



# FOCAL

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## Research Forum on Cuba

# Chronicle on Cuba

## December 2006

### Highlights

**Domestic Affairs:** Fidel Castro misses a massive military parade held in his honour in Havana. Dissident Hector Palacios and other political prisoners are released. A mob of some 200 people uses force to halt a peaceful march organized by a group of government opponents to commemorate International Human Rights Day. A Spanish surgeon who examined Fidel Castro states that the Cuban leader does not have cancer and is recovering from complications after surgery. A statement attributed to Fidel Castro assures Cubans that the ailing leader could still recover from his prolonged illness.

**Economy:** Legislation passed by the government of Raúl Castro attempts to tackle workplace absenteeism and increase productivity in state-owned companies through a rigorous regulation of workplace schedules. Cuban Economics Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez reports that the country's economy grew 12.5 percent in 2006. At the year-end meeting of the National Assembly, acting president Raul Castro says there is no excuse for the transportation and food production problems that anger many Cubans. Cuba owns Canadian company Pebercan US\$ 69 million.

**Exile Community:** Cuban Consensus releases a report calling for the US administration and Cuban government to ease travel restrictions. The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) proposes a set of measures whereby Miami-based Cubans would be empowered to act as "agents of change" in the island.

**Foreign Affairs:** Secretary General of the Organization of American States, José Miguel Insulza, says Cuba and the United States should sit down to talk about their relationship without conditions and without making the talks dependent on the death of Fidel Castro. Cuba and Honduras establish full diplomatic relations. Cuba blasts Costa Rican President Oscar Arias for comparing Fidel Castro to the late Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Fidel Castro telephones the Chinese ambassador in Havana to wish his president Hu Jintao a happy New Year. Cuba condemns the execution of deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

**Security:** A military parade in Havana's Revolution Square closes the festivities of Fidel Castro's 80th birthday and marks the 50th anniversary of the Granma landing. Raul Castro meets with military delegations from China, Vietnam, and Lao.

**US-Cuba Relations:** Raul Castro opens a military parade in Havana by offering to hold conversations on bilateral relations with Washington. Washington rejects to embrace in a dialogue with the Cuban government. US Homeland Security Task Force Southeast conducts an exercise designed to prevent a mass migration from Cuba. Raul Castro does not meet with the largest delegation from the US Congress to visit Cuba since 1959. The chief of US State

Department's bureau of Western hemispheric affairs says Canada's ties with Cuba can help nudge that country toward democracy after Fidel Castro is gone. Top Bush administration aides hold a meeting at the White House on a post-Castro Cuba.



## Domestic Affairs

**December 1:** The president of Cuba's National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon, convened in Havana the 8th Ordinary Sessions of the Sixth Legislature of the governmental entity. The meeting will take place at Havana's Conference Center on December 22 with the attendance of over 600 deputies from the country's various sectors. According to the Constitution, the Assembly is the only Cuban body with constituent and legislative authority. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/12/06)

**December 1:** A ceremony presided by First Vice President Raul Castro was held at the Karl Marx Theatre in Havana, as part of the activities organized by the Guayasamin Foundation of Ecuador for Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. Cuba's Vice President Carlos Lage delivered a firm defense of Cuba's one-party Communist system, insisting it would outlive ailing leader Fidel Castro. Lage, also vice president of the Council of State, told hundreds of supporters at a closing gala for celebrations honouring Castro's 80th birthday that: "We will have one party." "But I'm not talking about today, I am talking about the future. In Cuba, there will be no succession. There will be continuity. There will not be another Fidel Castro. No one will imitate him; many will follow him. There will not be ambitions, or ego trips (...) We will not allow that," Lage said. In another part of his speech, Lage said Fidel is recovering. "We will have him among us, he will continue to guide us. We are going to ask him to keep doing it for a few more years," Lage said. The Cuban Vice President said the ailing Fidel Castro was taking an "active and disciplined part in his recovery, minding all the details, asking questions, staying informed, helping out and approving things. In these difficult months for our people, and for so many friends in the world, Fidel Castro has continued to give us a good example," Lage added. (*Granma*, *The Financial Express*, *The News*, 2/12/06)

**December 2:** Fidel Castro missed a massive military parade held in his honour in Havana, fuelling more speculation about his health. Until the last minute no-one knew if Fidel Castro would make an appearance at the parade, held as part of belated birthday celebrations for him and to mark a key date in Cuban history. Fidel Castro has appeared in public only in sporadic videos and photographs, where the shrunken ailing leader was shown in his convalescence, sometimes in pajamas. His health has remained a state secret, and subject of rampant rumors. (*The Miami Herald*, 2/12/06)

**December 3:** Nobody knows where Cuba is headed, but the absence of Fidel Castro from his 80th birthday celebrations raised new doubts about his health and, for many, signaled a new era for Cuba. "It confirms that an era is over in Cuba, the Fidel era, and that a new one begins with Raul (Castro) as head of government, and with a strong military presence," said opposition leader and former political prisoner Vladimiro Roca. "Unfortunately, I don't expect any change for the opposition. Raul will begin ruling without Fidel Castro's mysticism and power, so he'll have to deal more harshly with the opposition," according to Manuel Cuesta Morua, of the dissident group Arco Progresista told the press. "Over the past few days, pressure and repression has been on the rise against practically all the opposition's" activities, he added. Economist Marta Beatriz Roque, who heads the opposition Assembly for Promoting Civil Society in Cuba, was certain Raul Castro would not alter the status quo. "If there were a true will to change things, we'd be seeing some improvement already," she said. (*AFP*, 3/12/06)

**December 4:** The National Independent Labour Confederation (CONIC) conducted an overhaul of its ranks in an effort to infuse more dynamism in its follow-up and denunciation of trade union violations as well as social and labor-related transgressions in the island. Replacements were appointed for provincial delegates who went into exile and the CONIC leadership in Granma, Las Tunas, Ciego de Ávila and Matanzas was restructured. The Confederation encompasses over 100 sectoral trade unions and has delegations in eight of fourteen provinces in the country. (*Cubamet*, 4/11/06)

**December 4:** Hundreds of people paid homage to Santa Barbara, who stands alongside Our Lady of Charity - the island's patroness - and Lazarus in the devotions of Cuba's Roman Catholic faithful. Since the eve of December 4, which is Santa Barbara's feast day, hundreds of people went to pray, make offerings and ask for miracles at the parish church bearing her name in the residential neighborhood of Parraga on the outskirts of Havana. As per custom, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the capital's archbishop, celebrated a Mass that drew about 1,000 people. Flowers, candles and red garments stand out as the distinctive symbols of the conjunction of rituals and beliefs in the annual celebration. (*EFE*, 4/12/06)

**December 4:** Labour authorities announced the postponement of the new "Internal Discipline Rules" (Reglamento Disciplinario Interno) on labour discipline of hours and day schedules until April. Resolution 187.2006 will come into force on January 2, but will not be put in effect until April 1, according to a resolution signed by Labor and Social Security Minister Alfredo Morales published in *Trabajadores* newspaper. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/12/06)

**December 5:** The 28th New Latin American Cinema Festival opened in Havana with the screening of *Pan's Labyrinth*, a film by Mexican director Guillermo del Toro. The film, which kept the audience on the edge of their seats, combines a magical fairytale with the crude reality of post-Civil War Spain. Havana's Film Festival takes place at 18 theaters around the Cuban capital and includes in its competition full length fiction, documentary and short films, from or on Latin America, as well as a selection of films from several European countries and Canada and three independent productions about Latin Americans living in the United States. The documentary "People and Thoughts" was dedicated to Fidel Castro by President of the New Latin American Film Festival, Alfredo Guevara, at the opening ceremony of the 23 edition of this prestigious event organized by Cuba every year. (*AIN*, 5/12/06)

**December 5:** Fidel Castro is recovering well from his July surgery and will soon return to public life, Vice President Carlos Lage said. Castro, 80, is following doctor's orders in a disciplined manner, he said. That is why Castro was absent from the military parade commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces. (*Xinhua*, 5/12/06)

**December 6:** Hector Palacios, a well-known dissident jailed in a Cuban government crackdown on the opposition in 2003, was released from prison, Elizardo Sanchez, head of the Cuban Commission on Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said. Palacios is the sixteenth prisoner of the so called "Group of 75" who has been released on medical parole. According to opposition activists from *Acción Democrática*, Palacio's wife, Gisela Delgado, received a call by State Security officials telling her that her husband would be released that same morning. Delgado has been active demonstrating with the Ladies in White for the release of all political prisoners. Palacios, a sociologist, is well known as one of the leading figures of the dissident movement in Cuba. Palacios joined the dissident movement in 1993 and was director of the illegal Center for Independent Social Studies and advisor to the Round Table for Reflection. He worked as a coordinator for *Concilio Cubano*, a coalition of dissident groups, was a leader of the All United movement, and played an important role gathering signatures for the Varela Project, launched by Oswaldo Paya and his Christian Liberation Movement. In 1997, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison for "contemptuous" statements about Fidel Castro. Palacios, 65, said he felt physically "destroyed" but remained "morally strong" in his opposition to the Cuban government. Opposition leaders wrote to Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations, asking him to monitor a human rights demonstration they plan for December 10. (*AP*, *El Nuevo Herald*, *The Miami Herald*, 6,7/12/06)

**December 6:** Acting President Raul Castro sat in for his ailing brother Fidel at an event marking Elian Gonzalez's 13th birthday -- and another year of the ideological campaign launched after an international custody battle over the Cuban boy. Raul Castro, 75, has been increasingly taking on his brother's public duties amid persistent questions about when - or if -- Fidel Castro will return to power. Dressed in his habitual olive-green uniform, Raul Castro sat in the front row of the auditorium in Elian's hometown of Cardenas, a coastal city about 85 miles (140 kilometers) east of Havana, for the gathering that featured a children's choir and dance troupe. "Our greatest challenge is to strengthen and enrich the immense work of the revolution," Communist Party leader Mercedes Lopez said in a brief speech at the hour-long event. The younger Castro, who is also the island's defense minister, did not address the gathering. (*AP*, 6/12/06)

**December 6:** Cuban political prisoner, Normando Hernández, was urgently hospitalized after suffering several fainting spells. Some prisoners picked him up and called different human rights organizations within Cuba. Human rights activist Juan Carlos González Leiva spoke by phone with Hernández' wife, who told him that her husband was not well, and that a doctor of the Ministry of the Interior had said that Normando would be moved shortly to the provincial hospital in Camagüey. A large number of prisoners in the facility where Hernández is incarcerated are accusing the State Security of committing a "slow assassination" against the political prisoner. Hernández is serving a 25-year sentence in Kilo 7 prison, Camagüey. (*Payo Libre*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** A top Cuban dissident jailed in the 2003 nationwide crackdown was freed for health reasons, making him the seventh political prisoner released in the past two months. But human rights activists in Cuba warned that the releases, which could be interpreted as a goodwill gesture on the part of Havana, come at the same time that the government has increased repression against other opponents. "The latest releases show a trend, but remember 300 are still in jail, which is the highest in the hemisphere and proportionately one of the highest in the world," said human rights activist Elizardo Sánchez. "Today they released Héctor Palacios, but Monday they arrested independent journalist Ahmed Rodríguez and have held him incommunicado without charges." "They are trying to create the false image that things are getting better," Sánchez said in a telephone interview from Havana. Leading democracy activist Oswaldo Paya, among well-wishers who rushed to greet Palacios at his home, called his colleague's early release "an act of justice." "They should release all of them," added Paya, the key promoter of the Varela Project campaign to gather signatures demanding a referendum on civil rights such as freedom of speech and business ownership. (*AP*, *Reuters*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** A Cuban dissident group invited UNESCO's regional director for the Caribbean, Hannsen Van Hoff, to participate in a silent walk on Human Rights Day and asked UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to monitor police response. In a letter delivered to the media, political opposition activist and medical doctor Darsi Ferrer, with the Patriotic National Front, informed Annan that Van Hoff, as well as all Cubans and representatives of the foreign diplomatic corps on the island have been invited to the walk. The organizers said that Cardinal Jaime Ortega, archbishop of Havana, will be asked "to encourage all parish priests to make a contribution by inserting references to the Human Rights Declaration in their sermons." (*AFP*, *EER*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** With thousands in attendance, the Jehovah Witnesses of Havana held their district assemblies in the municipalities of Boyeros, Guanabacoa and Arroyo Naranjo. Both believers and guests spent time together for three days in a cordial atmosphere, with the enactment of Bible passages and the intonation of religious hymns. "We were much persecuted by this government... mercilessly, I would say. But for some years now, thank Jehovah, we have been enjoying a measure of freedom for our meetings and in our lives," a participant said. (*Cubanet*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** Cuba, a country with one of the hemisphere's highest life expectancy rates and lowest birthrates finds itself with a dwindling population -- one that in just 13 years will see the number of retired people outnumber the labor force. The Cuban government-run media has tackled the issue in recent months, running remarkably candid coverage of a demographic phenomenon that promises to wreak havoc on an already strained social service system. As Fidel Castro -- himself 80 -- languishes in his sick bed, the effort to sustain the socialist society he built is being constantly

challenged by emigration, aging adults and childless women. Since 1978, Cuba's fertility rate has decreased to levels that can no longer sustain current population levels. Now at 11.2 million, the Cuban media says it is unlikely to ever reach 12 million. During the 1960s and 1970s, Cuba's annual birthrate was about 250,000. In 2005, there were slightly more than 120,000 births, despite there being 1 million women of reproductive age. Seniors age 60 and older now make up about 16 percent of Cuba's population. The Cuban government estimates that by 2025, 26 percent of Cubans will be elderly. If current trends don't change, Cuba will join the 11 countries with the world's oldest populations, Granma, the island's main daily newspaper, reported. Another newspaper, Juventud Rebelde, put it like this: "If in 10 years we haven't reached a coherent reproduction policy, we'll see each other more frequently at wakes than at children's birthday parties." Among the causes, Granma cited "material" problems such as housing shortages, high cost of living, lack of day-care centers and goods like children's clothing. The paper also acknowledged the outward migration of adults of child-bearing age, but said positive changes such as advances for women in the workforce and availability of birth control also contributed. (*The Miami Herald*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** Independent journalist Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia, 21, a reporter with the Youth without Censorship news agency, is in police custody and remains incommunicado. According to the Cuban Human Rights Foundation (FCDH), his relatives have not been allowed any form of contact with him. (*Cubanet*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** A multimedia CD entitled Fidel: Ethics and Human Values, was presented during a workshop at the Enrique Jose Varona Pedagogical Institute in Havana. The CD includes some 998 speeches delivered by the Cuban leader between January 1998 and September 2006, along with a glossary of terms, videos and photo galleries. Armando Hart Davalos, the director of the Jose Marti Program Office, presided the meeting in which members of the University Students Federation also participated. The product was made by a professor at the institution as a symbolic gift for Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. (*AIN*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** A leading dissident group called for an urgent and definitive transfer of power to Raul Castro to better deal with the transition period in Cuban politics opened by Fidel Castro's absence. With concerns about the country's leadership heightened in the more than four months since Castro, 80, disappeared from public for an intestinal operation and turned power temporarily over to his brother Defense Minister Raul, Arco Progresista issued a written call to dialogue. Arco "demands that the definitive transfer of power take place, with urgency," during the December 22 session of parliament, and that the body take up a 13-point reform program the dissidents drew up for the transition, the statement said. Whether he recuperates or passes on, dissidents insist the time has come for change. "Our country is undergoing an era change while it remains trapped at a historical crossroads: either Cuba opens up to itself -- the best way to open up to the world -- or it fizzles out as a nation amidst a spent revolution," said the Arco statement handed out to reporters. The group urged prompt economic and political reforms, a dialogue among Cubans "that respects our differences," and that "unconstitutional restrictions to Cubans' freedom of movement (and) the silence imposed on most citizens' right to freedom of expression be lifted". There has been no official reaction to Arco's statement. (*AFP, The Globe and Mail*, 7/12/06)

**December 8:** The Latin American Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR) will begin an international campaign to pressure the Cuban government to drop the mixed monetary system that currently operates on the island. According to this organisation, the fact that four currencies—the US dollar, the euro, the convertible peso (known as the chavito), and the Cuban peso—are circulating throughout the Caribbean country is generating economic discrimination against its poorest citizens. Cubans, who earn their wages in pesos, cannot access certain goods and services on the island unless they carry dollars or euros. According to a report by Univision, an American television network, the organisation hopes to collect at least 10,000 signatures within Cuba, which are necessary to push forward a constitutional reform as stated in the 1976 Cuban constitution. (*Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 8/12/06)

**December 8:** Ailing Fidel Castro is battling terminal cancer and could be dead by Christmas, senior Western diplomatic sources have said. Observers close to the Cuban regime have reported that the leader is suffering from an

aggressive form of stomach cancer and has refused radiation therapy or any other form of treatment. Cuban officials are notoriously tight-lipped over the health of Castro, which they treat as a closely guarded state secret. While occasionally they have broken their silence to report that Mr Castro is suffering from a non life-threatening illness, these claims have been roundly discounted by Western sources. (*The Independent*, 8/12/06)

**December 9:** Cuba closes 2006 with 339 political prisoners, 77 fewer than in 2005, according to a report by the illegal National Coordinating Committee of Prisoners and former-Prisoners of Conscience (CNPP). The CNPP pointed to a "significant" increase in the number of women jailed in the island for political reasons. "At the beginning of 2006, we had three female prisoners," but "we close the year with 28 women convicted of political crimes, 27 of them in prison and one on extra-penal leave," indicated Aida Valdés, the CNPP president. (*AFP*, 9/12/06)

**December 9:** Carlos Lamelas, a Cuban evangelical pastor who spoke up about religious freedom on the island, first found himself booted from his church, and then jailed. But the former Church of God president does not stand accused of political dissent or other counter-revolutionary activities. His alleged crime: human trafficking. Lamelas went on trial for allegedly smuggling people out of the island, and if found guilty faces nine years in prison. "Persecution of pastors is subtle," said Alexandri Sosa, a pastor who left Cuba after having problems with the government. "The methods have changed. So if a wall collapses and you rebuild it, you go to jail for illegal construction." Last year, Pastor Manuel Jesús Rosado Arencibia, of Remanente de Dios church in Matanzas, was jailed after distributing evangelical leaflets. A Roman Catholic Church layman, an agronomist who edits the religious magazine *Vitral*, which runs articles that criticize the government, lost his job as president of a state tobacco company when he refused a government plea to give up the magazine. He now spends eight hours a day in a shed, guarding palm tree stalks used to make cigar boxes. (*The Miami Herald*, 9/12/06)

**December 9:** Mariela Castro is seen by some as the future of Cuban socialism. While her father, Raúl Castro, has become the de facto leader of the country, with her uncle, the ailing president, Fidel, too sick to wield power, people are already looking to the next generation. In an interview with *The Scotsman*, she called for more open debate on economic problems. "I would like to hear more discussion. We need to experiment and to test what really works, to make the public ownership more effective, rather than simply adopting wholesale free-market reforms," she said. "As a Cuban citizen, I think we have to explain, discuss and listen to people's questions and criticisms. I don't agree with closing the door on people's experiences." She said that dealing with criticism of Cuba's human-rights record and its lack of political rights was "complicated because of the US threat". Referring to the US trade embargo and other efforts to topple Castro, she said: "We are a besieged country and, under these conditions, some puritans and authoritarians take advantage to impose their point of view. We have constant contradictions in Cuban society." (*The Scotsman*, 9/12/06)

