 23: Russian experts think that the reaction of General Norton Schwartz, nominated to be the chief of staff of the US Air Force, to potential appearance of Russian strategic bombers in Cuba was "inappropriate". "Russian strategic bombers have the right to use airfields in any country, including Cuba, if the leadership of that country does not object. Therefore, General Schwarz' statement can only be described as inappropriate and childish," Anatoliy Kornukov, former commander-in-chief of the Air-Force, told Interfax AVN. At the same time, Kornukov doubts that permanent presence of Russian strategic bombers in Cuba is expedient from the military point of view. For his part, the former commander of the long-range (strategic) aviation of the Russian Air Force, Lt-General Mikhail Oparin, also expressed surprise at General Schwartz's "inappropriate reaction" to the reports about a possible use of airfields in Cuba by Russian strategic missile carriers. "First, no one has said that our long-range aviation targets facilities on the territory of the USA. On the other hand, the existing Russian-American agreements on strategic arms do not bar Russia from stepping up the capabilities of its combat aviation systems," Oparin told Interfax-AVN. "The use of airfields in Cuba as forward staging bases, or to base our refuelling aircraft to provide support to our strategic missile carriers, could substantially increase the capabilities of our combat systems in terms of reaching remote military-geographic areas," M. Oparin said. The president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, described Schwartz' statement as blackmail of Russia (*Interfax-AVN*, 23/7/08).

July 24: Russian crews landed in Cuba to prepare for stationing nuclear bombers there in defiance of a US warning not to cross a "red line," Izvestia reported, citing unidentified Russian Defence Ministry officials. Crews of a supersonic Tu-160, a nuclear bomber, and a Tu-95, which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization dubs the "Bear", were on the island nation doing reconnaissance work and inspecting infrastructure, the Moscow-based newspaper said. Bombers can be deployed to bases in Cuba, Venezuela or Algeria at any time, Izvestia said. General Norton Schwartz, nominated to be US Air Force chief of staff, warned Russia two days ago not to station bombers in Cuba in response to America's decision to build a missile defence system in former Soviet satellite states in Europe (*Bloomberg*, 24/7/08).

July 24: Fidel Castro said Havana owed no apologies to Washington over reports that Russia might start flying long-range bombers to Cuba, and warned that his country "had nerves of steel in times of genocide." It was the first official comment from Cuba since a US general responded to a report in a Russian newspaper, warning Russia against basing nuclear-capable bombers in Cuba. "What we need are nerves of steel in times of genocide, and Cuba has them. The United States knows that," he wrote, in what appeared to be a reference to previous Cold War-era confrontations between the two countries. The ailing Fidel Castro, 81, who in February handed over power to his 77-year-old brother Raul, made his comments in a letter to the official online Cubadebate.cu. "Raul did just the right thing by maintaining appropriate silence on statements published Monday, July 21 by Izvestia, related to the potential installation of strategic Russian bomber bases in our country," he wrote ([La estrategia de Maquiavelo](#); *AFP*, 24/7/08).

July 24: The Russian Defence Ministry has denied a newspaper report that Russia was considering basing nuclear-capable bombers in Cuba, Russian news agencies reported. The newspaper Izvestia this week cited an anonymous top air force official as saying the bombers could be based in Cuba as a response to US plans to place elements of a missile defence system in Eastern European countries. Defence Ministry spokesman Ilshat Baichurin dismissed the report, according to the Interfax and RIA-Novosti news agencies. "We see this sort of anonymous allegation as disinformation and another media hoax," he was quoted as saying (*AP*, 24/7/08).

July 30: The flap over the possibility of Russian nuclear bombers deploying to Cuba appears to be over. It ended the way it began: with an article in the leading Russian newspaper Izvestia, said to be close to influential circles in Moscow. An editorial the newspaper published late last week acknowledged the editors had been "misinformed" about the potential deployment in Cuba of Russian nuclear-capable strategic bombers. The editorial appeared after a Russian defence ministry spokesman branded the original July 21 report in Izvestia a "media hoax." That report sparked a flurry of speculation about whether the White House and the Kremlin were headed for a new Cold War-style showdown similar to the one in 1962. The newspaper said it trusted the source because "when politicians reach a certain level, they seldom make 'idle' comments." Besides, the editorial noted, the source spoke "in the presence of a sufficiently large number of people" and the daily contacted officials who suggested the original tip was not "groundless" (*The Miami Herald*, 31/7/08).