**December 10:** A mob of some 200 people used force to halt a peaceful march organized by a group of government opponents in a central Havana plaza to commemorate International Human Rights Day. At least three of the dozen or so participants in the march, which was organized by the National Council of the National Patriotic Front, were shoved forcefully into cars and taxis halted by the mob and driven away from the spot along with people who had tried to intervene in the violent disruption of the protest. Three people in the mob tore off a white T-shirt worn by one of the marchers that said "Change." The foreign press were also verbally abused by people who were against the dissidents' protest, with members of the mob calling reporters "mercenaries" and "worms." Shouting "Viva la Revolucion" and "Viva Fidel," the regime's supporters first blocked the marchers from continuing and then started attacking them. Among the dissidents who were taken by force from the area were independent reporter Carlos Rios and regime opponent Darsi Ferrer, two of the people who had organized the march. In addition, according to Elizardo Sanchez, the head of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, independent journalist Julio Aliaga was arrested in El Vedado as he was trying to join the march. (*EFE*, 10/12/06)

**December 10:** About 30 women belonging to the Ladies in White, a group of wives and other relatives of imprisoned dissidents, marched peacefully down 5th Avenue in the Havana neighborhood of Miramar after attending Mass to call for the release of incarcerated opposition members. Their march concluded in front of the Santa Rita Church with shouts of "Long live human rights" and "Freedom for our political prisoners." The Ladies in White also issued a statement in honor of Human Rights Day. "In Cuba, lamentably, the totalitarian government has kept its people submerged in repression and fear for 48 years to prevent them from expressing their most basic ideals and aspirations," the statement said. It called for increased respect for human rights and the release of all political prisoners. Miriam Leiva, one of the Ladies in White, expressed dismay at the harassment of the dissidents in the march in Central Havana. "They should have the right to protest, just like anywhere else in the world," Leiva said. "It's pitiful that this happened on Human Rights Day." (*EFE, AP, 10/12/06*)

**December 12:** Exactly 20 years ago, the International School of Film and Television (EICTV) in San Antonio de los Baños, in Havana province, opened its doors for the first time. It was the brainchild of Fidel Castro and the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, affectionately known to his friends as Gabo. In the words of the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "The fact of the matter is that Fidel had been set on the idea for a while." EICTV's 20th-birthday celebrations kicked off in tandem with Havana's New Latin American International Film Festival. In its time, the school has seen more than 500 students graduate (among the most well-known is Benito Zambrano, the man behind the scripts of *Solas* and *Havana Blues*) and 3,000 students attend its masterclasses. It has spawned more than 1,000 short films and documentaries, some of which have won awards. Those who have imparted their pearls of wisdom at EICTV include Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Redford, Steven Soderbergh, Constantin Costa-Gavras, Emir Kusturica, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Ettore Scola. Stepping into the halls of EICTV, located on the estate of the old San Tranquilino hacienda, 35 kilometers from Havana, is enough to see that this is no normal school. With the emphasis on hands-on experience, students from different Latin American and Third World countries use every inch of space to prepare their "sets" and others prepare film crews to go out into San Antonio, which the school has just dubbed "the most filmed town in the world." (*El País, EFE, 12,15/12/06*)

**December 12:** Cuban independent journalist Guillermo Fariñas Hernández, honored with the "cyber-dissident" award by Reporters Without Borders, told the press he wants to dedicate the award to "all the political prisoners and, especially, to the independent journalists." "I'm very surprised because I didn't know I was among the nominees," he said by telephone from his home in the central Cuban city of Santa Clara. "This prize is for all the Cuban political prisoners and, especially, for the independent journalists who are prisoners at this time," the dissident said. Fariñas said that he also dedicated the award "to those who are taking risks and could go to prison at any time." Fariñas said that "I want to thank my teachers, Raul Rivero, Manuel Vazquez Portal and Jose Ramon Moreno, the founding director of Cubanacan Press, who are in exile, (and) other independent journalists who have helped me and those fighting for democracy all over the world." (*EFE, 12/12/06*)

**December 12:** Margarita Albacia Sánchez began the fifth day of her hunger strike in demand of the immediate release of her son, independent journalist Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia. Ms. Albacia began the hunger strike across from the Technical Department of Investigations (DTI)'s head office, on the corner of 100 St and Aldabó Ave., where Ahmed remains in custody. When the authorities had her removed, she moved the protest to her home, in the Old Havana municipality. (*Cubamet, 12/12/06*)

**December 13:** Cuban authorities released an independent journalist - a category not tolerated by the Communist regime - after grilling him for nine days, but the young reporter says his prosecution on charges of "spreading false news" continues. Ahmed Rodríguez, a 22-year-old journalist for the "Young People Without Censorship" agency, told the press his treatment while jailed between December 4 and December 12, when he was released at night, "was not bad." But he also said he was interrogated "day and night" in sessions of up to six hours straight. "I was arrested on the charge of the supposed crime of spreading false news, which I think is a smokescreen used to prosecute me," he said. The terms of his release oblige him not to leave Havana and to remain "locate-able" while his prosecution continues. If

convicted, he could be sentenced to up to four years in prison. "I will continue to struggle for freedom of expression and I will carry on with my journalistic work. But I will try to be more moderate," he said. Rodriguez had been writing about conditions in Cuban prisons. He suffered a three-day detention in September. (*EFE*, 13/12/06)

**December 13:** Pope Benedicto XVI appointed two new bishops in Cuba, reported the Holy See's press office. The new bishop for Guantánamo-Baracoa will be Father Wilfredo Pino Estévez while Monsignor Jorge Enrique Serpa Pérez will preside over the Pinar del Río bishopric. (*AP*, 13/12/06)

**December 13:** Cubans are increasingly talking in the past tense about Fidel Castro, the man who governed their lives for 47 years. Castro has not appeared in public since he underwent emergency intestinal surgery and temporarily handed over the presidency to his younger brother, Raul Castro, on July 31. Cubans have not been told what Castro, 80 and in power since 1959, has wrong with him or where he is. "On television they hardly mention him and when they do it's as if he was already dead," said Roberto, a self-employed Cuban who did not give his surname as he waited at a bus stop. "The official silence is preparing the country" for his death, said Walter, an artist. "But people love him and want to know what is wrong with him." There is no way to measure public opinion in the single-party socialist country, where the media is state-controlled, but many Cubans admit to anxiously believing Castro may be on his way out. (*Reuters*, 13/12/06)

**December 14:** A cell phone in Cuba is about as rare as an American executive without one. While the communist-led nation takes pride in its accomplishments in health and education, it ranks dead last in the Americas in cell phones per person and shares the second-worst standing in the world, according to a new UN study. Less than 2 percent of Cuba residents have cell phones, a ranking on par with countries like Nepal and Eritrea. Only Papua New Guinea has fewer -- with less than one cell phone for every 100 residents, according to the study by the UN Conference on Trade and Economic Development. The state-owned cell-phone company, known as Cubacel, won't allow Cubans living on the island to sign up for a phone on their own. Only foreigners or Cubans with residency abroad can open personal accounts. Some resident Cubans are issued cell phones through their employers -- but cannot open accounts on their own, according to Cubacel policy. Repeated attempts to reach top officials at Cubacel were unsuccessful. (*Sun Sentinel*, 14/12/06)

**December 14:** Three-quarters of Cubans would like more freedom to make choices about their own lives and around 40 percent disapprove of the rule of the Castro brothers, according to survey results. The poll was conducted in September by CID Gallup Central America among 1,000 people 15 and up in the island's two biggest cities, Havana and Santiago de Cuba. Only one in four of those surveyed expressed satisfaction with the level of personal freedom in the Communist-ruled country, though two-thirds of those with jobs said they were satisfied with their work. Overwhelming majorities said that Cubans enjoy universal access to education and health care, and most praised the government's record on fighting crime. Regarding the government itself, 40 percent said they disapproved of the leadership of Fidel and Raul Castro, while 47 percent voiced approval for the nearly 48-year-old regime. The Cubans selected on a random, scientific basis were often very eager to share their views, poll organizers said. They said people's attitude to the government had not changed markedly since the 1994 survey. Organizers said they avoided talking to neighborhood block captains responsible for enforcing revolutionary zeal, and had to stick to the island's two main cities because travel to rural areas was too difficult. (*EFE, Reuters*, 14/12/06)

**December 15:** Brazil, Argentina and Cuba were the big winners at the 28th edition of Havana's New Latin American Film Fest. Cuban feature films "El Benny" in the category of Opera Prima, and "La Edad de la Peseta" (The Silly Age) for photography and art direction, were awarded for their meticulous work in creating the ambience of the 50s. (*Prensa Latina*, 15/12/06)

**December 16:** Fidel Castro telephoned a meeting of provincial legislative leaders who reacted with jubilant applause to the call from their ailing leader, Cuba's Communist Party newspaper said. Castro's call to the assembly leaders

preparing for an upcoming national parliament session, and another to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez the same day, constituted the first news about the convalescing 80-year-old Cuban leader in 11 days. Vice President Carlos Lage and National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon were presiding over the meeting of provincial assembly presidents when Castro called, Granma newspaper reported. The full National Assembly will hold a regular session on December 22 to vote on the island's budget and other matters. (AP, 16/12/06)

**December 17:** Cuban officials told lawmakers from the United States House of Representatives visiting Havana that Fidel Castro did not have cancer or any terminal illness and that he would be making a public appearance shortly, according to Representative William Delahunt, one of the legislators. But Mr. Delahunt, Democrat of Massachusetts, said he concluded from the delegation's discussions with senior Cuban officials and diplomats that Mr. Castro would not return to running Cuba on a day-to-day basis. Mr. Delahunt said he understood that government administration had been definitively passed to Mr. Castro's brother, Raúl. "The Cubans were emphatic, and I believe them, that Fidel does not have cancer, and that the illness he does have is not terminal," Mr. Delahunt said in a telephone interview after he returned to Washington. He said Cuban officials assured the delegation that Mr. Castro was planning to re-emerge shortly. (*The New York Times*, 19/12/06)

**December 17:** Hundreds of thousands of Cubans made their annual pilgrimage to honor Saint Lazarus for their health and well-being, but praying this year for a special patient: Fidel Castro. Some pilgrims walked the 35 kilometers (22 miles) on their knees, carrying stones or flowers, to make good on promises to Lazarus, a Christian saint, at an abbey in Rincon the late pope John Paul II visited in 1998. Maria, 56, sat on a jute sack near one of the temple's columns praying before 17 candles. "I pray for everyone's health," she said, including Castro's: "He is number one. Saint Lazarus will raise him up, you will see," she told the press. Migdalia, 36, a school teacher said, "He is our idol, after God. He looks a little worse for wear because the operation was very demanding. "He is not immortal. We all have to die, but you have to have faith," she said. "He is our man, although I know that there are people who do not agree with him and want him to die, said Osmany, 38, who works in a restaurant in Pinar del Rio. (AFP, 17/12/06)

**December 17:** An outdoor rock concert took place in Havana to remember John Lennon on the 26th anniversary of his assassination. The event was sponsored by the Cuban chapter of the In Defense of Humanity Network and chaired by Minister of Culture Abel Prieto and Omar Gonzalez, who heads the Cuban Film Institute. (*Periódico 26*, 19/12/06)

**December 18:** Cuban First Vice President Raul Castro attended the unveiling of a mural dedicated to the 80th birthday of Fidel Castro and to the 50th anniversary of the landing of the Granma boat. At the request of Castro the mural was located at the Fine Arts National Museum, so that the people can admire it. Fifteen Cuban painters made the artistic work, headed by Alexis Leiva Machado, also known as Kcho. (*AIN*, 19/12/06)

**December 19:** Political prisoner Rafael Millet Leiva was released after a four-year incarceration without trial in "El Guayabo" prison, in southwestern Isle of Pines. Fabio Prieto Llorente, another political prisoner, told the Cuban Foundation for Human Rights (FCDH) that Millet Leiva was sent to prison without trial in 2003 under the alleged crime of public disobedience and distribution of "enemy" propaganda material. (*Cubanet*, 26/12/06)

**December 20:** Cuban First Vice President Raul Castro presided over the final session of the seventh FEU (University Student Federation) Congress, attended by almost 800 delegates and 300 guests. Cuban Communist Party leaders and top government officials, such as Political Bureau members Jose Ramon Machado Ventura, Esteban Lazo, and Carlos Lage, attended this most important meeting of Cuban university students. This session included the announcement of the new FEU board of directors, analysis of the central report and of seven working committee reports. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/12/06)

**December 20:** Cuba's interim leader Raul Castro, signaling a different style of government from his ailing brother Fidel Castro, called for greater debate on public policies in the communist-run country. "Sometimes people fear the

word disagree, but I say the more debate and the more disagreement you have, the better the decisions will be," he told students in Havana. Raul Castro said he was delegating more responsibilities and making fewer speeches than his famously verbose brother, and running the country of 11 million in a more collegial way. The Cuban vice president called upon university students to fearlessly engage in debate and analysis, and to put forth differences of opinions, noting that timely discussions at the right place and in the proper fashion always yield the best decisions. Raul Castro, who is also Minister of Defense, said that based on his personal experience this is the best kind of attitude to foster. He pointed out that building an armed forces is based on the principal of having one person in command; "however, this does not mean that there is no space for discussion. I always say discuss everything as in-depth as possible and then bring me the discrepancies. That's how our decisions take shape, and I am talking about major decisions," he said. (*Reuters, Granma, 21/12/06*)

**December 20:** Raul Castro, 75, said Cuba's one-party political system, or the "Revolution" as its backers call it, will continue with or without his brother. "Fidel is irreplaceable, unless we all replace him together," he said, repeating a statement he made in June that Fidel Castro's only possible heir is Cuba's Communist Party. "Fidel is irreplaceable and I don't intend to imitate him. Those who imitate fail," Raul said in the short speech to a conference of Cuba's Federation of University Students. Raul said Cuba was at an "historic" moment. "I say historic because, like it or not, we are finishing the fulfillment of our duty and we have to give way to new generations," he said. He added that the congress' discussions were based on Fidel Castro's November 17, 2005 address at the University of Havana in which he warned of the dangers facing the Revolution in today's unpredictable and complex world. (*Reuters, Granma, 21/12/06*)

**December 20:** Felipe Pérez Roque, foreign minister and member of the Central Committee, gave the closing remarks at the seventh FEU (University Student Federation) Congress. He said that the congress was different and better because, among other things, never before had the FEU had greater social responsibilities that it does now, and never before did it have such a close relationship with the people and the main tasks of the Revolution. As the political leader explained, the leadership of the Party, the State and the government have very closely followed proposals by the students throughout the nine months of discussion leading up to the congress, and based on proposals made by the FEU and the Young Communist League (UJC), it was decided to immediately respond to the most reiterated concerns. Thus, he said, stipends would be increased for full-time regular university students as well as those studying for their degrees in special and preschool education in the Higher Pedagogical Institutes. The 50% subsidy for travel on ASTRO buses would be extended, and two tickets per year would be assigned for students who are enrolled in colleges away from home, so that they could travel to and return from their home provinces. (*Granma Internacional, 20/12/06*)

**December 20:** Political prisoner Normando Hernández was in critical condition when he was admitted last December 13 into a ward of the Camagüey Provincial Hospital, reported his wife, Yaraí Reyes. In declarations to the Cuban Human Rights Foundation, Yaraí said that it had been several days since Hernández had been confined in a room of that hospital and that, in spite of being in critical condition, the prison guards had kept him without a bed and other necessary furniture for a week. (*EER, 21/12/06*)

**December 21:** A Spanish surgeon traveled to Havana to consider what steps should be taken to halt the deterioration of Fidel Castro's health, a Spanish newspaper reported. Dr. Jose Luis Garcia Sabrido, chief of surgery at the Spanish public hospital Gregorio Marañon de Madrid, departed for Cuba aboard an airplane the Cuban government chartered, *El Periodico de Catalunya* reported. The Cuban Embassy in Spain oversaw all details of the visit, the paper said. (*CNN, 24/12/06*)

**December 22:** According to an influential catholic publication of the island, the Cuban people live in constant doubt about its future, yet with the feeling that "something could come about and some things should be renovated" in the national landscape. In its Christmas-themed editorial message, "Between uncertainty and novelty," the latest issue of "Vitrail" magazine describes "the novelty" of the current period as a sort of psychological shift that amplifies the sense

of expectancy of many Cubans, pulling them out of their passivity. [[Entre la incertidumbre y la novedad](#)] (*El Nuevo Herald*, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** The Cuban parliament met to analyze the performance of the island's economy and social programs during 2006 and to approve the budget and priorities for 2007. A two-day meeting of ten permanent parliamentary committees was held prior to the ordinary session of Cuba's National Assembly. Cuba's acting leader, Raúl Castro, sat silently as the country's Parliament opened its year-end session in Havana, and all eyes were on the empty chair next to him from which his elder brother, Fidel, usually presides. The first meeting of the National Assembly since Fidel Castro went into surgery in late July was, according to news service reports, much like many other legislative sessions in Havana: bland. Before the meeting, speculation swirled about whether Fidel Castro might send a message to the Assembly. But there was no news forthcoming from the 80-year-old. At least one political dissident group, the Progressive Arch, has asked for Raul Castro to be made the permanent leader, a move that likely would require legislative approval. But the Assembly apparently did not address the issue. Officials continue to insist Fidel Castro is recovering. (*The New York Times, Sun Sentinel*, 23/12/06)

**December 23:** "I hope nothing perturbs the social coexistence; that the overall situation improves next year; and that well-being grows, so that we can live in tranquillity," Cardinal Archbishop Jaime Ortega of Havana said in his Christmas message. Ortega said that in the six Catholic celebrations held between September and December this year, "a unanimous clamour for peace" was heard from those attending. "How many things are Cubans referring to when they call for peace at this special moment in our national history!" he added. [[Mensaje de Navidad](#)] (*IPS*, 29/12/06)

**December 24:** As 2006 draws to an end, the 48th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 2007 is already being celebrated throughout the country. Cultural and recreational programs organized by the Young Communist League (UJC) and the local government in the capital took place at the esplanade of the Plaza of the Revolution and its surrounding areas. The festivities included a spectacular circus Fantasy 2006 show, sporting events including little league baseball, a carnival parade with conga drums and dancers, book sales and numerous food stands. The popular bands Bamboleo and El Clan de Pedrito Camacho accompanied by the Cuban TV dance troupe got people on their feet. Sunday afternoon included a fashion show, singer Haila Maria Monpie and the humor of Churrisco. Similar celebrations took place in the rest of Cuba's provinces. (*Periodico 26*, 26/12/06)