TERRORISM

July 22: Samir Qantar, the Lebanese terrorist serving a life sentence in Israel for murdering a Jewish family—including a four-year-old girl whose skull he smashed with a rifle—has made his first private visit since being freed in a prisoner swap between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah: to the Cuban Embassy in Beirut. "I am at the disposition of the Cuban government for any work to liberate the five Cuban prisoners being held by the United States," Qantar proudly told María Isabel Velásquez, Havana's top diplomat in

Beirut, at an emotional ceremony that was also attended by Qantar's brother Bassam and a group of Lebanese journalists (*News on Cuba, Cubaminrex- Embacuba Líbano*, 22/7/08).

July 30: The Embassy of Cuba in Lebanon congratulated Samir Qantar, a Lebanese man recently released by Israel after serving 29 years in jail for the murder of three people, including a four-year-old girl. "We appreciate his struggle for the release of our five compatriots," said acting business attachée, Maria Isabel de Velásquez, who claimed that the five Cuban prisoners in the United States also campaigned for Qantar's release. "We believe Samir Qantar to be a fighter in the Arab cause to put an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and Lebanon," added the diplomat (*EFE*, 30/7/08).



US-CUBA RELATIONS

July 1: Travel agents and charter companies are set to ask a federal judge to issue an emergency stay blocking a new law that would make it harder for them to book trips to Cuba. In the hearing in Miami, the agencies will argue the measure is unconstitutional and could drive up costs and put them out of business. The new law was set to take effect Tuesday and would force the agencies to put up a \$250,000 state bond if they book tours to Cuba. Other travel agencies would only pay \$25,000. Republican State Representative David Rivera sponsored the measure. He hopes it will cut down on travel fraud, provide greater homeland security, and deny resources to the Cuban government (*AP*, 1/7/08).

July 1: A federal judge ruled to allow flights to Cuba to continue while he considers travel agents' arguments over whether they should be regulated by the state of Florida for selling direct flights to Cuba. The two sides will return to court on July 11 for another hearing to determine the validity of the law, which was set to kick in July 1. The group of 16 Miami-Dade travel agencies specializing in trips to Cuba are suing the state in federal court to stop increased fees from taking effect on Tuesday. Those fees are on hold until the judge's decision is rendered (*The Miami Herald*, 1/7/08).

July 2: Two men from Charlotte County were indicted on charges of boating to Cuba. Authorities believe they were going there to smuggle in people. Francisco Leon Marquez and Walter Pereira Flores allegedly traveled to Cuba on February 16 on a 30-foot speedboat. It is against the law to travel to Cuba without written permission of the US Coast Guard. On February 17, according to court documents, a US Coast Guard boat was patrolling near the Dry Tortugas and spotted the boat, which was traveling north. The next day, Coast Guard seamen found Marquez and Flores in the boat without gas, 66 miles southwest of Fort Myers Beach. One of the men allegedly threw a GPS system off the boat, which the Coast Guard recovered. The GPS system documented locations from Port Charlotte to Boca Grande Pass and Cuba (*News-press.com*, 2/7/08).

July 2: Cuba accused US diplomats of instigating opponents of the communist-run government to hold public protests to mark American Independence Day. "There has

been an escalation of provocative actions organized and financed by the US Interests Section in Havana," the Foreign Ministry said in a communiqué published in Granma. It said the mission "is trying to organize other illegal activities and is instigating the mercenaries in Cuba to realize provocative public actions around July 4, US Independence Day." It did not describe what sort of demonstrations might be planned. US Interests Section officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In June, Communist officials accused Michael Parmly, America's top diplomat in Havana, of carrying funds to dissidents from a Cuban-American businessman who was once convicted in the US of conspiring to collect military-style weapons to overthrow Cuba's government. Parmly, who is winding up his assignment in Havana, has declined to respond to the allegations ([Cuba acusa a Estados Unidos](#); *CNN*, 2/7/08).

July 3: American diplomats denied instigating opposition demonstrations to coincide with the Fourth of July holiday, a spokesman for the US mission in Havana said. At least seven dissidents, meanwhile, were reportedly detained before the monthly meeting of an opposition group, according to the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation. Cuba's Foreign Ministry accused US diplomats in Havana of "instigating the mercenaries in Cuba to realize provocative public actions around July 4, US Independence Day." The statement did not describe what kind of protests were planned but warned that the US would be held responsible. "If they are planning something, I don't have any advance knowledge," Greg Adams, a spokesman for the US Interests Section, said of the opposition. "The government of Cuba is a dictatorship that oppresses its people," Adams told reporters. "The Cuban people do not need outside influence to seek relief from this oppression" (*Sun Sentinel*, 3/7/08).

July 3: The 19th US-Cuba Friendship Caravan, which challenges the US embargo against Cuba on an annual basis, was stopped at the US-Mexico border. The Pastors for Peace Caravan, as it is also known, was carrying medicines and other materials to show their solidarity with the people of Cuba. "We've had 31 computers seized by the Customs and Border Patrol at the US-Mexico border. These computers were destined for classrooms, clinics and hospitals in Cuba. These are 31 classrooms, clinics and hospitals that now will not have the opportunity to have computers," Rev. Thomas Smith, President of the Board of Directors for the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization/Pastors for Peace, said. The Pastors for Peace/ Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization has been bringing humanitarian aid to Cuba since 1992 without asking the US Treasury Department for a permit (*ACN*, 4/7/08).

July 4: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez said that the Cuban government is willing to negotiate with the United States on equal footing without compromising its principles. Perez made the remarks during the Non-Alliance Movement (NAM) meeting on Margarita Island off the north-eastern coast of Venezuela. Answering questions about the prospect of relations between the two countries after the US presidential elections in November, he said it is premature to make any comment on this, but one thing is certain: Cuba's principled positions will remain unchanged. These include safeguarding Cuba's national independence, building the country free of any foreign interference, and opposing the economic blockade imposed by Washington (*Xinhua*, 4/7/08).

July 4: A cultural gala in honour of the American people on the occasion of their Independence Day July 4 is scheduled to take place at Havana's Amadeo Roldan Theater. Cuban and American classics will be played by Cuban musicians, reported Granma online. The program includes performances by the Banda Nacional de Concierto, Ensemble Vocal Luna, Ventus Habana, Cuba's National Choir, and the Entrevoques Chamber Choir (*ACN*, 4/7/08).

July 4: The chief of the US Interests Section in Havana, Michael Parmly, said Washington "would not be opposed" to granting Cuba cable access to the Internet if the Castro government allows all Cubans to utilize it, the Spanish news agency EFE reported. "US technology companies are ready at this moment— now—to connect Cuba to the Internet and our government would not be opposed," Parmly was reported as telling guests at a Fourth of July party. "The only thing missing is for the Cuban government to lift its restrictions, lose its fears and begin to trust its own people." According to Cuban authorities, the US trade embargo bars Cuba from tapping the underwater Internet cable that runs from Miami to Cancun, Mexico, only 20 miles from Havana, so Cuba must use satellite connections, which are more expensive than cable and technologically more restricting. For that reason, Cuba limits its citizens' private use of the Internet, favouring its "social use" by state-run institutions, Cuban authorities say. Parmly's comment may have been in response to criticism of Washington's Internet policy voiced frequently during the Journalists' Union Congress in Havana (*The Miami Herald*, 6/7/08).

July 5: Cuba's communist government has rebuilt its network of spies in Florida to the levels that existed before the FBI rounded up more than a dozen members of the Cuban spy Wasp Network, according to a US Army expert on Cuban intelligence. Lt. Col. Chris Simmons, an Army counterintelligence officer, told the press that within nine to 18 months of the network's 1998 dismantling, the number of Cuban agents and intelligence officers in the state was back up to pre-Wasp Network levels—or about 210. "The loss of any one network doesn't compromise anything outside its own structure," said Simmons, noting that Cuba's spies appear to operate within compartmentalized cells not directly connected to each other. Simmons' statement marks the first time a US official has detailed the number of Cuban spies in Florida in recent years. He also outlined the spies' likely targets, including Cuban exile groups and US military installations. The Cuban government's diplomatic mission in Washington did not take a question on the issue. Judy Orihuela, an FBI Miami spokeswoman, declined to comment on the matter. But Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami's Institute on Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, said Simmons' claim is "within the realm of the possible in the nebulous world" of intelligence (*The Miami Herald*, 5/7/08).

July 5: Representatives from the Pastors for Peace Caravan from the United States reached Havana. Caridad Diego Bello, head of the Communist Party of Cuba's Central Committee religious affairs office, leaders of the Cuban People's Friendship Institute and Cuban religious leaders gathered at José Martí International Airport to welcome the group. Rev. Lucius Walker led the delegation which is bringing solidarity aid to Cuba, despite the challenges faced crossing the border into Mexican territory via the Pharr

Bridge near Reynosa. At this border crossing between the states of Tamaulipas and Texas, US agents confiscated 35 computers, part of the 100 ton shipment which included several vehicles. Members of the 19th US-Cuba Friendship Caravan, in a demonstration of protest, occupied one lane of automobile traffic at the Pharr border crossing station for half an hour, until their entrance into Mexico was authorized. The Pastors for Peace delegation includes activists from the US, Canada, Europe and Mexico, and every year challenges the US blockade against Cuba which prohibits trade and travel to Cuba by US citizens (*Granma International*, 6/7/08).