**December 25:** Evangelical pastor Joel Rojas of Holguin was believed in custody, on Christmas Day, after he was convicted of "human trafficking" by helping Cubans flee the country. He was reportedly sentenced to seven years in prison and it was unclear what legal options, if any, there were for the church leader after the December 13 verdict by The Seventh Penal Court of the Provincial Peoples Tribunal in Havana. Another Cuban evangelical pastor, Carlos Lamelas, was acquitted on the "human trafficking" charge, but convicted on previously unannounced charges of falsification of documents. (*BosNewsLife*, 25/12/06)

**December 26:** Fidel Castro "absolutely" does not have cancer but is recovering from complications after surgery to treat a "benign illness," a Spanish surgeon who examined the Cuban leader said in the first independent medical opinion of Castro's health since he gave up power almost five months ago. Dr. José Luis García Sabrido, chief surgeon at Madrid's Gregorio Marañón General Hospital, flew to Havana on a flight chartered by the Cuban government. In a press conference in Madrid, García Sabrido offered few medical details about what is ailing the controversial Cuban leader but insisted Castro is not dying of cancer. "Within [the rules] of confidentiality, what I can say is that President Castro doesn't suffer from a malignant illness," García Sabrido said at the televised news conference when asked whether Castro's illness was curable. "It's a benign illness for which he has had a series of complications." Asked if he had cancer, García Sabrido said, "From what I know, I absolutely deny it." García Sabrido said Castro asks every day to return to work, but doctors in Havana have demanded prudence. García Sabrido did not discount the possibility that Castro could return to office if his recovery is "absolute." "I think that in these moments his decision to delegate power

implies that he must now be dedicated to his recovery," the Associated Press reported. ``What happens in the future will be an absolutely personal matter." (*The Miami Herald*, 27/12/06)

**December 26:** Cubans concerned about the health of ailing Fidel Castro -- for most the only leader they have known -- were kept in the dark by official Cuban media, as a Spanish doctor who examined him refuted reports he was dying. Tightly controlled state media published no news of the Spanish surgeon's health update on the ailing leader. In Cuba, the rumors about the doctor's report were flying. "Already at my house we know it and people in the neighborhood told my mother, that for sure it will be seen by antenna (illegal satellite television)," a youth in a crowded sector of Havana told the press. A 20-year-old University of Havana student said anonymously: "We would like more specific information, even if (Fidel Castro) does not appear in public; but we would like some message from the Comandante, an explanation." Castro's health condition has been a mystery since Cuban authorities announced in late July that the nation's long-serving leader suffered intestinal bleeding, underwent surgery and ceded power to his younger brother, Defense Minister Raul Castro. Absent information, many Cubans have come to believe that Castro had undergone two or perhaps three surgeries and was suffering from cancer or another terminal illness. (*AFP, Chicago Tribune*, 27/12/06)

**December 26:** Despite pleas from fellow persecuted Christians not to do so, Cuban prisoner of conscience and journalist Juan Carlos Herrera Acosta sewed his mouth shut and was believed to continue his action, dissidents said. Herrera Acosta, 40, sewed his mouth, at the maximum security Prison of Kilo 8, in Camaguey, Cuba's largest province, said Juan Carlos Gonzalez Leiva, a blind Christian lawyer and president of the Cuban Foundation for Human Rights (FCDH). He, "sewed his mouth shut to protest the hostile treatment he is suffering at the hands of State Security and Military officers at this penitentiary," said Gonzalez Leiva. "The guards deprive this prisoner of conscience his right to telephone calls and his end of the year family visit is suspended. Herrera Acosta is under continuous psychological persecution, since he is tormented by dangerous common prisoners," he said in remarks released by an underground news agency. Oswaldo Paya Sardinias, who in 2002 received the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, said he had urged Herrera Acosta not to sew his mouth. In late October, "I asked him not to do it- I am not ashamed to say that I begged it of him- telling him that it is us who still have the opportunity to speak out," he said. At the same time Paya urged Christians and others that "before daring to judge him (...) ask themselves: 'What have I done in the face of this horror that so many human beings live through day to day in Cuban jails?'" (*BosNewsLife*, 30/12/06)

**December 27:** Members of Cuba's ever-beleaguered but generally optimistic pro-democracy movement say they are perceiving a rise in street-level consciousness of the need for change and expect 2007 to be a momentous year. Manuel Cuesta Morua, leader of the Social Democratic Progressive Arc, told the press that the phrase that best sums up the situation is "Cuba cannot stand more of the same." "Regardless of whether people are more critical of the regime or not, whether they have their thoughts aligned more coherently or not, running through the whole society is the sensation that Cuba cannot stand more of the same," he said. Hector Palacios, a former political prisoner released early this month after more than three years behind bars, said Cubans are more preoccupied with getting by than with Fidel's health. "The comandante's health is not a big concern of the people. They have so many things to resolve that they have no time to be thinking about Fidel's health, and they are aware of the need for change," he said. The coming year "will be crucial, a year of great shifts." He said movement toward some sort of climax is contributed to by economic woes, including "rampant inflation" spurred by hikes in utility rates and public transportation. For Elizardo Sanchez, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, "political repression has been a constant this year like in all previous years." He saw slight ups and downs in the level of application, but said he considered a pro-government mob's roughing-up of peacefully protesting dissidents on December 10 "a demonstration of muscle flexing" by Raul Castro. "What the average citizen on the street wants is for this page (regarding Fidel) to turn, and for better times to come," he said. On balance, (2006) was not negative," said Oscar Espinosa Chepe, another former political prisoner. "There have been advances in the public's consciousness of the need for change. That is something I perceive in the street." (*EFE*, 27/12/06)

**December 27:** Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega celebrated with a well-attended choral concert in Havana's cathedral his silver anniversary as archbishop of Havana, issuing best wishes for 2007 but refraining from politically tinged comment on the shift of power on the Communist island. Hundreds gathered in the church for the concert, including Papal Nuncio Luigi Bonazzi and other clergymen. "We must make present in our lives every day the great mystery of Christmas," said Ortega, who was consecrated archbishop of Havana 25 years ago. Ortega, 70, called on the faithful to pray "for peace" and that 2007 "bring improvement in the overall situation and increased well-being" in the nation of some 11 million inhabitants. In what may have been an oblique allusion to the illness of Fidel Castro and his "temporary" substitution in power by his brother Raul, the cardinal called on Cubans to resist "the temptation of anxiety over the future," and reflected that violence can be used and even justified with "apparently very noble motives." The Roman Catholic Church in Cuba, which has played a role under the 48-year-old regime drastically reduced from the one it had in pre-revolutionary Cuba, expressed last summer, after Fidel's intestinal surgery was announced, its "concern" about the situation. Ortega, the top Catholic authority in Cuba, has scheduled a "Mass for Peace" in the same cathedral for New Year's day. (*EFE, IPS, 27/12/06*)

**December 27:** Cuban writer Leonardo Acosta was awarded with the country's 2006 National Literature Prize, local media reported. He won the award for the essay "Alien on Solid Ground: Intertextuality and Happy Coincidences", which also won the Cuban Language Academy's annual prize. Acosta's works include 1967's "Human Landscape", 1974's "Jose Marti, Pre-Colombian America and the Spanish Conquest", "Music and Epics in the novel Alejo Carpentier", "Music and Decolonization", 1983's "From the Drum to the Synth", 1984's "The Baroque of the Indies" and "The Political Novel in the Mass Media". (*Xinhua, 28/12/06*)

**December 28:** Interim Cuban President Raul Castro delivered a message attributed to his ailing brother Fidel congratulating all who made the September summit in Havana of the Non-Aligned Nations a success, state news reported. During a meeting at the foreign ministry, Fidel's brother Raul "transmitted congratulations from the commander in chief to all those who contributed to the success" of the September 11-16 summit in Havana, the newscast reported. The message "underlined the prestige that Cuba has reached in the world and urged (Cubans) to continue working with the same dedication" to guarantee Cuba's successful leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, which lasts through 2009. The newscast did not quote directly from the message. (*AFP, 28/12/06*)

**December 29:** Fernando Martinez Heredia was awarded the 2006 National Sciences Award in recognition of "his important and prolific work in a wide spectrum of the social sciences with significant international implications, enriching Marxist thought" on a continental scale. The jury was chaired by jurist Julio Fernandez Bulte and included philologist Ana Ciro, philosopher Enrique Ubita and historians Sergio Guerra and Jorge Renato Ibarra. Among the most outstanding of Martinez' works are: "Desafios del socialismo cubano" (Challenges of Cuban socialism) (1988); "El Che y el socialismo" (Che and socialism) (1989), "El mes más crudo de la siembra" (The rawest month of the harvest) (1990), "Repensar el socialismo" (Rethinking socialism) (2001); and "El corrimiento hacia el rojo" (Running towards red) (2001). (*Granma, 29/12/06*)

**December 30:** A statement attributed to Fidel Castro on the eve of the revolution's 48th anniversary assured Cubans that the ailing leader could still recover from his prolonged illness. The message was read by a newscaster on state television and radio. Castro traditionally sends a message to Cuban citizens every New Year's Eve to mark the anniversary of the January 1, 1959, revolution that brought him to power. "I am grateful to you for your affection and support," read the message. "Regarding my recovery, I have always warned that it could be a prolonged process, but it is far from being a lost battle. "I collaborate as a disciplined patient, attended by the...team of our doctors." Castro purportedly said he was still "in the loop" when it came to matters of state. "I have had exchanges with our closest comrades always when cooperation has been necessary on vitally important issues." [[Mensaje de Fidel Castro](#)] (*AP, 31/12/06*)

## **Economy**

**December 1:** Haiti and Cuba signed a Cooperation Program for 2006-2007 to serve as a basis to the Joint Commission meeting of both countries. Haitian president Rene Preval and Esteban Lazo, Vice President of Cuban Council of State, penned the documents of the meeting that includes cooperation in 14 sectors and the continuation of Cuban medical aid. The document signed covers the fields of agriculture, fisheries, sports, communications, food production, the sugar industry, culture, steel and mechanic industry, and energy. (*Prensa Latina*, 1/12/06)

**December 1:** Cuba has launched full-tilt into the vaccine industry to compete on the international market with its products, some of which are unique. Cuban scientists are devoting themselves to investigating therapeutic products against cancer, malaria and cholera, diseases that ravage the people of poor nations. However, the first destination of every new pharmaceutical is the Cuban market and the national hospital network. Medical sources indicated that eight of the 13 vaccines included in the national immunization program are produced locally. "Half of our research projects deal with vaccines, which are financially unattractive to the big pharmaceutical companies," Carlos Borroto, deputy director of the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Research Center (CIGB), told the press. The "West Havana Scientific Pole" is made up of the CIGB, the Finlay Institute for Serum and Vaccines, the Center of Molecular Immunology, the National Center for Scientific Research and the National Biopreparations Center. The Pole institutions cooperate among them, and each project usually involves more than one unit. (*IPS*, 1/12/06)

**December 6:** The Minsk Automobile Factory (MAZ) plans to supply 50 MAZ-107 low-floor buses and 50 MAZ-105 larger-size buses to Cuba. The first batch of the urban coaches is expected to arrive at the island in December and all 100 units will be supplied to Havana by next June, the company's press office told the local press. This past October, the Belarusian enterprise delivered a shipment of six crane trucks, two dump trucks and spare parts to Cuba. (*BelaPan*, 6/12/06)

**December 8:** Cuba's system of reservoirs began at their highest levels in December, since 1993, putting the country in favorable conditions to deal with the dry season that extends until May. Margarita Fontova, a specialist at the National Water Resources Institute, told the press that at the end of November the country's 235 reservoirs were filled to an average of 80 percent capacity. For the provinces of Las Tunas, Holguin, Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo —hard hit by draught in recent years— the total stored water in their reservoirs is at the highest level in the last thirteen years. (*Granma*, 8/12/06)

**December 11:** The first legislation passed by the government of Raúl Castro attempts to tackle workplace absenteeism and increase productivity in state-owned companies through a rigorous regulation of workplace schedules. The Ministry of Labour resolution, published in the weekly government-run newspaper "Trabajadores", introduces amendments in the existing legal framework established by the Labour Code and the body of regulations approved at the beginning of the so-called "Special Period," declared in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The application of the new legislation and of another resolution, aimed at fighting "workplace indiscipline," has been postponed for April 1. Among other things, the resolution establishes that absences from work without valid reason and the abandonment of post during the workday without authorization, as well as any infractions of start/end times, will not be counted as time worked. Furthermore, the resolution establishes that time away from work will not be remunerated even in cases where workers have been authorized to miss work for personal business on account of conflicting schedules. (*EFE*, 12/12/06)

**December 11:** Two nickel mines in the Moa region of eastern Cuba were closed due to the torrential rains and floods of the last few days. According to the state-run radio station Radio Progreso, all operations have stopped at the Moa open pits of the 'Comandante Pedro Soto Alba' y 'Commander Ernesto Che Guevara' nickel mining companies. (*Reuters*, 12/12/06)

**December 16:** Iran's ambassador to Cuba discussed expansion of economic and trade ties with Cuban deputy foreign trade minister. According to Iranian Embassy in Havana, Iran's Ambassador to Cuba Ahmad Edrisyan in a meeting with Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Pedro Luis Padroon stressed the necessity of strengthening and expanding economic cooperation in different fields. "Iranian companies are ready to attend in Cuba and participate in executing industrial plans there", the Iranian Ambassador said. The Cuban official, for his part, referred to the friendly relations between the two countries in recent years and called for enhancing the level of cooperation. He pointed out the economic and commercial ties between Iran and Cuba should be promoted further. (*IRNA*, 16/12/06)

**December 18:** Cuba's Central Bank issued new bank notes with enhanced security features to prevent growing counterfeiting of convertible pesos (CUC). The new bills add the denomination to the watermark and keep the revolutionary slogan "Homeland or Death, We Shall Overcome" in the security thread. "There are lots of false bills in circulation, especially 50 and 100 CUCs. That's why they are changing them," said a Havana bank teller. The Central Bank gave no details on counterfeiting, but a business source said the false bank notes were printed abroad, possibly in the exile community in Miami. "There has been a lot of counterfeiting. They are so easy to counterfeit that you could almost do it on a good copier," said a resident foreign businessman. Pegged at par with the dollar for a decade, the CUC was revalued in April 2005 to \$1.08. The local script is worthless outside Cuba. (*Reuters*, 18/12/06)

**December 18:** Cuba expects to conclude construction and renovation of 110,000 homes before year's end, a National Assembly committee reported. The session, presided over by Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage and National Peoples Power Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, heard a detailed report on the issue from Permanent Productive Activity Committee Chairman Leonardo Martinez. Martinez stated that as of November, 102,353 houses had been constructed and the plan is to conclude the year with 110,000. The important number of 101,000 had the participation of the population in construction labor. According to official figures, housing deficit is of 600,00. (*Prensa Latina, EFE*, 18/12/06)

**December 19:** The Cuban sugar harvest began with the first of 51 mills grinding toward a hoped-for comeback to take advantage of higher world prices and increased ethanol demand, local media said. Authorities have said there is at least 25 percent more cane than the previous harvest that produced an estimated 1.2 million tonnes of sugar. "The Paquito Rosales mill in eastern Santiago de Cuba began milling," state-run television said, announcing the start of the harvest. "Local specialists announced there was 37.7 percent more cane in the province and raw sugar output would increase 51.2 percent" over the previous harvest's 90,000 tonnes, Santiago's Sierra Maestra weekly said in its online edition. Sugar Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro said in October the painful process of downsizing the industry was over. (*Reuters*, 20/12/06)

**December 22:** A syndicate of Russian banks and Cuba's Aviaimport S.A. signed a \$203.4 million credit agreement, Russia's state-controlled foreign trade bank Vneshtorgbank said. The credit is for 12 years and will be used to buy Russian Il-96-300 and Tu-204 passenger planes, said VTB, which is the credit organizer. Cuba will provide sovereign guarantees as loan security, while the aircrafts will be used as collateral. The bank said it is the largest deal on the export of Russian airplanes in modern Russian history, and the second-largest long-term project under the state program of financial support for industrial exports. (*RIA Novosti*, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** Cuban finance officials acknowledged in an unusually critical year-end report that the country's economy is still suffering the effects of the severe crisis of the 1990s but nevertheless grew 12.5 percent in 2006. Cuban Economics Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez defended the method used to calculate the island's gross domestic product growth figure, which includes the free health, education and other social services the communist country provides its citizens. "Cuba doesn't falsify its statistics, nor does it manipulate them with electoral ends," Rodriguez told a year-end session of the National Assembly, or parliament. Cuba's methodology makes the country's economic growth figures difficult to compare with those of other countries, prompting the United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to leave the island's numbers out of its report last year. This year, the

UN commission, known as ECLAC, appeared to have accepted the 12.5 percent figure, but said it was still studying some of the economic data. ECLAC reported earlier this month that Cuba's 12.5 percent growth figure was the highest in the region, which saw an average of 5.3 percent growth for 2006. On the streets of Havana's colonial section, many residents were little impressed with announcements the economy sprinted past last year's 11.8 percent growth and 5.4 percent in 2004. Nor were they wowed by an announcement to the Assembly that the government had pared the budget deficit to 3 percent of economic output. Instead, they wanted to see more tangible results in their daily lives: salaries that could stretch to buy chicken and beef, plus the mobilization of more buses, so that they needn't wait hours at bus stops. Many recalled better times before the demise of the Soviet bloc crippled Cuba's economy. [[Informe del ministro de Economía y Planificación](#)] (AP, *Sun Sentinel*, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** Cuba's Minister of Finances, Jose Luis Rodriguez told lawmakers that the country had still not fully recovered from the so-called "special period" of the 1990s, when Cuba imposed austerity measures to survive a crushing economic crisis caused by the Soviet Union's collapse. Rodriguez also said that much still needs to be done to increase economic efficiency. Worker productivity, for instance, has not kept up with salary increases, he said. Rodriguez said authorities also worry about the island's dependence on food imports, which he said have grown 35 percent in the last two years. Deficiencies in urban transportation and high petroleum costs are also worrisome, he added. (AP, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** Cuba will dedicate 22.6 percent of its Gross Domestic Product in 2007 to guarantee the development of social programs including education and public health for all citizens. Cuba's Finance and Prices Minister Georgina Barreiro presented the country's proposed 2007 budget to the Cuban Parliament meeting at Havana's Convention Center. Barreiro said that financial resources will be increased for health care, education, culture, and social assistance, the payment of pensions, as well as the country's defense and homeland security. The proposed budget also prioritizes public transportation, energy and water resources, the minister announced. Important resources will be used to subsidize the population's basic food and personal hygiene supplies, for which the country will invest a billion US dollars, said the Cuban government official. Barreiro also noted the need to include a sizeable emergency fund to face potential natural disasters during the year. (ACN, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** In response to public and governmental discontent with transportation, Cuban Transport Minister Jorge Luis Sierra announced a million dollar investment in the sector for 2007. At the urging of First Vice President Raul Castro, who pointed out inefficiencies on transportation ranks with housing and food for citizens, Sierra explained to National Assembly deputies current difficulties in freight and public transportation. Immediate priorities include reorganization and strengthening of his ministry's role for a more efficient use of investments, and better discipline and energy saving, the minister said. In 2007 the plan is to buy 200 buses from China, 50 used Mercedes Benz, and 344 school buses, as well as trucks for moving both human and cargo in the mountains while the railroads undergo major renovation to the tune of 230 million dollars. Sierra was severe in his criticisms of public transport, especially of workers in the sector, which has a high turnover; mentioning lack of drivers, incompetence, petty theft and illegal sale of tickets, particularly in the capital. He also noted lack of spare parts and deterioration of repair shops as well as lack of organization and financing for maintenance. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/12/06)