July 7: Anheuser-Busch Cos Inc raised the political and emotional stakes in its fight against an unwanted \$46.3 billion takeover bid by highlighting its foreign suitor's ties to Cuba. Belgium-based InBev NV wants to buy Anheuser-Busch to create the world's largest beer brewer, but its overtures have been rejected repeatedly by the St. Louis-based brewer of Budweiser. InBev moved ahead with plans to try to replace Anheuser-Busch's board with its own nominees. In rejecting InBev's offer as too low and uncertain, Anheuser-Busch on Monday also called attention to InBev's operations in Cuba. InBev, through a subsidiary, has a partnership with the government of Cuba to produce and distribute products in Cuba, Anheuser-Busch said. "InBev has not commented on how that would impact business with Anheuser-Busch's customers, nor on its ability to complete an acquisition under U.S. laws that affect acquisitions of US companies by foreign companies," Anheuser-Busch said. US companies are barred from doing business with Cuba under most circumstances (*Reuters*, 7/7/08).

July 8: After a few weeks of uncertainty, business dealings will remain the same for Florida travel agencies specializing in trips to Cuba—at least until August. A lawsuit between 16 Miami-Dade-based travel vendors and the state of Florida was initially scheduled for a federal court hearing on July 11, but it was postponed until August 29 at the state's request. At stake is whether a law aimed at increasing state regulation of Florida travel agencies selling trips to Cuba unfairly targets a specific group of companies. "The long holiday weekend would not have given us sufficient time to prepare and provide a full and meaningful response," said Terence McElroy, spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (*The Miami Herald*, 8/7/08).

July 10: A US Senate committee approved legislation that would undo tougher travel restrictions to Cuba imposed by the Bush administration in 2004, but Republican opposition could stop the measure. The change approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee would allow Cuban-Americans to travel to Cuba once a year to visit relatives. It would also allow them to spend more money there, about \$160 a day. The current restrictions allow limited family travel from the US to Cuba—trips lasting a maximum of 14 days once every three years. Daily spending is limited to \$50. If approved, the change would put US travel policy to Cuba back to where it was before the restrictions were introduced by President George W. Bush in 2004. Democrats controlling Congress are trying to loosen restrictions on allowing people of Cuban descent to visit their relatives on the island. But efforts underway in Congress—including a measure adopted by the Senate panel—appear unlikely to loosen the restrictions before President Bush leaves

office in January. Bush opposes efforts gaining steam in Congress to ease a longstanding embargo and recently-toughened travel restrictions on Cuba. His veto promises have carried the day, despite majority support for loosening restrictions on travel to Cuba and trade with the authoritarian state (*Reuters, The Miami Herald, 11/7/08*).

July 10: The United States' newly reactivated Fourth Fleet for Latin America does not have an offensive capability, a senior state department official said in Argentina. US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Tom Shannon made the assurance in a joint media conference with Argentine President Cristina Kirchner in the capital Buenos Aires, after several Latin American nations voiced concern at the return of the US navy patrol mission for the region. Shannon stressed that the fleet, which was inactive for nearly six decades, had no aircraft carrier or large warships in its composition. The largest vessel in the fleet was a hospital ship, he said. As well as Argentina, several leftist-run states in Latin America such as Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela have said they fear the move signals a return to US gunboat diplomacy (*AFP, 10/7/08*).

July 10: Fabian Pina Amargós arrived in Fort Lauderdale from Havana with hopes of networking with his colleagues to find solutions to some of the problems facing coral reefs around the world. Instead, he wandered the cavernous exhibit halls at the Broward County Convention Center alone. Pina is the only one of four Cuban scientists who focus on coral reef research allowed to attend the International Coral Reef Symposium in Fort Lauderdale, the largest gathering of scientists on the subject in the world. His three colleagues never received a response from the US State Department regarding obtaining visas. Pina's experience is the latest chapter in the bitter relationship between the United States and Cuba in which seemingly everything—even the undersea world of coral, scuba and grouper—is politicized. In an interview, Pina talked about the state of coral reefs in Cuba and the challenges and rewards of pursuing a science career on the communist island. He also lamented that his colleagues could not make it to the symposium. "There is a desire from the scientific community on both sides to do more exchanges," Pina said. "I'd like to see much more exchanges" (*The Miami Herald, 11/7/08*).