**December 23:** Acting president Raul Castro complained to legislators about inefficiencies in the island's economy, telling them in comments made public by the Communist party newspaper Granma that there is no excuse for the transportation and food production problems that anger many Cubans. "In this Revolution we are tired of excuses," he said, giving the strongest sense yet of the frank and demanding leadership style he will likely adopt if his ailing older brother Fidel Castro does not return as president. "The Revolution cannot lie," he said in the comments published by Granma. "This isn't saying that there have been comrades who have lied, but the imprecision, inexact data, consciously or unconsciously masked, can no longer continue." Castro spoke the day before during a year-end meeting of the National Assembly. During the parliamentary session, he criticized the "bureaucratic red tape" preventing the government from completing payments to the individual farmers and cooperatives producing 65 percent of the island's

vegetables. In excerpts of his comments aired on state television, Castro also criticized efforts to improve Cuba's dilapidated public transportation, saying it is "practically on the point of collapse." He did not address the two-hour session that international journalists were allowed to attend in the morning. Excerpts of his comments aired later on state television showed him looking gruff and almost angry as spoke in a strong, controlled tone about problems affecting average Cubans. (*Globe and Mail, AP, 24/12/06*)

**December 25:** Carlos Lage Davila, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers, toured water supply infrastructure in the central province of Villa Clara. Lage said that government's efforts are directed not to building more reservoirs or other water sources but to promote savings and improved water quality. The official noted that leaks in the water distribution system are a problem throughout the country with aqueducts being 50 to 100 years old and in dire need of repair. (*Granma, 26/12/06*)

**December 25:** After visiting a new housing project in Villa Clara, Carlos Lage Davila, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers spoke about the population's discontent with the progress in the program to maintain and restore houses. He said that in 2006 a total of \$300 million USD went for maintenance and home building but that an even greater effort is still needed. (*Granma, 26/12/06*)

**December 26:** The final stage of installing a large area of wind generators on the Isla de la Juventud in southwestern Cuba is near completion. "The alternative energy source is part of the island's Energy Revolution," explained Yadira Garcia Vera, minister of Basic Industry, during a tour of the project site. Garcia's ministry is charged with electricity generation for the island. Garcia spoke with workers in charge of erecting the 55-meter-high generators built with French technology. Unlike earlier models, these generators can be dismantled in case of an approaching hurricane. The Isla de la Juventud was selected for the project because of its continuous winds. The system hopes to generate 1,650 KW of electricity. (*Granma, 26/12/06*)

**December 26:** Energy production from natural gas originating in wells on the northwest coast of Cuba will reach 400 megawatts of power starting the first semester of 2007. The increased output is the result of investments by the ENER GAS Company, said Engineer Alberto Villalonga, the vice general manager of the company. At the facilities, like those in nearby Varadero, gas from oil wells is extracted, cleaned and processed for use in the generation of electricity that is supplied to the nation's power grid and as raw material for gas manufacturing plants in Havana. ENER GAS is the first company on the island whose equipment was designed especially for this type of high efficiency output, cleaning 90 percent of the gas that it receives. (*Periódico 26, 26/12/06*)

**December 26:** Nickel has been Cuba's top traditional export product since 2000, and in 2005 it was once again the country's top source of foreign exchange, along with services and the biotechnology sector. However, Canadian firm Sherritt International announced an estimated shortfall of 3,000 tons at an ore-processing plant it operates in partnership with Cuba. This means that the national production target of 76,700 tons for this year, a modest increase over production in 2005, is unlikely to be met. The Cuban-Canadian joint venture Moa-Níquel (formerly Pedro Soto Alba) S.A. said in its report for the first quarter of 2006 that it would have to readjust its planned output target of 33,000 tons for 2006 downward to 30,000 tons, because of bottlenecks in the production process, apparently in the first quarter. "So far, strong prices have compensated for the decline in production," a Cuban researcher who wished to remain anonymous told the press. Total Cuban nickel production in 2005 amounted to 75,900 tons, similar to output for 2004, and a very modest increment of 1.1 percent was planned for 2006. Given the upward trend in international prices, which crossed the \$20,000-a-ton mark in 2000, the Cuban government designed an ambitious plan for a gradual increase in production. Last year, Cuba reached an agreement with Sherritt International for expanding production at the Moa-Níquel plant, and incorporating the latest technology at a Canadian cobalt-nickel refinery, financed with more than \$500 million contributed equally by both partners. The expansion of the Moa-Níquel plant was intended to increase output by 16,000 tons year, or about 50 percent, by the end of 2008. But Sherritt itself has now announced that

the plans to increase Moa-Níquel's capacity will have to be reviewed, and are now forecasting staged production increases of 4,000 tons for 2008, 9,000 tons in 2009, and a further 3,000 tons by 2011. (*IPS*, 26/12/06)

**December 26:** The ferronickel factory, also to be located in Moa, is expected to produce 68,000 tons a year of iron-nickel alloy. Conceived as a joint venture, Cuba will own 51 percent of the shares and the Chinese Minmetals group the remaining 49 percent. There are plans for China to invest in a fifth processing plant, to be built close to the ore reserves at San Felipe in the eastern province of Camagüey, which would increase Cuban nickel production to 120,000 tons a year (up from its current 76,000 tons) in the future. China is to invest more than \$1 billion in the Cuban-Chinese San Felipe project, according to the agreements signed by Fidel Castro and President Hu in Havana. Without going into details, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez said in Caracas on December 14 that Venezuela and Cuba are planning to manufacture stainless steel with Cuban nickel and Venezuelan iron. It is estimated that China absorbs half of Cuba's total nickel output, and would be capable of buying up the other 50 percent, according to experts, because China is the world's top producer of steel, and its industry is still expanding. Experts concur that until the day oil starts gushing from the underwater reserves in the Cuban zone of the Gulf of Mexico -- China is also involved in oil exploration there -- nickel is important as collateral for the loans Beijing has given Havana in recent years. China is now Cuba's second-largest trading partner, after Venezuela. Trade between Cuba and China was worth more than \$1 billion in 2006, and the Asian giant is providing the Caribbean country with large amounts of soft credit. According to the US Geological Survey, world nickel production stood at 1.5 million tons in 2005. Russia, the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway and Cuba are the world's foremost producers of nickel, a non-ferrous metal used in a large number of industrial processes. (*IPS*, 26/12/06)

**December 27:** On November 10, 2006, as part of the disclosure pertaining to its financial results for the period ended September 30, 2006, Pebercan Inc. (the "Company") indicated that Cubapetroleo S.A. (Cupet) was almost 2 months late in its payments owed to Peberco Ltd., a subsidiary of the Company, pursuant to the procedure set out in the production-sharing and sales agreements. The Company, through its subsidiary, sells all its oil production to Cupet. Pursuant to such agreements, as at December 31, 2006, there will be an amount totaling approximately US\$69 million owing in relation to the development and operation of Block 7, 55% or US\$37 million of which is to be paid to Peberco and the balance to its partner, Sherritt International (Cuba) Oil and Gas Limited. This amount varies monthly and is based on the amount of contractual payments outstanding, namely those remaining unpaid 90 days after their respective billing date. The Company has intensified the negotiations with the Cuban authorities to find solutions to this matter. In addition, pursuant to the production-sharing agreement, the Company must confirm the amount it will undertake to invest, in 2007, to develop the oil assets. The Company's proportionate share of the expected cost of such investment totals approximately \$65 million, which corresponds to its interest in Block 7's operations. The Company is concurrently pursuing all the abovementioned negotiations with Cupet and hopes to reach an agreement on the amount required to be invested during 2007 as capital expenditure during the third week of January. (*Rigzone.Com, Globe and Mail, Toronto Star*, 27/12/06)

**December 28:** Cuba is interested in joint projects with Belarus that would involve other Latin American countries, Cuban Ambassador Omar Medina Quintero said at a news conference held in Minsk. According to the Ambassador, such trilateral cooperation could be established with the participation of Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Nicaragua. "There is quite a number of areas for the development of cooperation between our states," Mr. Quintero said. The ambassador noted that Belarus and Cuba would continue developing bilateral cooperation in education, healthcare and transportation. Institutions of higher learning have already submitted their specific cooperation proposals, he said. A Belarusian-Cuban agreement on cooperation in the educational sphere would provide for the expansion of ties between educational institutions, and an exchange of teachers, postgraduates and students, Mr. Quintero added. (*BelaPan*, 29/12/06)

**December 28:** The flow of tourists from the Ukraine into Cuba doubled up during 2006 compared to 2005, Cuba's ambassador in Kiev said. In a meeting with representatives of more than 125 Ukrainian tour operators, ambassador

Julio Garmendia said all the companies worked very close with the Cuban consulate. The Cuban mission presented the four most successful companies in sending travelers to the island with certificates of recognition for their work. (*AIN*, 28/12/06)

**December 29:** Cuban First Vice President Raul Castro presided over the annual meeting of the Agricultural Ministry, where officials presented a report on the most important outcomes in urban agriculture in the year 2006. Castro claimed for a higher efficiency in this sector, and said "we cannot be satisfied with results in agriculture until vegetables are abundant throughout all the provinces with prices available to every Cuban". The officials in the sector highlighted the work and accomplishments in the provinces of Pinar del Rio, Havana, Cienfuegos, Matanzas and Granma – while communicating to urban agricultural representatives from the provinces Sancti Spiritus, Las Tunas and Guantanamo the need to achieve better results. Castro was critical of the performance of the Sugar Ministry, which should have finished planting 1, 295 hectares of vegetables on lands dedicated to sugar cane, as part of the restructure of this industry. Only 46% of this task was accomplished. (*AIN, AFP*, 29/12/06)

### **Exile Community**

**December 2:** Fidel Castro was a no-show at a major military parade that doubled as his 80th birthday celebration, raising questions about whether the ailing leader will ever return to power as his public absence begins taking on a tone of permanence. In Miami, Alfredo Mesa, executive director of the anti-Castro Cuban-American National Foundation, said the leader's failure to appear was unimportant. "For us, Fidel Castro is part of the past," Mesa said. "The pressure is on those who did appear, for them to let Cubans in Cuba decide for themselves what kind of future they want." (*AP*, 2/12/06)

**December 4:** An umbrella group of influential Cuban exile organizations joined the growing chorus of Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits calling for the United States to ease restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba. About two dozen exile organizations, speaking in unison under the umbrella group *Consenso Cubano*, or Cuban Consensus, released a report calling for the Bush administration to ease travel restrictions. The groups say US policies that restrict Cubans from visiting family members and that limit remittances and other humanitarian aid "violate fundamental rights of Cubans, damage the Cuban family, and constitute ethical contradictions." The announcement underscores a growing rift between hard-line exile leaders who want to preserve the sanctions, and more moderate Cuban Americans in Miami and dissidents in Cuba who feel that increasing interaction can help promote a peaceful transition to democracy. [[Propuesta de agenda humanitaria](#)] (*The Miami Herald*, 4/12/06)

**December 4:** The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) proposed a set of measures whereby Miami-based Cubans would be empowered to act as "agents of change" in the island. The set, part of a CANF research paper entitled "Cuba in Transition: 2006," includes a call upon the Cuban government to let its people decide its own destiny through free elections, as well as early economic assistance packages to avoid waiting until the "day after." "It seems to us that it is completely irrational to think that it is possible to carry out a peaceful and successful transition without being prepared for it, or without preparing the Cuban people (...) The moment to act is now, not later," said Francisco "Pepe" Hernández, a member of the CANF executive board. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 4/12/06)

**December 5:** Huber Matos, an ex-Commander of the Cuban Revolution exiled in Miami, urged the Armed Forces of his country to forge an alliance with the people to restore a democratic process in the Caribbean island. In a message addressed to the military and to Ministry of the Interior officials, Matos said that "there exist the reasons, the heart and the will to play a leading role, hand in hand with the people, in the birth of the New Republic." (*EFE*, 5/12/06)

**December 8:** The residents of a town near Havana have been honoured by a European human rights groups for defending an opposition activist when Cuba's secret police went to his home to take him away, a Cuban exile organization announced. The Miami-based Cuban Democratic Directorate said the citizens of the municipality of Madruga received the Pedro Luis Boitel Freedom Prize. The directorate said the prize was awarded "to the town of

Madruga because on the 2nd of November hundreds of people took to the streets when the political police showed up at the home of human rights activist Eddy Hernandez Arencibia." Hungarian Ambassador to the United States Andras Simonyi presented the prize in a ceremony at the offices of the directorate and Jose Manuel Lopez Montero, a Madruga resident who recently arrived in Miami, accepted the award on behalf of the town. The Pedro Luis Boitel Freedom Award was created by Romanian physicist Gabriel Andreescu in 2001, with the support of eight Central and Eastern European human rights groups, to honor dissidents in Cuba. It takes its name from Pedro Luis Boitel, a Cuban political prisoner who died while on a hunger strike in 1972. (*EFE*, 8/12/06)

**December 10:** Mario Llerena, a Cuban intellectual who was an early representative of Fidel Castro in the United States but who broke with him before he took power because of Mr. Castro's shift toward Communism, died in Miami. He was 93. Mr. Llerena met Mr. Castro in Mexico in the mid-1950s as Mr. Castro was preparing for an invasion of Cuba to overthrow the military dictator Fulgencio Batista. At Mr. Castro's request, Mr. Llerena put into writing the democratic ideals that underpinned the Castro movement in the early days of the uprising. The document, "Nuestra Razón" ("Our Reason"), was published in Mexico. After splitting with Mr. Castro, Mr. Llerena became an important figure among Cuban exiles. In 1978 he published "The Unsuspected Revolution: The Birth and Rise of Castroism," in which he accused Mr. Castro of deceiving many followers when he adopted Communism. He also published several collections of his journalistic essays about the revolution. (*The New York Times*, 12/12/06)

**December 12:** Former Cuban political prisoner Armando Valladares wrote his own book about life in Cuba as a counterpoint to two controversial children's books in school libraries. Children loading guns, hospitals full of cockroaches and elderly people who live mired in their own filth. This is the real Cuba, according to a new children's book written by Valladares. The prominent poet and author who spent 22 years as one of Fidel Castro's political prisoners was in Miami to introduce his new book, "Los Niños de Cuba". (*The Miami Herald*, 13/12/06)

**December 22:** A small but growing number of Cubans in South Florida are getting around the US embargo that limits what can be sent to the communist island by sending their Christmas gifts through foreign Internet sites. At least one Canadian Web site, <http://www.Cubamaxstore.com>, allows people to ship items such as beef, jams and even deodorant to relatives in Cuba. While the gifts aren't the i-Pods and Sony Play Stations that Americans crave, they are much appreciated by Cubans who earn an average of \$10 to \$15 a month and often struggle to put enough food on the table. The trend exemplifies the creative ways Cuban families are seeking to stay connected, despite the restrictions on travel and exports imposed by the governments on both sides of the Florida Straits, said Cuban-American activist Ramon Saul Sanchez. "Fortunately, people try to keep in touch with their families. Unfortunately, they have to go through all these measures," he said. Antonio Conte, who left Cuba in the early 1990s and edits an online magazine of articles written by Cuban dissidents, said it was easier than going through one of the few authorized parcel services and safer than returning to the island. "It's better to send food there instead of money. It's not so expensive, and you can help a bit." Conte said. "In Cuba you have your ration card, and you get chicken only once in a while. Only the children and the sick get beef." (*Globe & Mail*, 23/12/06)

**December 25:** Violeta Cano, a pianist and composer who struck a chord with Miami's Cuban exile community, died of organ failure at South Miami's Larkin Hospital. She was 84. "Most of her work was always by ear," said her daughter, Violet Moreno-Manrique. "She was very talented, a natural." Cano starred in a radio show on WFAB La Fabulosa, which was the only Spanish-language station in Miami during the 1960s. Her handprint is in Hialeah's Monument Park as part of a hall of fame formed to honor Cuban culture and artists of Cuban descent. Cano belonged to the Sociedad de Autores y Compositores Cubanos en el Exilio (SACCE), an association of exiled Cuban artists who got together and played for countless social and community events. (*The Miami Herald*, 26/12/06)

## Foreign Affairs

**December 1:** Bolivian President Evo Morales arrived in Havana to attend the festivities of Fidel Castro's 80th birthday and the 50th Anniversary of the Granma landing. "We express gratitude for the solidarity between the Cuban and the Bolivian people, as well as for Fidel Castro's friendship," the South American statesman said. "As I promised, I brought a coca cake", Morales responded to a journalist inquiring what had he brought as a gift for Castro. In August, Morales had promised that special birthday gift for the Cuban leader, but birthday celebrations were postponed due to Castro's surgery. The Bolivian president was welcomed by Cuban Vice President, Carlos Lage, and by other top leaders and diplomatic staff from Cuba and Bolivia. (*Prensa Latina, AFP, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** Haitian President Rene Preval is in Havana to attend celebrations of Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. Nicaraguan president-elect Daniel Ortega is also expected. The two leaders are slated to participate in the program of activities that also include the 50th anniversary of the landing of the Granma yacht that in 1956 brought an expedition led by Fidel Castro to the southeastern coast of the island to begin what would culminate in the 1959 Cuban revolution. The Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Ralph E. Gonsalves; Yerodia Abdulaye Ndombasi, vice Head of State of Congo; and former Jamaican Prime Minister Persival Patterson also arrived in Havana for the celebrations. (*Granma, The Miami Herald, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** Nobel laureate Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez said in Havana he is happy to be in Cuba for Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. "What will make me happier is when I come to his 100th celebration," Fidel Castro's friend said. Culture Minister Abel Prieto welcomed the Colombian writer. Garcia Marquez will also be attending in Havana the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the International School of Cinema and Television, in San Antonio de los Baños, that he founded together with the Cuban leader. (*Prensa Latina, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** The Cuban embassy in the Democratic Popular Republic of Korea (DPRK) celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the island. The head of the diplomatic mission, Rubén Pérez, toured the Kim Il Sung Military College facilities in Pyongyang and laid a wreath at the statue of the DPRK founding father. (*Granma, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** Nicaraguan President-elect Daniel Ortega said in Havana that the electoral triumph of the Sandinista National Liberation Front was the present he brought for Fidel Castro in his 80th birthday. Ortega spoke during the closing ceremony of activities organized by the Guayasamin Foundation for the birthday of the Cuban Revolution leader, which was attended by Cuban First Vice President Raul Castro. "The exchange with Fidel," he said, "turns us more sensitive each day, more humane, friendly and supportive, firm and determined to defend the noblest ideas of humanity," Ortega said. In our bitter or good moments, we have always had the support and solidarity of the Cuban people and Fidel Castro, he stressed. (*AIN, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines highlighted Fidel Castro's political and human values in his address of participants to the closing ceremony of activities organized by the Guayasamin Foundation for the birthday of the Cuban Revolution leader. Gonsalves said that Fidel is one of the most important personalities of today's world and highlighted his leadership of the socialist revolution in the face of the United States, the most hostile and powerful empire of the world. The Caribbean leader thanked Fidel and the Cuban Revolution for their internationalist solidarity with his small country and referred to the Cuban assistance to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in the fields of health and education. (*AIN, 1/12/06*)

**December 1:** Reporters Without Borders [RSF] demonstrated in support of 23 journalists imprisoned in Cuba at the human rights square in Paris. Twenty-three cages were placed in Trocadero Square, each holding a masked inmate, clad in prison dress. Each cage bore the journalist's name, media, sentence and the reasons for their imprisonment. The

demonstration was attended by Cuban exiles, including dissident journalists, and drew journalists from the French and foreign press. (*BBC*, 4/12/06)

**December 3:** Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez dedicated his landslide re-election to Fidel Castro but he is also keen to convince his supporters that he is not a leader in Castro's communist mold. Chavez said he would use his strong majority to intensify a self-styled socialist revolution that has already included land confiscations, higher taxes on foreign companies and the state taking control of private oil projects. "We dedicate this victory to the Cuban people and to Fidel Castro, my brother and comrade. We are sending an embrace to Fidel and to our brothers in Cuba who support our cause," Chavez told his rain-drenched supporters. (*Reuters*, 4/12/06)

**December 4:** Cuba and the United States should sit down to talk about their relationship without conditions and without making the talks dependent on the death of Fidel Castro, said the secretary general of the Organization of American States, José Miguel Insulza. "If talks can begin later, why not begin to talk now?" Insulza said, referring to the readiness for dialogue expressed by Cuba's interim leader, Raúl Castro, during a speech in Havana. "First thing is that [the talks] must be without conditions." "Maybe, during the conversations, conditions will be set; then someone will say: 'In exchange for this, we're willing to grant that,'" he added. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 5/12/06)

**December 4:** "My passion for theatre led me to be an actor," said distinguished actor Ralph Fiennes to students at Cuba's International Film and Television School, located some 50 kilometers from Havana in the town of San Antonio de los Baños. Fiennes, who played the main character in "The English Patient" and the role of a Nazi officer in Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List," is delivering a workshop this week on his experience in the film industry. The British actor said he is also in Cuba to learn about its cinematography industry and expressed his admiration for Latin American films such as "City of God" by Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles. (*AIN*, 5/12/06)

**December 5:** Cuba's Fidel Castro congratulated Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for his re-election victory in a letter, but makes no mention of his own ailing health. The signed letter was published in the two leading newspapers, *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde*. It is the first statement attributed to Castro since November 30, and follows his failure to show up at any of the recent events honoring his 80th birthday, especially a high-profile military parade. "Hugo: I shall be brief so that emotions do not betray me. Your victory was overwhelming, crushing and without parallel in the history of our America," read the letter. (*AFP*, 5/12/06)

**December 5:** Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque met in Havana with the President of the government of the Canary Islands Martin Menis. Menis also met with Vice President Carlos Lage, the President of the Cuban Parliament Ricardo Alarcon and Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, the head of the International Relations Department of the Cuban Communist Party. President Menis noted that the Cuban Canary Association is made up of 792 nationals of the Spanish islands and 59,000 second and third generation descendants. (*AIN*, 5/12/06)

**December 5:** The body of a Cuban rafter (balsero) was found on the coast of Cozumel Island, in the Mexican Caribbean. The Quintana Roo state authorities identified the deceased as 24-year-old Humberto Rivera Rodríguez, from Guantánamo, Cuba. His remains were found on a flimsy makeshift raft at one of the illegal entry hotspots most used by Cuban illegal migrants, also known as "balseros". (*EFE*, 5/12/06)

**December 5:** Costa Rican President Oscar Arias urged the Latin-American nations to join their voices so that Cubans can achieve the freedom that other peoples of the region enjoy. In a speech before the Organization of American States, in Washington, Arias emphasized that freedom has come to all the countries in Latin America, with the noticeable exception of Cuba. He pointed that Latin America can strengthen its democratic systems and rise up as one, with one voice and one hope, so that the Cuban people can also come to enjoy the freedom they have been denied. Or, it can fall prey again to its old authoritarian demons, to the siren songs of autocratic and populist governments that have only caused famine and misery to the Latin-American peoples. (*OCB*, 5/12/06)

**December 6:** A Cuban delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Marcos Rodriguez is participating at the Council of Ministers Meeting of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group (ACP), underway in Khartoum, Sudan. Cuba has been a member of the group since December 14, 2000 and has actively participated in the ACP's meetings despite not being a signatory of the Cotonou Accords. Made up by 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific nations, the group was founded in 1975 and currently has three working guidelines: the instrumentation of the ACP/European Union Agreement, known as the Cotonou Accord, North/South relations and cooperation between the ACP. (*AIN*, 6/12/06)

**December 6:** US President George W. Bush and his Costa Rican counterpart, Oscar Arias, discussed Cuba-related issues while reviewing the political situation in Latin America during a meeting at the White House. "We did a 'tour' of all of Latin America and exchanged views on how we perceive the region," said Arias. "You all know very well about my commitment to restore democracy for the Cuban people after 47 years of dictatorship," he told media representatives. (*AFP*, 6/12/06)

**December 6:** Haitian President René Preval made an unscheduled trip to Cuba to take a battery of prostate-related tests, said his office. A communiqué released in Port-au-Prince stated that Preval traveled to Havana for "health reasons" tied to prostate surgery he had undergone in Cuba early in the year. (*AP*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** Reporters Without Borders called for the immediate and unconditional release of Ahmed Rodríguez Albacia of the Jóvenes sin Censura independent news agency, who was arrested by the State Security police on December 4, in Havana. The organisation also condemned the four-year prison sentence passed on independent journalist Raymundo Perdigón Brito on December 6 for being a "pre-criminal danger to society." "Rodríguez Albacia and his family have been the victims of constant harassment by the political police since the start of the year," Reporters Without Borders said. "This young journalist was even detained and ordered to stop his journalistic activities in September. This time the State Security has deprived him of his work material and thrown him in prison. Is any further proof needed that he has been arrested simply for being a journalist?" The organisation added: "We call for his immediate release and that of Perdigón Brito, who has been given a four-year sentence for the same reason, in his case on the false and absurd grounds that he poses a danger to society." (*RWB Press Release*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** Barbados and Cuba began two days of talks which they said would further deepen bilateral relations between the two countries. Theresa Marshall, Permanent Secretary in the Barbados Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, said the two day Barbados-Cuba summit would seek to enhance previous activities between the two countries and allow them to embark on new initiatives. (*CBC*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** Cuba is one of the first Latin American countries that has finished a report on the Caribbean Sea pollution affecting national coasts. The conclusions of this research will be the basis for the development of a regional project against contamination that would include twenty-eight Caribbean nations, said the Director of the Caribbean Environmental Network (CEN), Dr. Antonio Villasol. CEN, based in Cuba, is one of the three protocols of the Caribbean Environmental Program (CEP). (*ACN*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** The International Committee of the Red Cross said it would seek access to prisons in Cuba, one of the few countries to deny it permission to visit political detainees. ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger told reporters he planned to make a new request to the government in Havana. The ICRC has not been able to visit Cuban prisons since July 1959, seven months after Fidel Castro came to power. After armed Cuban exiles launched the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 in a US-backed bid to overthrow the Castro government, more than 1,000 of them were captured and incarcerated. When the ICRC asked to visit them to ensure they were receiving fair treatment under international humanitarian law, Havana said no. In March 1962, when the Bay of Pigs prisoners were about to go on trial, the ICRC wrote to Castro saying it presumed Havana would respect Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of prisoners of war. It repeated its request to be allowed to visit the jailed fighters. Again the request was rebuffed. "The

doors were closed to the ICRC, which did not obtain permission to send delegates to Cuba for many years to come," the ICRC says on its website. (*AFP*, 7/12/06)

**December 7:** After learning that a journalist was arrested and another convicted in recent days, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) criticized the Cuban government for continuing to hound the independent press on the island. (*El Nuevo Herald*, 8/12/06)

**December 7:** Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez expressed in Brasilia his concern and that of his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, about Fidel Castro's state of health. After a meeting with Lula, Chávez pointed out that the Brazilian president "told me of his wish to visit Fidel. We are both concerned." "I received a note from Fidel two or three days ago and the information that I have from Cuba indicates that his recovery is still slow," added Chávez. (*Notimex*, 7/12/06)

**December 8:** A Cuban Pastoral Forum has criticized the Czech Ecumenical Council of Churches for supporting what they call "anti-Christian measures" like the US blockade against the island. The statement issued by the forum was read by Reverend Pablo Oden Marichal at the Episcopal Cathedral of the Holy Trinity. It sustains that the position of the Czech Council is part of the US policy of recurring to third parties to justify the reinforcement of the criminal blockade against Cuba. Jitka Klubalova, Secretary General of the Czech council, had demanded Christians in Cuba not to support the Council of Churches of Cuba, which she described as an institution subordinated to the government. (*Granma*, 8/12/06)

**December 8:** China and Cuba have jointly built an ophthalmic hospital in northwest Qinghai Province, to help locals of the high-altitude province who suffer ophthalmic diseases. The Hospital Oftalmologico Amistad China-Cuba in Xining has a building area of 4,000 square meters, 80 beds, and 135 staff members, including 52 Cuban professionals. "This is the first cooperation project in ophthalmic area between China and Cuba," said Wang Xuan, vice mayor of Xining City, capital of Qinghai. The two countries have invested 39 million yuan (4.9 million US dollars) in the construction of the hospital. They planned a total investment of 60 million yuan (7.6 million US dollars) for the hospital. Under a 10-year cooperation term, Cuba will supply the hospital with equipment and experts, while the Chinese side provides space and other staff. (*Xinhua*, 8/12/06)

**December 9:** The President of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Denzil Douglas highlighted Cuban solidarity with the countries and peoples of the region. Douglas, Saint Kitts and Nevis Prime Minister, remarked that at 34 years of the opening of relations between Cuba and four nations of the area those social, political and economic ties have been strengthened. On December 8, 1972, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago established relations with Cuba and that date is known as the CARICOM-Cuba Day. (*Prensa Latina*, 9/12/06)

**December 10:** Travel agents report a brisk demand for visas to Cuba, one of the few places that welcomes Palestinians. Two popular destinations for Gazans are Canada, which still offers legal immigration, and Cuba, which imposes few restrictions on Palestinian travelers. Those with tourist visas to Cuba often don't plan to go there. Instead, they get off in transit at a European airport, rip up their Palestinian travel document and seek asylum. Travel agencies in Gaza arrange for fictitious invitations, hotel bookings and Cuban visas for their clients, a Palestinian security official said. The cost of the service has gone up from \$200 to \$1,500 because of the high demand and increasing risk, the official said. Palestinian, Egyptian and European officials have begun to tighten restrictions in an attempt to stem the flow. Travel agent Mohammed Mouin said 65 of his clients with Cuban visas were sent back from Egypt, but that many more are trying. "Traveling to Cuba has become a fad," he said. (*Chicago Sun Times*, 10/12/06)

**December 11:** Former Czech president Vaclav Havel urged tourists to shun Cuba as a holiday destination, in a video message showing solidarity with Cuban dissidents. "I cannot go to Cuba to lounge on the beach and pretend not to

notice anything while there are dozens of political prisoners behind bars," Havel said. "Today, we must not allow ourselves to be deluded that nothing bad is happening in Cuba. A lot of bad is happening in that country," Havel continued. Havel's message was aired at a conference organised by Polish Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former president Lech Walesa, aimed at showing solidarity with dissidents in Cuba. In a speech to open the conference, Walesa assured that the aim of the meeting was not to foment revolution on the Caribbean island, but to help Cubans to help themselves. "We are not trying to bring the people into the streets to start a revolution," Walesa said. "Our aim is more to give advice, because there are solutions to be found there," said the former leader of the Solidarity trade union. "Poland is an excellent example of the role that reconciliation can play on the peaceful path to democracy," Walesa said. (*AFP*, 11/12/06)

**December 11:** The government of Dominica thanked Cuba for its cooperation, during a ceremony held in that Caribbean island with the presence of Dominica's President Nicholas Liverpool and other top government officials. In recognizing the work of the Cuban personnel in Dominica, acting Prime Minister Matthew Walter, Health Minister John Fabien and Parliament president Alix Boyd-Knight expressed their admiration for the Cuban professionals who are offering their services far from their land and families. Meanwhile, Cuban ambassador to Dominica Osvaldo Cobacho Martinez expressed his thankfulness for the ceremony, organized to recognize the work of the Cuban medical brigade as well as the assistance offered by representatives of the Cuban Aeronautics Institute in the expansion of Dominica's international airport. (*ACN*, 11/12/06)

**December 11:** In response to a proposal by the conservative Spanish People's Party (PP) that all Spanish political parties maintain a "common position" *vis a vis* the island, Cuba said that "it does not need advice from its former metropolis. The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) newspaper Granma characterized the PP initiative as just another "act of interference in Cuba's domestic affairs." (*EFE*, 12/12/06)

**December 11:** Photos that show the hurt felt by families of political prisoners in Cuba are on exhibit at the Organization of American States (OAS) headquarters in Washington. Thirty portraits of individuals holding small photos of husbands, brothers, children and parents who have been jailed by the Cuban regime make up the exhibit. "The thing that stands out (...) is the look of sadness in the eyes of family members," said Ambassador John Maisto, US permanent representative to the OAS. The photos will be displayed at OAS until December 15 and then continue to travel around the world until all Cuban political prisoners are released, according to Frank Calzon, executive director of The Center for a Free Cuba, which created the exhibit. The exhibit's other sponsors are the National Democratic Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy, Reporters Without Borders, and People in Need. (*US Fed News*, 11/12/06)

**December 12:** The Cuban government hasn't issued an official statement on the death of Augusto Pinochet. The Cuban media, all under state control, didn't highlight the death of former Chilean dictator. The Foreign Affairs Ministry hasn't made any comment or official statement. (*ABC*, 12/12/06)

**December 12:** The North Korean government awarded Fidel Castro, Cuban media reported. On behalf of Castro, Esteban Lazo, Vice President of Cuban State Council, received the title of Work Hero, the Gold Medal and the First Class National Banner of the North Korean Parliament. "In accepting such high honour, Lazo transmitted Fidel Castro's deep feeling of humbleness and gratefulness toward the Korean government", official daily Granma said. (*Reuters*, 12/12/06)

**December 12:** Cuban-Russian relations are at a high level, and both sides are interested in further expansion of cooperation, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Eumelio Caballero and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak said in Havana. Caballero and Kislyak signed a protocol on political consultations between the Foreign Ministries of the two countries. "Through joint efforts, we can further expand and strengthen each other's positions within the framework of bilateral ties," Caballero said to the press. He noted that the visits which Russian and Cuban

representatives have recently exchanged, helped "add new themes for consultations, which Cuba views as very important for further development of ties with Russia." For his part, Kislyak stated that relations with Cuba "have been developing very well and intensively." Signing the protocol, Caballero and Kislyak noted proximity of their positions on the key issues of international politics. They stated that the recent visit to Cuba by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov gave a new impulse to bilateral ties. (*Itar Tass, EFE, 13/12/06*)

**December 12:** Ambassadors of the block of Non Aligned countries in the UN concur on the need to reform the Security Council and regretted the lack of agreement on the subject after 18 months of consultations and discussions. To date the General Assembly has not reached any conclusion over the number of permanent and non permanent members in the Security Council. Speaking as president of the Coordination Bureau of the Non Aligned Movement in the UN, Cuban ambassador Rodrigo Malmierca stressed that clearness, truthfulness and coherence are basic elements that the Security Council must respect. This is the first time that this group of 118 countries participates in these debates. (*Prensa Latina, 12/12/06*)

**December 12:** According to Guyana's Foreign Trade Minister, Henry Jeffrey, the Cuban government cancelled millions of dollars worth of debt incurred by the South American nation in the 1980s, which the Guyanese government had declared itself unable to pay off. (*EFE, 12/12/06*)

**December 13:** Former president Vaclav Havel denied the information that he had called for boycott of tourism in Cuba, Havel's secretary Jakub Hladik said. The French news agency AFP said that Havel called on people to boycott tourist trips to Cuba in a video recording presented at a conference held by Lech Walesa, former Polish president and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, in Warsaw. Hladik said that the video recording was 18 months old. "However, Havel does not call for the boycott of trips to Cuba in it. He wants the public to realise the local political situation, which may not be always apparent from the suites of luxurious hotels," Hladik said in a press release. (*CTK, 13/12/06*)

**December 13:** Cuba has refused to issue visas to a German parliamentary delegation, officials said in Berlin. The Foreign Ministry said it regretted the decision not to admit the group. The communist nation's ambassador was to be summoned to the ministry, a spokeswoman said on customary condition of anonymity. Members of the cross-party German-Central American parliamentary group said Havana refused to issue visas on the grounds that a planned meeting with Cuban opposition figures at the German ambassador's residence was unacceptable. "This is a missed opportunity to continue the bilateral dialogue that the Cuban side also wants," the German Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said. In June, European Union foreign ministers deplored the state of human rights on the Caribbean island, and urged Havana to free all political prisoners. They said they would strive for a dialogue with both the official Cuban authorities and the political opposition. (*AP, 14/12/06*)

**December 14:** Chile's President Michelle Bachelet met Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Alejandro Gonzalez, with whom she reviewed the good state of bilateral relations and exchanged criteria on Latin America. The meeting was also attended by Cuba's ambassador to Chile Giraldo Mazola and by Chilean Ambassador to Havana Jaime Toha. Gonzalez told the press that the president made inquiries on Fidel Castro's state of health and wished him a prompt recovery. A release from the Chilean Foreign Affairs Ministry states that there was a consensus in the political dialogue between delegations to keep up the annual bilateral consultations. (*Prensa Latina, 14/12/06*)

**December 16:** A group of 21 Cuban immigrants in transit to the United States arrived in the Atlantic coast of Honduras, authorities reported. The immigrants arrived on December 8 at Cuzuna, in the Atlantic coast, and were sent by migration authorities to La Ceiba, 350 kilometers north of Tegucigalpa. (*AP, 16/12/06*)

**December 18:** The president of El Salvador, Tony Saca, gave assurances that his government would not refuse to allow Cuban acting president Raúl Castro into the country should he wish to attend the Sao Paulo Forum, scheduled for January in San Salvador. "Of course we'll let him in... that's the advantage of living in a free country," Saca said in

reply to questions regarding Fidel Castro's brother's possible participation in the international conference of leftist parties, to be held January 12-16 in the Central American nation. (*EP/AP*, 18/12/06)