July 11: Cuban lawmakers adopted a declaration supporting the cause of the five Cubans held in US jails, during the First Session of the Cuban Parliament's 7th legislature, underway at Havana's Convention Center with the presence of President Raul Castro. The declaration was presented by Parliament President Ricardo Alarcon, who called on all lawmakers around the world to join the declaration and the accords adopted at the Latin American and Caribbean Parliamentary Encounter, held in Panama on July 7-8. Alarcon reiterated the need to multiply world solidarity in favour of the cause of Ramon Labañino, Gerardo Hernández, Rene Gonzalez, Antonio Guerrero and Fernando Gonzalez, known as the Cuban Five. The US Administration's backdrop against the Five is countered by this Draft Declaration, which was approved unanimously, he said (*ACN, 11/7/08*).

July 11: Cuba's President Raul Castro has taken a more conciliatory tone toward the United States than his brother, even offering in speeches to talk with the country that has

maintained a trade embargo against Cuba since 1962. But in his speech to the National Assembly, he accused the United States of subverting the changes he had pushed and adding to Cuba's woes. "The enemy," he said, "is doing everything possible to increase the difficulties, with the absurd hope of bringing us to our knees. Faced with the measures adopted lately in our country, some official in the United States comes out immediately, from a spokesman to the president, to brand them 'insufficient' or 'cosmetic,'" Castro said. "Although no one here asked their opinion, I reiterate that we will never make any decision, not even the smallest one, as a result of pressure or blackmail." ([Discurso de Raul Castro ante la Asamblea Nacional](#); *Reuters, AP*, 12/7/08)

July 13: Anheuser-Busch agreed to sell itself to the Belgian brewer InBev for about \$52 billion, people briefed on the matter said, putting control of the nation's largest beer maker and a fixture of American culture into a European rival's hands. Both Anheuser and InBev resorted to lawsuits as bludgeons. InBev began a campaign to oust Anheuser's board, while Anheuser accused its suitor of lying about its financial commitments and criticized its beer business in Cuba (*AP*, 14/7/08).

July 15: The investigating branch of the US Congress has accused the federal agency that oversees radio and television broadcasts to Cuba of awarding more than \$1 million in contracts to two Miami news outlets without following regular contract-bid procedures. In a report, the Government Accountability Office said the International Broadcasting Bureau failed to follow federal contract-awarding regulations when it authorized no-bid deals totalling about \$1.1 million for WAQI Radio Mambí 710 AM and TV Azteca. The 30-page report is the first of a series of GAO reports on the operations of Radio and TV Martí, which beam commentary, entertainment and news to Cuba under the Miami-based Office of Cuba Broadcasting. The GAO released the report as part of an ongoing broader probe into the management and broadcasting practices of the controversial Radio and TV Martí services. The GAO opened the probe in response to a request from Representative William D. Delahunt (Democrat-Massachusetts), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight. "It's important that we step back and look not just at an individual report," Delahunt told the press. "But cumulatively, the Martí's have been plagued by allegations of mismanagement and corruption, inefficiencies and ineffectiveness and thus we need constant monitoring and oversight of Martí operations" (*The Miami Herald*, 15/7/08).

July 15: Responding to constant pressure from communities all across the US, US officials returned to the members of the 19th US-Cuba Pastors for Peace Caravan 32 computers that had been seized on July 3. A report by the organization says the "caravanistas" hand-carried the computers across the International Bridge from Hidalgo, Texas into Reynosa, Mexico, to make sure that they would be on their way to Cuba. The computers will be sent from Reynosa on to Cuba, which means that every item of the nearly 100 tons of humanitarian aid collected by the caravan from all across the US will in fact be donated to Cuba. "We appreciate that the computers were released today. But our work could not be complete until we knew for sure that the computers would be on their way to their intended home," said Rev. Lucius Walker, Jr., Executive Director of IFCO/Pastors for Peace. "In fact, even now, our work is not complete—not until this

mean-spirited, foolish, petty, counterproductive, immoral blockade against our Cuban sisters and brothers is ended" (ACN, 15/7/08).

July 15: Fidel Castro has come out against wiretapping—if done by countries other than Cuba. In his latest "reflection," published in the official daily Granma, the former Cuban leader expressed barely suppressed shock at the enactment last week of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which granted immunity to telecommunications companies that cooperated with Washington in the wiretapping program instituted after the attacks of September 11, 2001. "Something that offends people's sensitivities, in any social system, is the disrespect for privacy," Castro wrote. "In the past [...] the laws protected correspondence. Later, protection extended to telephone communications [...]. The laws of the United States prohibited their interception without legal warrants." Not anymore, apparently. And Castro quoted the American Civil Liberties Union, which "described the law as 'unconstitutional' and 'an assault on civil rights and the right to privacy,'" as well as a news account from Sweden, which criticized the enactment there of similar wiretapping legislation ([La impotencia de las potencias](#); *The Miami Herald*, 1/7/08).

July 15: Boulder-based Platte River Associates faces criminal charges of "trading with the enemy" for allegedly providing computer software and training in 2000 used to help oil and gas exploration and development in Cuba's territorial waters. The charges in US District Court in Denver were announced by the US Attorney's Office in Colorado. If convicted, Platte River Associates faces a fine of up to \$1 million plus restitution (*Rocky Mountain News*, 16/7/08).

July 16: Defense lawyers will introduce to the Ninth Circuit of the Court of Appeal of Atlanta a document requesting to reconsider the case of the five Cubans imprisoned in the US on July 24. Roberto Gonzalez, a member of the defence team told the press that when the reconsideration document is introduced the process is halted until an answer is received as it appeals the verdict issued by the three judges on June 4. That panel ratified the guilty verdicts and the sentences of Rene Gonzalez (15 years in jail) and Gerardo Hernandez (two life terms plus 15 years). The cases of Ramon Labañino (life term plus 18 years), Fernando Gonzalez (19 years) and Antonio Guerrero (life term plus 10 years) were submitted to Florida Court for re-sentencing by Judge Joan Lenard, the same judge that imposed the sentences on the Five in 2001 (ACN, 16/7/08).

July 21: A new jet service taking off in December from Windsor Airport will bring the allure of a forbidden Cuban vacation within minutes of downtown Detroit. Sunwing Airlines, a Canadian leisure carrier, will offer weekly flights to Varadero, Cuba, a popular beach resort about 50 miles east of the capital, Havana. While US citizens are mostly barred from spending money on travel to Cuba, officials with the airline and airport expect Americans to make up at least half the passengers on the route. "On average, about 50 per cent or more of passengers flying to Cuba from Canada are from the US," said Federica Nazzani, Windsor Airport's manager. "Given our unique geographic position near Metro Detroit, we're expecting at least that." Because of decades-old government restrictions on Americans traveling to Cuba, flights are limited from the US to the Communist Caribbean island nation south of Key West, Florida. Most

Americans who do make the trip must get there through a third country, such as Canada or Mexico (*The Detroit News*, 21/7/08).

July 21: Rev. Al Sharpton stood with several Afro-Cubans adjacent to the Cuban Mission to the United Nations to protest the jailing of Afro-Cuban political dissidents by the Cuban government. The imprisonment of Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet, Jorge Luis Garcia Perez “Antunez,” and other Afro-Cuban dissenters and opposition leaders has prompted Sharpton to speak out against Cuba’s many human rights abuses and to ask to meet with Cuban representatives. “I want to extend an invitation to [President of Cuba] Raul Castro for an open dialogue,” said Sharpton. Charlie King, acting Executive Director for Sharpton’s nonprofit civil rights organization National Action Network (NAN), spoke on Sharpton and the NAN’s behalf. “We’re going to investigate the facts of this troubling civil rights issue. If these allegations are true, we will send a request for a humanitarian mission to be sent to Cuba, and we will do anything and everything we can to [ensure justice],” he said. According to the Cuba Solidarity Movement, Dr. Biscet was detained in Cuba for “25 years for speaking out against the Castro regime, [and was] subjected to torture and extended stays in vermin-infested solitary confinement cells” (*Epoch Times*, 22/7/08).

July 21: Congress has put the 2008 funding of the \$45 million Cuba program of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) on hold, following a series of troubling audits and fraud cases. In a quest to get the funding hold lifted, USAID ordered a bottoms-up review of all its Cuba democracy programs and suspended a Miami anti-Castro exile group that spent at least \$11,000 of federal grant money on personal items. Representative Howard Berman (Democrat-California), ordered a hold on the USAID Cuba program funding last month, partially in response to a \$500,000 embezzlement case at the Center for a Free Cuba in Washington disclosed earlier this year, said federal officials (*The Miami Herald*, 22/7/08).

July 22: The chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee lifted the hold he had placed on the US Agency for International Development's \$45 million Cuba democracy program, saying steps are being taken to address corruption and misspending. Representative Howard Berman (Democrat-California) had put a hold last month on USAID's 2008 funding for its controversial Cuba democracy program. The program is aimed at bringing democracy to Cuba, but critics have said the bulk of the money has gone to Miami exile organizations and universities. Two of the program's 11 grant winners are under investigation for misspending funds, including the Center for a Free Cuba, where an employee, who last worked at the White House, allegedly embezzled more than \$500,000. A Miami organization, Grupo de Apoyo a la Democracia (Group in Support of Democracy), had its funding cut off after one of its employees charged \$11,000 in personal items to the grant, federal officials said. USAID ordered a top-down review of all the grants and promised to suspend any grants that show signs of misspending (*The Miami Herald*, 22/7/08).