**December 19:** According to István Gyarmati, director of the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT) in Budapest, Hungary wants to mobilize the European Union (EU) into supporting the democratization of Cuba. In Gyarmati's opinion, the transition in Cuba will begin after the death of Fidel Castro and added that Hungarian politicians "have two important tasks in this situation," namely, to emphasize that the United States are not the ones "to carry out the transition in Cuba" and to stir the EU into playing a more active role on this issue. "Hungary, Spain and Germany could be the driving force behind US-EU cooperation" in support of the democratization process in the Caribbean country, said the director. (*EFE*, 19/12/06)

**December 19:** Honduras' foreign minister, Milton Jiménez, travelled to Havana to meet his Cuban counterpart, Felipe Pérez Roque. The meeting is being held to discuss Honduras's maritime borders with other countries in the Caribbean, including Belize, Jamaica, Grand Cayman, Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua and Mexico. Honduras has been at the centre of several maritime border disputes, including an intractable feud with El Salvador and Nicaragua over the Gulf of Fonseca. Honduran relations with Cuba are, however, more friendly and Jiménez said that he expected an agreement on maritime boundaries between the two countries would be signed by the end of 2007. The two countries reinstated diplomatic relations in 2002. (*Latin News Daily*, 20/12/06)

**December 19:** The Film Co-production Agreement signed between Chile and Cuba, during the 28th New Latin American Film Festival in Havana, one of the most important such events in the region, will enhance cooperation in this field. Chilean Foreign Ministry Cultural Director Emilio Lamarca said that the accord will help expand the industry in both countries and open doors to Third World productions. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/12/06)

**December 20:** The official Cuban newspaper Granma poked fun at the Spanish People's Party (PP). "The obsession of the right-wing People's Party (PP) with Cuba took a new beating at the Spanish Parliament, which shot down yet another of the aznaristas' made-in-USA initiatives against the Caribbean island," the article read. It added that "Aznar and his cohorts within the PP remain in the US government's roster and are paid well by Washington, despite being 4th-category 'players' of the political game and being unable to shake off the losing streak that began when they were overthrown from power in Spain in 2004." (*AFP*, 20/12/06)

**December 20:** Venezuelan Executive Vice-President José Vicente Rangel met with a Cuban delegation that is to advise the Venezuelan Government to create a commission that is to implement an internal control system to fight corruption in the Venezuelan public administration. "This system is not hard to design, and implementation requires the willingness of public agencies," said National Superintendent of Internal Audit, Vice-President's Office, Neida Camacho Montenegro. "The innovation here is that internal control is a process intertwined in every process of the public sector, including management, budget, procurement and biddings. All of these steps are integrated and combined with the audit." Fidel Castro, also leading his own campaign against corruption before falling ill in July, portrayed the widespread stealing from the state and other examples of "moral decay" as the greatest threat yet to Cuba's socialist system. "We've brought the experience on both the positive and negative points (...) of our model to share with our Venezuelan colleagues," Jose Carlos del Toro, a Cuban Finance Ministry official, was quoted as saying in the statement. (*El Universal, The Miami Herald*, 21,22/12/06)

**December 20:** Cuba lodged a protest over the UN Security Council's refusal to allow it to participate in a debate on terrorism, adding that this decision confirms the urgent need for profound reform in that body. Ambassador Rodrigo Malmierca highlighted the importance Cuba puts on fighting terrorism and recalled the island's prior attendance at these quarterly meetings. "We have been informed that it has been decided to use a new format in which only Committee presidents will be allowed to address the meeting," noted Cuba's letter of protest. The Cuban Ambassador asked the Security Council to circulate the letter. The diplomat also requested that members receive the address that he

was to pronounce on the subject, with detailed information on acts of terrorism against Cuba carried out by individuals and organizations that operate under the protection of the United States government. (*Granma*, 20/12/06)

**December 21:** The chancellors of Cuba and Honduras, Felipe Perez Roque and Milton Jimenez, expressed their willingness to recover dialogue and levels of bilateral cooperation, as well as intensify relations based on mutual respect. The Honduran Foreign Affairs minister initiated an official visit to Havana with a meeting with his Cuban colleague, to whom he confirmed Tegucigalpa government's decision of appointing an ambassador to Cuba. Jimenez said he carried a message from President Manuel Zelaya to Fidel Castro, to whom he wished a quick recovery from the intestinal surgery he had in July. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/12/06)

**December 22:** Costa Rica's president compared Cuba's leader Fidel Castro to the late Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, an ideological foe, saying each was "savage, brutal and bloody" in his own way. President Oscar Arias, a Washington-friendly conservative who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for brokering deals to end Central America's civil wars, has traded barbs with Cuban officials since his election in February. "Fidel Castro began with the (execution) wall, killing those people who opposed him," Arias said in radio interview. "There is no difference. The ideology is different but both were savage, brutal and bloody." (*Reuters*, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** The Non-Aligned Movement demanded that the UN Security Council practice a policy of peaceful diplomacy and dialogue to find a lasting solution to the issue of Iran's development of nuclear energy. Cuba's ambassador to the UN Rodrigo Malmierca presented the Non-Aligned Movement position on the issue. Since September 2006, Cuba holds the presidency of the organization for a three-year period. The statement reaffirms "the fundamental and inalienable right" of all states to conduct research, produce and use atomic energy for peaceful ends, without discrimination and in compliance with their legal obligations. (*Prensa Latina*, 22/12/06)

**December 24:** The Bolivian government has announced plans to deport a prominent Cuban dissident who publicly criticized President Evo Morales' close ties to Havana. Dr. Amauris Samartino, a Cuban who holds permanent residence status in Bolivia, will be expelled under a 1996 law forbidding immigrants to "intervene in any form in internal politics or incite by any means the alteration of the social and political order," according to a government statement. Samartino was arrested in the eastern city of Santa Cruz, a center of anti-Morales opposition, and later transferred to the Bolivian capital of La Paz. He will be flown home to Cuba once his case has been processed, the statement said. Samartino was one of a group of Cuban dissidents who fled to Bolivia in 2000, but the Bolivian government announced that Samartino does not hold refugee status. Samartino has been a vocal critic of Cuba's government and has publicly decried the influence of Cuban leader Fidel Castro in Morales' administration. (*AP*, 25/12/06)

**December 26:** The Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani issued a document endorsing a draft agreement between Qatar and Cuba on reciprocal administrative assistance to facilitate the implementation of customs law and to prevent, track and fight customs crimes. The draft agreement was signed on November 7, 2006 in Havana, Cuba. (*The Peninsula*, 27/12/06)

**December 26:** The head of Madrid's regional government said that she does not like the idea of public monies being spent on medical attention for "the dictator Fidel Castro." Esperanza Aguirre, the conservative chief of the local administration, commented in light of the trip to Havana by surgeon Jose Luis Garcia Sabrido to examine ailing Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Aguirre said it was the Cuban embassy in Spain that contacted Garcia Sabrido and asked that he travel to the island for the consultation. She said the regional administration for the past six months has been sending medicines to Cuba as part of a humanitarian aid program. "We give humanitarian aid to anyone who asks us for it," she said, although she also expressed regret that in this case such assistance was going to "a dictator." She wondered aloud "what must happen with the rest of the residents of the island, especially the political prisoners, if circumstances are such that when the 'comandante' is ill, they have to ask Madrid's public health system for help." (*EFE*, 26/12/06)

**December 26:** A government human rights monitor called for the government to halt the deportation of a Cuban dissident critical of President Evo Morales' ties to Havana, saying the move could hurt Bolivia's image abroad. Dr. Amauris Sanmartino, a Cuban who holds permanent residence status in Bolivia, was arrested in the eastern lowland city of Santa Cruz under a 1996 law forbidding immigrants to be involved in Bolivian politics. "This case could affect the image of Bolivia," said Public Defender Walter Albarracin, whose office has sought to block Sanmartino's deportation to Cuba. "Beyond whether someone thinks one way or another, here in Bolivia we live in a state of law, and we must be very careful with that state of law." (AP 26/12/06)

**December 27:** Cuba blasted Costa Rican President Oscar Arias for comparing ailing leader Fidel Castro to the late Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, calling Arias an "opportunistic clown" who does the bidding of the US government. In a statement published in the Communist Party daily Granma, the Cuban Foreign Ministry said it reacted with "profound indignation" to President Oscar Arias' comments likening Castro to his ideological foe. [[Declaración del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores](#)] (AP, *Prensa Latina*, 27/12/06)

**December 27:** A Bolivian court ruled that a Cuban dissident who criticized improved relations between Bolivia and Cuba should be deported to the communist country. "This is a death sentence. Cuba is a country where people who have different points of view, like me, don't have rights," Amauris Samartino told reporters after hearing the verdict. Samartino, who arrived in Bolivia in 2000, was detained on charges he violated a Bolivian law prohibiting immigrants from interfering in the South American country's internal affairs, government officials said. The Cuban ambassador in La Paz, Rafael Dausa, said his government did not ask Bolivia to detain Samartino, but acknowledged the dissident had publicly criticized both Morales and Castro. "He has decided to politically act out against the Cuban revolution and the government of Bolivia," Dausa told the Red 1 TV network. (*Reuters*, 27/12/06)

**December 28:** Costa Rican President Oscar Arias refused to back off his harsh criticism of Fidel Castro and said Latin American countries need to help the communist-ruled island make a smooth transition to democracy following Castro's death. In interviews with the daily newspapers La Nacion and Al Dia, Arias also said he had "never heard so many rude epithets at the same time" as those the Cuban government unleashed at the president, whom it referred to as an "opportunistic clown" and a "vulgar mercenary" of US officials. "I stand by what I've said (...) that the Castro dictatorship has been as bloody and cruel as the Pinochet dictatorship, and that both regimes murdered innocent people." Arias said Cuban authorities are irritated because "my voice is one of the few in Latin America the island has heard regarding the necessity, once Fidel Castro is gone, to have Latin America (...) do something to reach a peaceful transition in Cuba toward a free and democratic regime." Arias said the Cuban people should be consulted as to whether they want Raul Castro to become the island's president-for-life. "All of the dictatorships have disappeared from this part of the world, except the Cuban one, and the Cuban people don't deserve 47 years of dictatorship," he added. (*AP Herald Tribune*, 28/12/06)

**December 28:** Havana will not accept a Cuban dissident set to be deported from Bolivia for criticizing President Evo Morales' close ties to the island nation, the government said. Bolivian Interior Vice Minister Ruben Gamarra called on the United States to help find another destination for Amauris Sanmartino because the US helped settle him in Bolivia. Sanmartino holds permanent residence status in Bolivia but was arrested under a law forbidding immigrants to be involved in Bolivian politics. "We've spoken with Cuba and Cuba doesn't want him," Gamarra said. US officials confirmed that they were discussing Sanmartino's future with the Bolivian government but declined to comment further. The Bolivian government has accused Sanmartino of having ties to a radical separatist movement in the city of Santa Cruz, a center of conservative opposition to Morales about 340 miles east of La Paz. They also claim Sanmartino helped organize a December 15 protest. Sanmartino has denied both accusations. (AP, 28/12/06)

**December 29:** The solidarity and voluntary assistance provided by Cuban health workers in Guatemala earned the brigade the "2006 Personality of the Year" recognition from the editors, journalists and photographers of "Siglo Veintinuno" newspaper. The daily ran a front page photo of Cuban doctor Yoandra Muro, in charge of the medical

brigade, with the headline: "We came to Guatemala to share not compete," along with a subtitle declaring the group Personality of the Year. (*Granma*, 29/12/06)

**December 30:** Cuba's Communist Party daily reported that ailing leader Fidel Castro telephoned the Chinese ambassador in Havana to wish his president Hu Jintao a happy New Year. The story in *Granma* said Castro called Chinese Ambassador Zhao Rongxian on December 25, and they discussed relations between their countries. The ambassador also transmitted his president's wishes for Castro's speedy recovery. Beijing's local media headlined the congratulation messages exchanged by Fidel Castro and Hu Jintao on occasion of the New Year. The digital version of the People's Diary in Spanish, organ of the Chinese Communist Party, conferred special significance to the news. (*AP, Prensa Latina*, 31/12/06)

**December 30:** Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said that he decided to drop plans to visit Nicaragua and Cuba. Lula said he would skip the inauguration of Nicaraguan President-elect Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and that he would also give up the planned visit to Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Lula had said he would travel to Cuba to visit Castro after his trip to Nicaragua, where he would take part in Ortega's swearing-in ceremony on January 10. "I will not attend the presidential ceremony in Nicaragua because I convinced myself that I have to take 10 days off," he told journalists, adding that he would be on vacation on January 5-15, possibly on the seaside of the southeastern state of Sao Paulo. (*Xinhua*, 31/12/06)

**December 31:** Communist Cuba condemned the execution of deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and called for the end to the war it said had caused the suffering of millions of innocent Iraqis. Hussein's execution by hanging over the weekend was "an illegal act in a country that has been driven toward an internal conflict in which millions of citizens have been exiled or lost their lives," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement published on January 1 in the official daily *Granma*. The statement acknowledged that Cuba "has not yet abolished the death penalty because of the brutal war imposed on it by the United States," referring to the US government's policy to undermine the communist country, including trade and travel sanctions. Nevertheless, the island nation "has a moral duty to express its point of view about the assassination committed by the occupying power," the statement said. [[Declaración del MINREX](#)] (*Prensa Latina, The Miami Herald*, 1,2/1/07)

## Security

**December 2:** Cuba's armed forces marshalled their Soviet-era arsenal in a parade to show the world, especially the arch-enemy United States, they remain a force to be reckoned with as their ailing leader Fidel Castro fades. Aged tanks, rocket launchers and MIG jet fighters roared through Havana's Revolution Square before a crowd of 300,000 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Revolutionary Armed Forces' (FAR) birth as a ragtag rebel force Castro led ashore from the leaking yacht ``Granma" on December 2, 1956. Soldiers marched past and a replica of the Granma, the yacht that carried Fidel Castro back from exile, was pulled along the street. Leading the pomp was Defense Minister and interim president Raúl Castro, accompanied by three original commanders of the Revolution: Ramiro Valdes, Juan Almeida and Guillermo García. In his speech, Army Raúl Castro Ruz said that Cuba is increasing its combat capacity and modernizing its combat equipment to guarantee the country's defense. The parade was also scheduled to close the festivities of Fidel Castro's 80th birthday. (*The Miami Herald, BBC, Reuters, Granma International*, 2/12/06)

**December 4:** Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces Minister Army General Raul Castro met with Angolan Defense Minister General Kundy Paihama, local mass media reported. According to a brief note and a photo published by *Granma* newspaper, both top leaders held a friendly and respectful conversation, characterizing relations between the two countries. (*Prensa Latina*, 4/12/06)

**December 4:** Cuba is willing to strengthen cooperation, including military cooperation, with China, the first vice-president of the Council of the State of Cuba and Defence Minister Raul Castro said, while meeting with a visiting Chinese military delegation. Raul expressed his satisfaction at the smooth development of exchanges and cooperation between the Cuban and Chinese armies in the areas of personnel and military trainings, and hoped the cooperation could be further strengthened. He also thanked the Chinese military delegation for attending the 50th anniversary commemorating the founding of Cuba's armed forces. Leader of the delegation Gen Zhao Keming conveyed the kind wishes from the Chinese people and military to the Cuban leader, Raul's brother Fidel Castro, hoping him a quick recovery from surgery. Before the meeting, Gen Zhao also met with Alvaro Lopez Miera, chief of the General Staff of Cuba's armed forces. The two generals discussed possible cooperation between the two armies in the future. (*Xinhua*, 4/12/06)

**December 4:** Cuban Defence Minister, Raúl Castro, met in Havana with military delegations from Vietnam and Lao invited to festivities for the 50th Anniversary of Cuban Armed Forces. Together with Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, and Fernando Remírez de Estenoz, Chief of the Department of Foreign Affairs Relations of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, Army General Raul Castro met with Lao Army General, Douangchay Phichit. Phichit is also Lao's Defence Minister. (*EER*, 6/12/06)

**December 10:** Thousands of Cubans participated in the National Defense Days, aimed at training the population to face any possible armed aggression. The two-day exercises intend to continue improving the preparation of all Cubans involved in the Defense Councils, under the principle of the "War of the Entire People". Members of the Territorial Troop Militias, Special Troops, Production and Defense Units, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces participated in territorial defense drills. (*Prensa Latina, Granma*, 11/12/06)

**December 20:** The "Jornal do Angola" carried on its front page a report about a meeting between Angolan President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos and Cuban Lieutenant General Leopoldo Cintra Frias. The main Angolan daily stated that Dos Santos and Cintra Frias reviewed relations between the two countries. The chief of the Western Army and member of the Cuban Communist Party's Political Bureau delivered the Angolan government a message from the island's Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro, although the source did not reveal the content. Cintra Frias arrived in Angola from South Africa, where he attended the partial opening ceremony of the Solidarity Park, to pay tribute over 2,000 Cubans fallen in the struggle for the freedom of this continent. (*Prensa Latina*, 21/12/06)

## **Terrorism**

**December 7:** The US military transferred the first group of detainees to a new maximum-security prison at Guantanamo Bay designed to restrict contact among the prisoners and prevent attacks on guards. More than 40 detainees were brought to the \$37 million prison perched on a plateau overlooking the Caribbean Sea from another maximum-security facility at the US naval base in eastern Cuba, said Navy Commander Robert Durand. The 178-cell prison, constructed beside another maximum-security prison built in 2004, will allow the base to phase out an older facility, Durand said. UN human rights investigators and foreign governments have called on the United States to close the entire detention centre. (*AP*, 8/12/06)

**December 8:** In an abrupt about-face, the Pentagon has scrapped plans to invoke emergency authority to fast-track construction of a controversial \$100 million legal compound at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Instead, Defense Department officials will seek permission from Congress for any new major buildings in which to stage the first war-crimes trials since World War II. California Senator Dianne Feinstein, a key Democrat on the Senate's military construction and armed services committees, announced the Defense Department's change of course in a news release -- after members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, had protested the move. (*The Miami Herald*, 10/12/06)

## US-Cuba Relations

**December 2:** In a major foreign policy declaration, Raúl Castro opened a massive military parade in his brother's honour and in commemoration of the Day of the Armed Forces by extending an olive branch toward negotiations with Washington. "We take this opportunity to once again state that we are willing to resolve at the negotiating table the longstanding dispute between the United States and Cuba (...) as long as the said resolution is based on the principle of equality, reciprocity, non-interference and mutual respect," he said. "We patiently await the moment there's common sense in the circles of power in Washington," Castro added. [[Speech by Raul Castro](#)] (*The Miami Herald, BBC, 2/12/06*)

**December 2:** In response to Raul Castro's speech at the military parade in Havana's Revolution Square, US State Department spokeswoman Janelle Hironimus said that "the dialogue that needs to take place is one between the Cuban regime and the Cuban people about the democratic future of the island. "Any deepening of our engagement with Cuba depends on that dialogue and the Cuban regime's willingness to take concrete steps toward a political opening and a transition to democracy," she added. (*AP, 2/12/06*)