July 23: John Parke Wright wants to provide Florida's best restaurants with the finest steaks around, and he wants to do it from a ranch in Cuba. "I've got a plan," says the

sixth-generation Floridan whose ancestors were pioneers of the once-thriving Havana-Tampa trade route. "I'm ready to go." Cuba, on the other hand, is not quite ready for him. But could it be soon? Mr. Wright, a rancher, is one of many long-time Cuba watchers who agree that Raúl Castro is following the "China model" of managed movement toward a free market economy. He visits Cuba frequently, finessing close ties with the Castro government in order to push for any small trade openings between the island nation and the US. He was also one of the first businessmen to open up trade with China 30 years ago when Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping began his famous economic reforms to that country's communist economy. Wright compares Raúl to the practical Deng, saying Raúl wants to have Cuba be a little more like Florida. "Raúl's goal is to modernize and to normalize trade relations with the US. If we normalize relations now, it'll be a whole new world. Havana will be the Hong Kong of the Caribbean. From 1860 to 1960, Cuba had some of the best land for cattle in the Western hemisphere," says Wright. In 1960, Cuba had about 6 million people and 2 million cattle, but now has only 2 million cattle for 12 million people, he explains. "There's a tremendous need to restock Cuba's ranches, and the opportunity has to be given to people like me," he said (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 23/7/08).

July 24: The president of the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), John J. Sweeney, sent a letter to Cuban President Raúl Castro on behalf of more than 10 million working women and men of the US, petitioning for the release from prison of "independent journalists, human rights advocates and pro-democracy activists." "Although two of the unionists have been released, the following six still remain in detention", and he named them in the letter (*Cubanet*, 24/7/08).

July 24: Russia's denial of reports that it plans to send strategic nuclear bombers to Cuba is "a very good thing," the US State Department said. The daily newspaper *Izvestiya* reported on July 21 that Russia may set up a refuelling base for strategic aircraft in Cuba in response to US plans to deploy elements of a missile defence system in Europe, citing an unidentified "highly placed source." Russian Defence Ministry spokesman Ilshat Baichurin denied the reports, blaming unnamed foreign states themselves expanding their military bases around Russia for disseminating misinformation. "I think that's a very good thing," Gonzalo Gallegos, a State Department spokesman, said in comments posted on the department's web site (*Bloomberg*, 25/7/08).

July 26: President Raúl Castro warned Washington that Cuba would stay focused on defence regardless of who wins November's presidential election. He put the United States, which hoped for greater change under his regime, on notice. "We shall continue paying special attention to defence, regardless of the results of the next presidential elections in the United States," Raúl said ([Raul Castro's speech](#); *AP*, 27/7/08).

July 27: Teresa Aral, a travel agent in South Florida, was relieved after learning she did not have to pay the state \$250,000 to keep booking trips to Cuba. For now, at least. Ms. Aral, along with 15 other agents providing charter flights to Cuba, filed a lawsuit in Miami against the State of Florida, challenging a new law requiring them to post a one-time \$250,000 bond and disclose the names of clients in order to continue their business

with Cuba. But earlier this month, a federal judge temporarily lifted the measure while he considered its legality. "I'm very grateful that at least the judicial branch of government here is still working," Ms. Aral said after the ruling. Cuban Americans are allowed to visit the island every three years and must obtain visas through the federal government. Despite the recent ruling, the legal battle between the travel agents and Florida lawmakers over the cost of doing business with the Raúl Castro-run government, which controls all aspects of commercial air travel into Cuba, is far from over (*The New York Times*, 27/7/08).

July 28: It was a run-of-the-mill immigrant-smuggling case: a boatload of Cubans brought from the island for \$10,000 a head, until the smugglers made a serious goof. As often happens, the alleged smugglers held onto their passengers until relatives paid their fee. Except that one relative they phoned to demand cash from happened to be a US Customs and Border Protection officer. He promptly alerted agents at his sister agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, according to documents filed in Miami federal court. The officer and an ICE agent then set up a late-night meeting at a drugstore parking lot, swapped the cousin for \$10,000 in cash and signalled a waiting ICE SWAT team, which arrested the two alleged smugglers. They found themselves indicted not just for alien-smuggling, but also on the rarer and more serious charge of hostage-taking. The accused smugglers, Niovel Chirino Alvarez, 33, and Lazaro Martinez Padron, 21, face life in prison if convicted. Both have pleaded not guilty. ICE officials declined to comment, citing the pending nature of the case. But the indictments, and investigators' statements filed in Miami federal court, describe how the alleged smugglers unwittingly handed immigration agents a crack at an often hidden aspect of alien smuggling—holding people for alleged ransom (*The Miami Herald*, 28/7/08).