**December 3:** Monsignor Robert Sheeran, president of Seton Hall University, made a trip to meet religious and government leaders in Cuba. Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation in New York, which organized the trip, accompanied Sheeran and said "there's a lot of suspense" in Cuba right now. "President Castro is in the picture but out of the picture," he said. "You have the guessing game. What will the brother's policy be like? What will the new team be like?" Schneier, whose group promotes peace, tolerance and ethnic conflict resolution around the world, is a regular traveler to Cuba and has met with Castro on several occasions since 1998. While there, he and Sheeran met with leaders in the Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, Jewish and Evangelical Christian communities. They also met with Cardinal Jaime Ortega; Bruno Ramirez, a former ambassador to the United Nations; Caridad del Rosario Bello Diego, the director of the Cuban government's religious affairs office, and Ricardo Alarcon, the high-profile speaker of Cuba's parliament. Sheeran said the foundation urged Alarcon to consider amnesty for roughly 70 prisoners associated with the Varela Project, a failed movement for political democratic reforms in Cuba. Alarcon was noncommittal. (*The Star-Ledger, 3/12/06*)

**December 4:** The US State Department said that it has no interest in responding to a diplomatic overture from Cuban "dictator-in-waiting" Raul Castro, who two days before affirmed the Communist regime's readiness to sit down and talk with Washington. "The dialogue that should be taking place is not between Raul Castro and any group outside or any country outside of Cuba. It's the regime, with the Cuban people, talking about a transition to a democratic form of governance in that country," department spokesman Sean McCormack said at his daily briefing with reporters. He said it was unlikely that official talks between Washington and Havana would promote a transition to democracy on the island. "I don't see how that really furthers the cause of democracy in that country where you have dialogue with a dictator-in-waiting who wants to continue the form of governance that has really kept down the Cuban people for all these decades," McCormack said. (*EFE, 4/12/06*)

**December 4:** US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Thomas Shannon, said in New York that, although Fidel Castro's final hour may be drawing nearer, the time is not yet right to start a dialogue with Cuba. During a conference hosted by the Council of the Americas, Shannon said that, while the USA welcomes the readiness "of Raúl Castro and others for a dialogue," we do not yet feel that this is the right time for it. He added that, the view in Washington is that the most important dialogue, as far as the transition in Cuba is concerned, "must take place first between the regime and the people of Cuba." (*EFE, 4/12/06*)

**December 7:** Nearly one-third of journalists now serving time in prisons around the world published their work on the Internet, the second-largest category behind print journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists said in an analysis. The bulk of Internet journalists in jail -- 49 in total -- shows that "authoritarian states are becoming more determined to control the Internet," said Joel Simon, the New York-based group's executive director. Among the 24 nations that have imprisoned reporters, China topped the list for the eighth consecutive year. Cuba was second with 24 reporters in prison. Nearly all of them had filed their reports to overseas-based Web sites. (AP, 7/12/06)

**December 8:** Homeland Security Task Force Southeast is scheduled to conduct a command post exercise on December 12 and 13 at the Broward County Convention Center, Miami, to exercise the task force's mass migration plan. More than 250 response personnel from more than a dozen local, county, state and federal agencies are expected to participate in the two-day exercise. Established in June 2003, pursuant to Homeland Security Presidential Directive Five, the task force is required by Homeland Security Presidential Directive Eight to exercise the mass migration plan as part of the national preparedness goal. The timing of this year's exercise in no way reflects concern over recent events in Cuba -- in fact the mass migration plan does not focus on any single country, rather it addresses mass migration from any Caribbean nation. "This exercise provides an excellent opportunity for the members of Homeland Security Task Force Southeast to further refine their skills and to further build upon our already solid partnerships," said Rear Admiral David W. Kunkel, director of Homeland Security Task Force Southeast and commander of the Seventh Coast Guard District. "We want to remain ready and able to effectively respond to a mass migration event and exercising our plan helps us to retain that edge." (US Homeland Security Department, News Release, 8/12/06)

**December 10:** Celebrated American writer Gore Vidal slammed the four-decade-long US trade embargo against Cuba, saying during a visit to the island that he hopes recent changes in US politics will help end the sanctions. "I've never been here before and it's a fascinating country," Vidal said, touring Old Havana. Vidal said the United States is "undergoing tremendous political change," referring to growing opposition to the war in Iraq and the Democratic Party's return to control of both houses of Congress in November midterm elections. "After more than 40 years, the embargo is ridiculous," said Vidal, who himself ran for Congress and who regularly raises funds for Democratic candidates. (AP, 10/12/06)

**December 10:** The executive officer of the US Presbyterian Church helped Cubans celebrate the 100th anniversary of the opening of the capital's first Protestant temple, giving a sermon in which he urged all Christians to do more to eliminate global inequality. The Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick spoke in both English and Spanish to hundreds of followers and diplomats at the ceremony in central Havana. Delegations from Florida and Washington D.C. were also present. "A better world is possible," said the American minister, criticizing Christians who fail to work toward creating a planet where everyone has a dignified life and enough to eat and drink. Kirkpatrick first came to Cuba 20 years ago. He spoke of the history of the church, which was inaugurated in 1906 and hosted the founding of the Cuban Council of Churches in 1941. "This church has been witness to very difficult, very complex times," he said, referring to low attendance rates and tension with the Cuban government in the past. (AP, 10/12/06)

**December 11:** A congresswoman said a video clip showing her calling for Fidel Castro's assassination is fake, a charge denied by the film's director. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican-Miami), appears in the 28-second clip made available on the Internet by the makers of "638 Ways to Kill Castro," a new British documentary. In it, she says: "I welcome the opportunity of having anyone assassinate Fidel Castro and any leader who is oppressing the people." However, the Havana-born lawmaker, likely to be the top Republican on the House International Relations Committee, said filmmakers spliced clips together to make the sound bite. The film's director, Dollan Cannell, replied, "I can assure you (...) there has been no distortion of what she said." (AP, 11/12/06)

**December 12:** The US Congress will pass legislation in 2007 to ease restrictions on family travel and financial transfers to Cuba, Representative William Delahunt, co-chair of a congressional group seeking to loosen the US embargo, said. Rules limiting US residents with Cuban relatives to one visit every three years are "cruel" and will be

overtaken next year, Delahunt, a Massachusetts Democrat, said at the New York-based Council of the Americas, a policy research organization. Delahunt, a member of the House International Relations Committee, said Congress will also loosen restrictions on remittances to the island. "I don't think the embargo will change in 2007, but the Bush administration may pre-empt Congress and approve these other changes before we can," Delahunt said. (*Bloomberg*, 12/12/06)

**December 12:** Cuba vowed to defy US efforts for economic and political change on the island in a front-page editorial in the Communist Party's newspaper that also referred to Cuban dissidents as "mercenaries" and "counterrevolutionary puppies." Members of the US government "should not fool themselves," the editorial said. "The Cuban government and people will take charge, as they've done until now, of guaranteeing the complete failure of these plans (...) to encourage the subversion and internal counterrevolution in our country," it said. The Cuba editorial addressed a recent report by U.S. congressional investigators that said the U.S. Agency for International Development did not always properly oversee Cuban aid grants and that coordination with the State Department was sometimes ineffective. "The poorly named dissident movement is no more than a group financed and directed by the U.S. government, true mercenaries (...) at the service of the Cuban people's historic enemy: Yankee imperialism," the editorial said. "No matter how much money they spend, they'll never be able to bend the will of the Cuban people. [[Editorial de Granma](#)] (*AP, El Universal*, 14/12/06)

**December 13:** Channel One, the US preeminent news and public affairs content provider for teens reaching more than seven million students in middle schools and high schools across the country, traveled to Cuba to report on the 50th anniversary of the Fidel Castro-led Communist Revolution. Anchor Alexander Marquardt's on-the-ground reporting from the capitol city of Havana furthers Channel One's position as an unbiased source of breaking news and perspective, and adds to a long list of visits to regions across the globe. The segment aired on the Channel One Network on December 4th, coinciding with wide celebrations commemorating Castro's landing in Cuba 50 years ago. (*Business Wire*, 13/12/06)

**December 13:** The Swiss ambassador to Havana traveled to Washington in November in what is believed to be an effort to deliver a message from Cuba reiterating its eagerness to open contacts with the Bush administration, several persons familiar with the trip said. Ambassador Bertrand Louis met with State Department officials and influential members of the Cuban-American community in Washington, including Florida Republican Senator Mel Martinez, the persons added. The Swiss embassy in Washington confirmed the visit but declined to comment on its purpose. But those who met with Louis believe he came to repeat Raúl Castro's message that he's willing to open talks with the Bush administration. In his talks with Cuban Americans, Louis also explored the exile community's possible responses to Cuba's search for a dialogue with Washington, according to those who met with him. The Louis visit was the first sign that Raúl Castro is pulling diplomatic levers beyond public view to communicate his position, several Cuba watchers said. The United States and Cuba do not have formal diplomatic relations, and Switzerland acts as official host to both the Cuban mission in Washington and the US mission in Havana, known as interests sections. (*The Miami Herald*, 14/12/06)

**December 13:** The producer and others involved in Oliver Stone's documentary on Cuban leader Fidel Castro have agreed to pay the US government more than US\$6,000 to resolve allegations they violated a long-standing embargo against the communist country. According to government documents, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Controls, which oversees the economic embargo against Cuba, said the payment of \$6,322.20 would settle alleged violations that occurred between February 2002 and May 2003 in the making of the documentary film "Comandante." The Treasury documents, dated December 1, said that production company IXTLAN Corp. in Santa Monica, California, and four people had agreed to the monetary settlement. The documents did not identify the people or provide further details. "Comandante" was the precursor to Stone's more recent documentary on the Cuban leader called "Looking for Fidel." (*Toronto Star, Granma International*, 13/12/06)

**December 13:** The US government coordinator for the transition in Cuba, Caleb McCarry, said that change towards democracy in the island must be carried out by the Cuban people. Washington believes that there must be a domestic dialogue and that the Cubans should decide their own future. "That's respect for the sovereignty of the people of Cuba," the official emphasized to the media in the Dominican Republic. (*OCB*, 13/12/06)

**December 13:** The deterioration of Fidel Castro's health has been accompanied by the rise of hardline elements to key positions in Cuba, leaving no possibility for democratic reformers to surface, a senior State Department official said. "With Fidel Castro still alive, the regime has become more orthodox," said Thomas Shannon, who heads the State Department's Western Hemisphere affairs bureau. "It is hard to say what position it will take post-Fidel." In the meantime, he said, "the success of the succession depends on the absolute control of the state." For now, he added, potential reformers have been lying low, awaiting a more favorable climate to make their move. Once Castro dies, Cuban authorities will have a choice between "deepening repression" or a policy of greater openness to the world, Shannon added. As Cuban officials see it, the system Castro created will survive him. But Shannon expressed doubt that a successor can match the traits that have enabled Fidel Castro to survive in power for almost 48 years. "There is nobody like Fidel," Shannon said, citing his "revolutionary legitimacy," charisma, political skills and ruthlessness. (*AP*, 14/12/06)

**December 13:** The United States rebuffed a recent offer by Cuba for talks and said Havana had become even more hard-line since Raul Castro stepped in for his ailing brother Fidel Castro. Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon, the top US diplomat for Latin America, made clear Washington would only deal with Raul Castro's government when it showed commitment to a peaceful transition to democracy and not before. "In Cuba there is not that commitment to democracy," Shannon said in a briefing to reporters. Earlier this month, Raul Castro, Cuba's acting president, made a direct offer of talks with the United States. The younger Castro became acting president after his brother underwent emergency intestinal surgery in July. Shannon said there had been a greater crackdown on dissent since the younger Castro effectively took over. "It is a transfer of power that is in an uncomfortable moment. With Fidel still alive (and Raul in place), the regime has actually become harder and more orthodox and is not in a position to signal in any meaningful way what direction it will take post-Fidel," said Shannon. (*Reuters*, 14/12/06)

**December 14:** Fidel Castro is very ill and close to death, Director of National Intelligence John D. Negroponte said. "Everything we see indicates it will not be much longer (...) months, not years," Negroponte told a meeting of Washington Post editors and reporters. (*The Washington Post*, 15/12/06)

**December 14:** The US Department of Homeland Security's US Coast Guard, 7th District, issued a press release informing that the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter *Chandeleur* repatriated 16 Cuban migrants to Bahia de Cabanas, Cuba. On December 3, 14 male migrants on board were spotted by a vessel 12 miles southwest of Marquesas, Florida. A Coast Guard helicopter spotted a raft with four migrants on December 4 about 22 miles south of Rebecca Shoals, Florida. At the request of U.S. Citizen and Immigration Service, two of the four migrants will be taken to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for further disposition. Once on board Coast Guard cutters, all migrants receive food, water and any necessary medical attention. (*US Fed News*, 14/12/06)

**December 14:** A judge awarded \$400 million (euro303 million) in damages to the family of an American who was tortured and then killed by a Cuban firing squad shortly after Fidel Castro took power. The ruling by Miami-Dade County Circuit Judge Thomas S. Wilson Jr. came after a default judgment was entered against Cuba in favor of the family of Robert Fuller, a plantation operator who died on October 16, 1960. Cuba never answered or defended itself in the family's lawsuit. (*AP*, 14/12/06)

**December 15:** The largest delegation from the US Congress to visit Cuba since 1959 arrived in Havana seeking to open a dialogue with the communist government of acting President Raul Castro despite White House opposition to such contacts. The stepping aside of ailing Fidel Castro, who has not appeared in public for four months, has set the

stage for ending political hostility dating from the start of the Cold War, they said. "We sense this is an important time and we hope to meet with officials and hopefully launch a new era in US-Cuba relations," said Representative Jeff Flake, an Arizona Republican. The six Democrats and four Republicans hope to meet with Raul Castro, who took over July 31 after his brother underwent emergency surgery for an undisclosed illness. (*Reuters*, 15/12/06)

**December 15:** US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said a delegation of ten lawmakers' trip to Cuba would have no effect on official US policy toward Cuba. "This divide over whether or not to have an embargo on Cuba or to lift it, it's a debate that's been going on for some time. We understand that there are some in Congress who have a very different view. As a matter of policy, we of course have an opposite view from the folks that are down there today," he said. (*AP*, 17/12/06)

**December 15:** Seven Cubans arrived in the United States a second time, almost a year after they were repatriated because they first landed on an abandoned Florida Keys bridge not considered US territory by immigration officials. Although a federal judge later said they should have been allowed to stay and the United States issued them visas, relatives said they grew tired of waiting for the Cuban government's permission to leave the island and took off in a homemade boat. They were among 16 Cubans who arrived near the south end of the Seven Mile Bridge in the Keys and were taken into US Border Patrol custody, the relatives said. The Border Patrol said it was interviewing the new arrivals and could not confirm their identities. (*Sun Sentinel*, 16/12/06)

**December 17:** A delegation of ten US lawmakers in Havana said issues of human rights and economic freedom are important to them too, but that it is time for the two countries to find creative ways to solve their differences. In a joint statement they suggested some specific issues to negotiate, such as migration, drug trafficking and the environmental impact of Cuban oil explorations in the Gulf of Mexico. "I think this is the golden opportunity (for talks) ... especially as we make a transition in Washington," said Gregory Meeks, a New York Democrat, referring to his party's upcoming takeover of Congress. But the US representatives from Kansas, Texas, California, Tennessee, Arizona, New York and Massachusetts also said they were surprised at what they called the rigidity of some Cuban officials, who said they have no plans to make changes in the island's political or economic system in the future. "Basically we're being told it's the same menu, different waiter," said Jim McGovern of Massachusetts. (*AP*, 17/12/06)

**December 17:** The largest US congressional delegation in years ended talks in Havana without a commitment from Cuban authorities to release political prisoners or make other concessions that could bolster those seeking to ease US sanctions against Cuba. Cuban officials were amenable to discussing with the US such issues as immigration and anti-narcotics cooperation, but they refused to concede any changes in internal policy as a way to further talks. "The Cuban officials made every attempt to convince us [and] to demonstrate that there is no change of policy in Cuba," said Representative Jerry Moran (Republican-Kansas), one of 10 American lawmakers visiting Cuba. "They made a very strong effort to convince us that the ball was in the United States' court. They've done all they were going to do." "The party line is that Fidel is coming back," said Jane Harman (Democrat-California), another delegation member. The delegation was led by Mr. Delahunt and by Representative Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, the leaders of the Cuba Working Group in the House. The lawmakers met with the foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, the National Assembly president, Ricardo Alarcón, and Yadir García, an economic minister, among others. They did not have any contact with Fidel Castro or meet with Raúl Castro. The Communist Party newspaper reported that Fidel Castro had telephoned several Cuban lawmakers. "It seems that the Cuban government may not be ready to say that a new era has begun," Mr. Flake said when asked why Raúl Castro had not met with the lawmakers. [[Statement by Jeff Flake on behalf of Congressional delegation](#)] (*AP, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune*, 18/12/06)

**December 18:** Canada's ties with Cuba can help nudge that country toward democracy after an ailing Fidel Castro is gone, according to a senior US State Department official. "Canadians have been able to maintain relationships both with the [Castro] regime, and Cuban civil society and Cuban dissidents," assistant secretary of state Thomas Shannon said in an interview. "That's no small feat. Only a few countries have been able to do that." Mr. Shannon, who is in

charge of the State Department's bureau of Western hemispheric affairs, said Canada, Mexico, and other countries in the region share with the United States the desire to see Cubans transform their country into a democracy. The fact that Canada and others trade with Cuba while the United States maintains an economic embargo is simply a matter of different tactics, Mr. Shannon said. "The tactical differences can actually work to the advantage of our larger objective," he said. "We are coming to the end of the Castro era. We all need to look ahead," Mr. Shannon said. (*Globe & Mail*, 19/12/06)

**December 18:** Cuban migrants sent back to the island this year after reaching an abandoned bridge in the Florida Keys said they would not risk their lives again like the other half of their group, which took a second sea voyage to the United States the week before. Noel Reyes, one of the eight remaining "bridge" migrants in Cuba, said he was thrilled the others arrived safely but would wait to leave the island legally. "I already risked my life once, why should I go and commit madness again?" he asked. The group has been waiting several months for permission to leave by the Cuban government. They received US visas to emigrate after a federal judge ruled against the original Department of Homeland Security decision that sent the group back to Cuba. (*AP*, 18/12/06)

**December 18:** Former Cuban diplomat and economist Oscar Espinosa's beef is as much with the United States government as it is with Havana's communist authorities. "It's absurd what the Americans are doing," he said during a long interview in the small Havana apartment, stuffed with books where he lives with his wife and fellow dissident, Miriam Leiva. "There's no room for extremism. What we need is to create space for dialogue." He was referring to the widely condemned US embargo against Cuba and to additional restrictions imposed by the Bush administration in 2004 limiting family travel to the island by Cuban-Americans, as well as cash remittances sent to relatives. Dramatic recent events in Havana and Washington are causing Cubans, both on the island and in exile, to question US policy more loudly than ever. Many Cubans would like to see Washington explore a different approach with the collective leadership emerging under Castro's younger brother, Defense Minister Raul Castro. "Without Fidel, we have to look at Cuba with a more open mind," said Vladimiro Roca, another dissident who has served jail time. Raul Castro deserves credit as "a very organized person" who capably led the Defense Ministry, which Roca described as "the most organized and efficient institution" in Cuba. "He has always had good advisers and he listens to advice," he added. Espinosa and Roca agreed that the United States should carefully study Raul Castro's offer of negotiations. "He made a positive proposal," said Roca, the son of a Communist Party leader. "It deserved a better answer." (*St. Petersburg Times*, 18/12/06)

**December 18:** Groups of Cuba's internal opposition asked for the "urgent" normalization of humanitarian aid from the United States in view of it being stopped after an official report found irregularities in its administration. The request was made in a communique signed by four leaders of dissident organizations and addressed to US congressmen William Delahunt (Democrat-Massachusetts) and Jeff Flake (Republican-Arizona), who led a congressional delegation that visited Cuba for meetings with officials of the Communist government. "Do everything you can to normalize urgently the sending of humanitarian aid in the form of medicines, food and other vital subsistence items, and we acknowledge the positive role of those in charge of getting that aid to us," the communique said. "There is no plea for an increase of anything, we only ask for greater control and wish to express our concern about the stoppage of aid," the president of the outlawed Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, Elizardo Sanchez, told the press. Sanchez is one of the signatories of the document, together with Marta Beatriz Roque of the Assembly to Promote Civil Society; Vladimiro Roca of the Cuban Social Democratic Party, and Gisela Delgado, spokesperson for the Independent Libraries Project and the wife of recently freed political prisoner Hector Palacios. (*EFE*, 18/12/06)

**December 18:** A South Florida Spanish-language TV station has begun broadcasting programs produced by TV Marti, the federally owned station that beams anti-Castro programming into Cuba, US officials said. The first show, a half-hour news broadcast, came as Miami-based TV Marti faced a new round of criticism for spending \$10 million annually to produce programs rarely seen by the network's intended audience. Radio and TV Marti have always had the option of using US frequencies in case the stations were jammed in Cuba, said Joseph O'Connell, a spokesman for the

Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the Cuban broadcasting stations. TV Marti has long been jammed on the communist island nation, but December 18 appeared to mark the first time the programming was broadcast on US airwaves. In recent years, the Marti podcasts have been available in the US over the Internet. The show aired on WPMF-TV, a local affiliate of the Hispanic Aztec Americas network. (AP, 19/12/06)

**December 18:** Representatives Jerry Moran and Jo Ann Emerson, back from a visit to Cuba, said the US government should ease travel restrictions and expand agricultural trade with the communist nation. "It's become clear to me that personal freedom follows economic opportunity," said Moran, Republican-Kansas. "The larger trading relationship we have, the higher standard of living that Cuban people have, the more demands they will make upon their government for change." Moran and Emerson, Republican-Missouri, were part of a 10-member bipartisan congressional delegation that visited Cuba. (AP, 18/12/06)

**December 19:** Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated that should ailing leader Fidel Castro die, the United States won't try to engage his brother, Raul, who's temporarily in charge and is Fidel's presumed successor. Giving an impression of American outreach "from one dictator to another" would be "the worst betrayal" of Cubans, she said. (*McClatchy Newspapers*, 20/12/06)

**December 19:** The speaker of the Cuban parliament said there was little possibility of any changes in US policy towards Cuba while George W. Bush is president. "We shouldn't believe that there will be any important changes while Bush is president and as long as the current political balance exists in the United States," Ricardo Alarcon said during a session of the legislature. Alarcon answered lawmakers' questions about the recent Havana visit of a delegation of 10 US congressmen to talk with high-ranking members of the Cuban government about bilateral relations. Alarcon said that Cuba is quite far down the list of priorities for American politicians at the moment because their attention is focused on other problems, like the war in Iraq. Nonetheless, he said that while a majority in the US Congress might conceivably vote to modify or eliminate restrictions on trips to the island, it would not get the two-thirds necessary to override a presidential veto. "This is a matter that, regardless of the existing situation between the two countries, is destined to be eliminated because it affects many people and violates the US Constitution itself," he said, referring specifically to the travel restrictions. (EFE, 19/12/06)

**December 19:** A psychology professor and his wife pleaded guilty to reduced federal charges in a case involving allegations that both had spied for the Cuban government for decades. Carlos Alvarez, 61, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to become an unregistered foreign agent. His 56-year-old wife, Elsa Alvarez, admitted knowing about her husband's illegal activities but failing to report them to authorities. Carlos Alvarez faces up to five years in prison and his wife up to three years on the revised charges. Both were charged previously with the more serious charge of acting as illegal Cuban agents, which carries a longer possible prison sentence. US District Judge K. Michael Moore set sentencing for February 27. (AP, 19/12/06)

**December 19:** US Congress will investigate allegations of mismanagement and political cronyism at taxpayer-funded Radio and TV Martí, a ranking Democrat said. Representative William Delahunt (Democrat-Massachusetts) -- slated to chair the oversight and investigations subcommittee for the House International Relations Committee -- said he will move to hold hearings on the Martí in late January or early February. His comments came a day after Radio Mambí, WAQI-AM (710), and Azteca América, WPMF-TV 38, each began carrying an hour of Martí programming daily for payment. "This will be a priority," said Delahunt, who was in Cuba this week as part of a congressional delegation. "There's mismanagement (...) that really demands a thorough review." (*The Miami Herald*, 20/12/06)

**December 20:** Several high-profile members of Cuba's dissident movement blasted US legislators for ignoring the pro-democracy activists during their visit to the island, while others said they understood the omission and did not take it as a slight. "The result of the visit is deplorable. They gave up the chance to meet with the opposition and lobby for the release of political prisoners in the hopes of a meeting with Raul Castro, and they didn't even get that," said Miriam

Leiva, a member of the Ladies in White hailed internationally for its work on behalf of political prisoners. "The legislators left not only with empty hands, but with dirty hands," said Marta Beatriz Roque, of the Assembly for Promoting Civil Society. "It would have been positive if, in the first place, they would have spoken with the opposition and thus been able to take back to their country the issue of human rights, of the release of political prisoners, of the repression here. But they did not do that," she said. For his part, Manuel Cuesta Morua of the Arco Progresista (Progressive Arc) told the press a meeting with the dissidents would have served only to provide "an exchange of opinions already well known." Elizardo Sanchez, president of the not-officially-recognized Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, said the lawmakers' decision not to meet with dissidents was "understandable." "There is much more closeness between us - between the congressmen and the opposition - than there is between them and the government of Cuba," he said, implying that seeking to bridge the broader gap makes sense. (*EFE*, 20/12/06)

**December 20:** With Fidel Castro's health waning, Governor Jeb Bush, Governor-elect Charlie Crist and other federal and state officials reaffirmed their support of the US trade embargo on Cuba in hopes it will lead to the communist government's downfall upon his death. "The hour is upon us and the time is now," US Senator Mel Martinez (Republican-Florida), told supporters of the US-Cuba Democracy political action committee at the group's annual luncheon. Martinez was born in Cuba, but his family sent him to Florida four decades ago when he was 15 to escape the Castro government. (*Sun Sentinel*, 21/12/06)

**December 20:** The World Trade Center-Palm Beach plans a humanitarian, educational and information exchange mission to Cuba in June, the international business group announced. "We hope to exchange information about several key resources found in Palm Beach County: agriculture, ranching and food processing; water purification, irrigation and related technologies; transportation; and medicine and life sciences," Lou Haddad, president of the group, said in a statement. Haddad said the group is working with its counterpart in Cuba, the World Trade Center-Havana, to organize the visit. About 30 professionals from South Florida are expected to make the trip, pending government approvals. "There once existed a pre-Castro relationship between the Port of Palm Beach and Cuba," Haddad said. "We believe that Palm Beach County can re-establish former ties and assist the island to develop its economy." The delegation does not plan to meet with any Cuban government agencies or officials, "just everyday people like us exchanging information and getting to know each other's cultures better," he said. (*Sun Sentinel*, 21/12/06)

**December 21:** According to official figures, in the last fiscal year, from September 31, 2005 until October 1, 2006, the US Interests Section in Havana granted Cuban citizens 21,195 permanent resident visas and another 7, 823 visas for temporary visitors. With these figures, the US government honors its commitment and exceeds the 20,075 visas granted in the previous fiscal year. (*EFE*, 21/12/06)

**December 21:** Five Cuban-Americans were called to testify in a federal grand jury probe exploring allegations they helped send more than \$30,000 to an anti-Castro militant suspected of directing attacks on Cuba, their lawyer said. All five deny wrongdoing, attorney Gilberto M. Garcia said. He told the press that four of his clients claim someone used their names to send transfers to Luis Posada Carriles, an anti-Castro militant wanted in Cuba and Venezuela. He said a fifth, Oscar Rojas, acknowledges handling transfers but says he did so only at the request of a former millionaire businessman that he worked for and did not know what the funds would be used for, according to a press report. Garcia said one of his clients testified and that two gave written statements, although he wouldn't specify which. He said two others were excused from testifying after saying they intended to invoke their Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination. Posada, 79, has spent the past 18 months in federal custody in El Paso, Texas, on immigration charges. (*AP*, 21/12/06)

**December 21:** Representative Jerry Moran (Republican-Kansas) is traveling to Cuba to meet with government and trade officials about the possibility of expanding agricultural exports to one of the country's nearest neighbors. The visit by Moran, currently chairman of the House Agriculture Committee's General Commodities Subcommittee, could

include a meeting with current acting-President Raul Castro. "I have long fought for the opening of trade and easing of the embargo of Cuba," said Moran, who will become ranking member on the subcommittee in January. "These meetings with Cuban officials come at a unique time as the health of Cuban leader Fidel Castro continues to be in question." Moran said he wanted "to get a better understanding of the political situation in Cuba, explore further opportunities to export US agriculture commodities and work to establish a framework for our countries' relations during this time of transition in Cuba." In 2000, Moran successfully helped open the door to US agriculture sales to Cuba. (*Farm Press*, 21/12/06)

**December 21:** Top Bush administration aides held a meeting at the White House on a post-Castro Cuba. The meeting, which was not publicized but was reported by Bloomberg News, included Stephen J. Hadley, the national security adviser; Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, and Karl Rove, the president's chief political adviser. (*The New York Times*, 22/12/06)

**December 22:** US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen admitted, through a spokesman, that she did call for the death of ailing Fidel Castro during an interview with a British documentary-maker whom she had earlier accused of altering the video. "Yes, it's in the documentary, she said that," said Alex Cruz, the congresswoman's spokesman. Ros-Lehtinen did not want to respond further, Cruz said, because "she's focused her energies on issues that are more important for the community. "Neither she nor I have seen the raw footage, without editing, but if that's in the documentary, she said it," Cruz said. As she is about to become the ranking minority member in the House International Relations Committee, Ros-Lehtinen has found herself embroiled in controversy about her credibility and her relations with the media. (*The Miami Herald*, 23/12/06)

**December 23:** Top Bush administration officials met on December 21 to discuss Cuba's political future, with US intelligence reports predicting that ailing Fidel Castro may not have long to live. President George W. Bush's national security adviser Stephen Hadley chaired the 90-minute meeting that included Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other officials, National Security Council press secretary Gordon Johndroe said. "We're engaged in an interagency process that is focused on a successful transition to democracy for the people of Cuba," Johndroe said. He declined to provide further details about the meeting at the White House. (*Reuters*, 23/12/06)

**December 24:** With the 80-year-old Cuban president believed to be terminally ill and his brother Raul, 77, who now runs the country, showing little appetite for democratic change, authorities believe that Florida could be hit by a tidal wave of refugees from the communist island once the sickly dictator dies. In the biggest exercise of its kind, 520 officials from 75 federal, state and local agencies have been running through their plans for such a crisis, wary that Castro's demise could prompt an exodus on a scale unseen since the Mariel boatlift in 1980, when 125,000 Cubans took to the sea. "If Raul lets people go and there's not a naval blockade to stop them, we estimate as many as 500,000 people will leave in the first year," said Andy Gomez, a senior fellow at the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, which has been involved in the planning. He added: "The pressure on the social infrastructure here will be unbearable." In a series of table-top exercises held in a convention centre in Fort Lauderdale, emergency officials from agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, the FBI, police and Coast Guard, worked through simulated scenarios. (*The Telegraph*, 24/12/06)

**December 25:** The largest contingent of US congressmen to travel to Cuba since the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to the presidency visited the country and US Representative James P. McGovern (Democrat-Worcester), was among them. With Mr. Castro in ill health, his brother Raul assuming the interim presidency, and Democrats ready to take over both branches of the Congress next month, Mr. McGovern believes the time is right for the US to normalize relations with its controversial close neighbor. It is a policy he has long advocated as nearly a lone voice, but like many of Mr. McGovern's pet issues these days it is gaining in popularity. For Mr. McGovern, who has been to Cuba several times, it was an opportunity to check up on a project that has drawn his keen interest - the rebuilding of the home of

author Ernest Hemingway and efforts to preserve important documents that were left untouched in that house for more than 40 years after his death. (*Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, 25/12/06)

**December 26:** A US official said his government agency had "no reason" to reconsider its evaluation that Fidel Castro's condition was "very serious indeed." The official spoke on condition that his name and affiliation not be revealed, given the sensitivity and speculative nature of the subject. The State Department declined to comment on the assessment of Castro's health condition that Spanish doctor José Luis García Sabrido made in Havana. But privately officials reiterated the US government's previously stated belief that Castro is more ill than Cuban officials have let on. The State Department has said since August that it believes Castro will not return to wield the kind of absolute power he once held. (*The Miami Herald* 27/12/06)

**December 26:** US officials are keeping a close eye on the case of Dr. Amauris Sanmartino, a Cuban who holds permanent residence status in Bolivia, and who would be deported by the Bolivian government. "We are aware of Mr. Sanmartino's case and we are in contact with the Bolivian government about it," read a brief statement released by the US Embassy in La Paz. "In addition to local law, we believe that this case involves international conventions and agreements to which Bolivia is a signatory." (*AP*, 26/12/06)

**December 28:** Members of the US solidarity brigade Henry Wallace defended Cuba's right to self-determination and called the US ban on trips to the island institutional violation. Sonja De Vries, one of 23 US members of the Kentucky brigade aimed at spreading Cuba's reality in their country, said "the US has never respected any people's self-determination." De Vries is the daughter of journalist Henry Wallace, who died on April 2004. (*Prensa Latina*, 28/12/06)

**December 28:** A group of Cuban writers, journalists and actors, recently created a committee for the independence of Puerto Rico in the city of Manzanillo, in the eastern province of Granma. The association aims at encouraging the solidarity movement with the brother country of Puerto Rico, the organizers said. The committee was organized by the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists in the municipalities of Granma, and the Jose Marti Cultural Society. It was named after the Puerto Rican revolutionary, Modesto Tirado Aviles (1866-1952), who was a personal friend of Cuban national hero, Jose Marti. (*AIN*, 28/12/06)

**December 28:** Two people remain missing after a boat with 11 people on board foundered Christmas Day off the coast of the western Cuban province of Pinar del Rio, the official daily Granma reported. The newspaper said the two missing individuals fell off the vessel when it was returning to shore following a failed attempt to sail from the island to Mexico. "After hours of fruitless searching" the two were considered missing, said Granma, which noted that the other nine passengers were rescued by the Cuban border patrol. The daily said that the would-be emigrants had been picked up at different parts of the island for the illegal voyage on December 21. They set off in a vessel made of plastic and equipped with a "Lombardini engine, similar to those used for irrigation work." Their plan was to arrive in Mexico and then slip across the border into the United States. During the 2006 fiscal year, which ended September 30, 2,810 Cuban migrants were intercepted at sea by the US Coast Guard, the highest number since the 37,191 picked up during the mass exodus of 1994. The US Interests Section in Havana issued more than 21,000 visas to Cuban citizens in the same fiscal year. (*EFE*, 28/12/06)

**December 30:** Even with Fidel Castro seriously ill and power transferred to his brother, the ailing leader's presence is widely felt and is keeping the country from taking any new economic or political direction, says the US government's top diplomat for Latin America. "We see that this regime has made this successful transfer of power and is trying to consolidate itself, but it can't define itself or separate itself from Fidel," Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said in an interview. "My guess is that we're not going to see that until Fidel Castro is dead and buried." As Cuba prepares to celebrate the 48th anniversary of Castro's rise to power on New Year's Day, the country is in a sort of limbo, Shannon said. "Fidel Castro is in this odd moment where he is neither alive nor dead

politically. He is alive physically, but he's not in charge day to day, and he's obviously not present day to day, but it appears that he still has the ability to sit up in bed and give orders occasionally," Shannon said. (*San Jose Mercury News*, 31/12/06)

**December 30:** The US government's top diplomat for Latin America, Thomas Shannon, said four goals must be met before the US government considers a change in policy: all political prisoners must be freed, human rights guaranteed, trade unions allowed to form and concrete moves made toward free elections. "We're not going to engage with Cuba just to engage," Shannon said. "Any engagement we have with Cuba has to be part of some kind of change process that leads toward this transition to democracy, and therefore we depend on what the Cuban people think and will want us to do." Shannon said Cubans will set the course for their country. "Ultimately, Cuba's transition is going to be driven by Cubans, not by the United States, not by the international community or the Organization of American States, nobody except Cubans in Cuba," he said. Shannon acknowledged that the US government has no clear idea what ails Castro. (*San Jose Mercury News*, 31/12/06)

**December 31:** Experts say the size of Cuba's offshore oil deposits is still in question, but the potential is impressive. A US Geological Survey study estimates that a curving belt of ocean floor north of Cuba may contain at least 4.5 billion barrels of oil and nearly 10 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. For impoverished Cuba, the oil prospects are dazzling, and Fidel Castro's government has wasted no time in pushing to develop the fields. Cuba has signed oil deals with firms from Spain, Norway, Venezuela, India, China and Canada, a clear sign that a Cuban oil boom is brewing. The activity has piqued the interest of US lawmakers. Competing bills were introduced in Congress this year, with supporters of the US embargo against Cuba proposing to deny visas to foreign oil workers headed to Cuba. Their opponents introduced a bill that would exempt US firms from the embargo and allow them to participate in the Cuban oil rush. "At risk are the Florida Keys and the state's tourism economy, not to mention the \$8 billion that Congress is investing to restore the Everglades," said Senator Bill Nelson (Democrat-Florida), one of the sponsors of the bill aiming to limit the Cuban drilling. Neither bill passed, but the issue seems certain to come up again. Embargo opponents hope that the new Congress, which Democrats will run for the first time in more than a decade, will ease the trade and travel restrictions and allow US participation. The Cuban government has sought bids from American oil firms. "This is a product the U.S. needs," said Kirby Jones, president of the US-Cuba Trade Association, a group seeking to break the embargo. "If we maintain the embargo, it says we don't need that oil and it's OK for India, Canada, Spain and these other countries to take it." (*Palm Beach Post*, 1/1/07)