July 29: The new Chief of the US Interests Section (USINT) in Havana, Jonathan D. Farrar, officially initiated his mission in Cuba with a request for an introductory meeting with government authorities but is still awaiting reply. "We asked for an appointment with MINREX [Foreign Office] when Mr. Farrar arrived in Cuba and we are still waiting," said USINT Public Affairs Officer, Gregory Adams. Farrar arrived in Havana on July 17 to replace exiting Chief of Mission Michael Parmly. "This time we proceeded just like we did when Parmly arrived; we requested the interview in the first week," remembered the official. "But Parmly was never received" (*El Nuevo Herald*, 30/7/08).

July 30: Producers wanting to learn more about exporting goods to Cuba can attend an August 15 conference in San Antonio, Texas. "Exporting to Cuba", to be held at San Antonio's International Center, will help participants learn more about how to export food, agricultural goods, lumber and certain medical products, said Dr. Parr Rosson, Texas AgriLife Extension Service economist and one of the conference presenters. The workshop will begin with an overview of recent changes in the Cuban political system and the implications for Texas by Dr. Jonathan Brown, Institute for Latin American Studies, University of Texas. "This conference will help producers, ranchers, agribusiness, export-service providers as well as government officials receive an in-depth look at how to reach the Cuban export market," Rosson said. "Cuba has become an important market for Texas over the past four years, and it holds promise for the future."

The workshop will focus on the future of the Cuban export market, opportunities for food and agricultural trade, and provide a forum featuring several industry leaders. The export process, shipping, logistics and port facilities will be discussed (*Farm Press*, 30/7/08).

July 30: Senator Arlen Specter said he hopes to meet with Cuban President Raul Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez during a trip to Latin America in August. "I'm a firm believer in dialogue," the Pennsylvania Republican told reporters. Speaking to reporters on a wide range of subjects, Specter said his experience has been that meeting with world leaders leads to change. "I think President McCain will understand (...) an independent senator that has a different point of view," he said when asked about his view versus McCain's on the matter. Specter said he met with Fidel Castro during previous stops in Cuba and talked to him about drug interdiction. He said he would like to follow that up with Raul Castro, as well as to discuss trade and tourism during a visit there. He said he believes the United States is "on the cusp" of re-establishing formal relations with Cuba. "I've been to Cuba three times and I think the chances are really on the horizon for re-establishing relations with Cuba now that Fidel Castro is no longer in charge," Specter said. He said he wrote a letter to Raul Castro requesting a meeting, but has not heard back (*AP*, 30/7/08).

July 30: A Florida congressman is criticizing a Vermont-New Hampshire Little League team's trip to Cuba. According to a column in the *Washington Post*, Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Republican-Florida), an anti-Castro Cuban-American, held a meeting of the Cuba Democracy Caucus on July 10 to discuss "the very troubling granting of a Treasury/OFAC license to a Little League team to travel to Cuba." The 14- and 11-year-olds plan to be in Cuba for 10 days starting August 8 for a series of games. Americans are prohibited from traveling to Cuba unless they get permission from the US government. The team was granted a travel license from the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control and is permitted to spend US money in Cuba (*AP*, 31/7/08).

July 30: Vermont's senior US senator has some blunt advice for a South Florida congressman: "He should pick on someone his own size." Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat-Vermont), levelled his criticism at Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart (Republican-Florida), who has expressed serious reservations about a combined Vermont-New Hampshire youth baseball trip to Cuba. Leahy said in a statement that Diaz-Balart should leave the kids alone. "I don't like the idea of the government telling ordinary Americans, let alone Little Leaguers, where and when they can travel," Leahy said. "If the president can go to China at taxpayers' expense, these kids ought to be able to go on a privately paid trip to Cuba to play some baseball." Diaz-Balart, a staunch anti-Castro Cuban-American, convened a meeting of the Cuba Democracy Caucus on July 10 to discuss the trip, according to a column in *The Washington Post* (*Rutland Herald*, 31/7/08).

July 31: The President of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcon, said that the US Government is guilty of corrupt practices in the case of five Cuban anti-terrorist fighters who remain imprisoned in the United States after almost 10 years. Speaking at the prime

time radio and television program ‘The Round Table’, Alarcon stressed that Washington has failed to comply with or ignored its public duties, which has been perceived in the behaviour of all government officials involved in the case against Rene Gonzalez, Gerardo Hernandez, Ramon Labañino, Fernando Gonzalez and Antonio Guerrero internationally known as the Cuban Five—since their arrest in 1998 (*ACN*, 1/8/08).

