

FOCAL's Research Forum on Cuba

Chronicle on Cuba

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Highlights

Domestic Affairs: Racism is under discussion among the Cuban population and intellectuals. Authorities harass blogger Yoani Sanchez. The Latin American Film Festival runs for ten days in Havana. Authorities arrest dozens of activists on the eve of the 60th Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. At the National Assembly, Raul Castro calls for austerity measures and stricter management.

Economy: The implementation of salary reform experiences delays. Venezuela and Cuba sign an agreement for 163 joint projects for 2009. Cuba registers a GDP growth of 4.3 percent. Cuba's trade deficit soars by nearly 70 percent in 2008.

Foreign Affairs: The 3rd Cuba-CARICOM Summit takes place in Santiago de Cuba. Several Latin American governments and bodies favour the return of the island to the Organization of American States. President Raul Castro travels to Venezuela and Brazil. Cuba is formally introduced into the Rio Group.

Security: A group of Russian warships visit the island.

US-Cuba Relations: President Raul Castro says that Cuba has battled Washington's trade embargo for nearly 50 years and is prepared to do so for another 50. Business groups and dozens of other organizations send letters to President-elect Obama asking him for a change in US policy toward Cuba. Raul Castro proposes a swap of prisoners with the US.

Lo más relevante

Asuntos domésticos: La población e intelectuales cubanos debaten acerca del racismo. Las autoridades hostigan a la bloguera Yoani Sánchez. El Festival de Cine Latinoamericano tiene lugar durante diez días en La Habana. Las autoridades arrestan a decenas de disidentes en vísperas del 60 Aniversario de la Declaración de los Derechos Humanos. Raúl Castro hace un llamado ante la Asamblea Nacional hacia medidas de austeridad y mayor control administrativo.

Economía: Sufre dilaciones la implementación de la reforma salarial. Venezuela y Cuba firman un acuerdo por 163 proyectos conjuntos para 2009. Cuba experimenta un

crecimiento del PIB del 4.3 por ciento. El déficit comercial de Cuba se eleva a cerca del 70 por ciento en 2008.

Asuntos exteriores: La 3^{ra} Cumbre CARICOM-Cuba se desarrolla en Santiago de Cuba. Varios gobiernos e instancias latinoamericanas favorecen el reingreso de Cuba a la Organización de Estados Americanos. El presidente Raúl Castro viaja a Venezuela y Brasil. Cuba se incorpora formalmente al Grupo de Río.

Seguridad: Un grupo de naves de guerra rusas visitan la isla.

Relaciones Cuba-Estados Unidos: El Presidente Raúl Castro dice que Cuba ha resistido el embargo por 50 años y está dispuesta a hacerlo otros 50. Grupos de negocios y decenas de otras organizaciones envían cartas al Presidente electo Barack Obama en solicitud de un cambio de política hacia Cuba. Raúl Castro propone un cambio de prisioneros con Estados Unidos.

Domestic Affairs

December 1: Cubans believe the island's black population is restricted from obtaining better jobs and say the possibility of a black man someday governing the nation is unlikely, according to a study published this week. The study, by the independent academic project known as Cubabarómetro, was conducted in Havana in September and October and focused on monitoring perceptions of racial differences and the way individuals define themselves in the current context of Cuban society. Among the most revealing findings: Cubans believe that blacks live primarily in the nation's public housing developments and improvised tenements, while whites are believed to live in the better established and more comfortable neighbourhoods. Similarly, 82.8 percent of those interviewed for the study believe that blacks predominate among the island's prison population. The study found that most Cubans believe there is no chance that a black person will ever govern the island in the near future. When asked if a black man could be elected president after the current administration's term is over, the overwhelming majority answered no (80.7 percent); while 7.05 per cent believed it possible. The remaining 12.2 percent had no opinion. The study, entitled "Perception Regarding The Nation's Racial Situation", was conducted by interviewing 425 people who were subdivided by gender, race and age (*The Miami Herald*, 1/12/08).

December 1: Two movies about fallen Cuban hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara -- both by US director Steven Soderbergh and starring Puerto Rico's Benicio del Toro -- were to receive top billing at the 10-day Latin American Film Festival opening in Havana. The films, shown in Miami, were cleared by festival president Alfredo Guevara -- no relation to Che -- who had feared the movies would dwell on personal clashes between Guevara and ailing former Cuban leader Fidel Castro. "El Argentino" deals with Guevara's involvement with the Cuban revolution and friendship with Castro, while "El Guerrillero," delves in Guevara's revolutionary efforts in South America, after he left Cuba in 1965, and his death in Bolivia in 1967. The festival kicks off with Argentine director Pablo Trapero's "Leonera". In all, 20 feature films, 19 short films, 29

documentaries and 24 animation movies will be shown at the festival, which includes entries from Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, and other countries (*AFP*, 1/12/08).

December 2: After being postponed twice due to extreme weather conditions, the Seventh Congress of the Committees in Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) will take place on December 13-14 at Havana's Convention Centre. The announcement was made by Juan Jose Rabilero, national coordinator of the CDRs, who added that 1,000 delegates and 200 guests will participate in the event (*ACN*, 3/12/08).

December 2: Cubans allegedly have stolen everything from gasoline and cement to rice and powdered milk - one person was even caught with 320 tubes of toothpaste - in the wake of three recent hurricanes that caused more than \$10 billion in damages. Officials have prosecuted more than 1,200 cases of hurricane-related crime in the Havana region through the first half of November, the government-run Havana newspaper *Tribuna* said. Courts imposed jail sentences to more than one-third of the people arrested in a crackdown on fraud, theft of government property and other crimes following Hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma that hit, starting in late August. "In the city of Havana, we are in combat," *Tribuna* declared, saying the police actions were "in defence of the interests of the majority of the people." The newspaper said that 34 percent of those prosecuted were sent to jail, about 8 percent were sentenced to correctional work programs, about 16 percent were fined and 4 percent received some kind of parole. The rest of the people were absolved, or their cases merely filed away. Cuban courts have also imposed stiff sentences on people accused of price-gouging and stealing construction materials and other supplies (*The Miami Herald*, 2/12/08).

December 3: The Cuban government has replaced 95 percent of the refrigerators in homes on the island with "more efficient" models as part of its plan to reduce electricity consumption, the state-run press reported. *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper cited the deputy minister for Basic Industry, Juan Manuel Presa, as saying that the country also replaced virtually all the water pumps and light bulbs with others that use less power, and he added that in some municipalities electricity use had been reduced by 10 percent. The strategy of changing old US- or Russian-made refrigerators began to be implemented in 2007, when they began to be phased out in favor of modern Chinese models that the government distributed to the public at subsidized prices. Then-President Fidel Castro at the time called the old devices "energy devourers" and he planned to eliminate them as one of the main features of his "energy revolution" policy. Cuba had launched that policy in 2005 to try and renew its sources of energy production, revamp the power distribution system and reduce electricity consumption on the communist-ruled island. In addition to the replacement of obsolete and inefficient appliances, the government has implemented other power-saving measures including higher electricity prices, and in 2005 it launched a campaign against the widespread pilfering of gasoline at service stations (*EFE*, 3/12/08).

December 4: Acclaimed filmmaker Mike Leigh was in Cuba to receive an award at a film festival that will screen 10 of his best productions, according to local reports.

Havana's 30th Latin American Cinema Festival was to screen "Bleak Moments" (1971), Leigh's big-screen debut, the official Cuban News Agency (ACN) reported. Leigh, 65, has received five Oscar nominations, and numerous awards in Britain and around the world. The director's award in Havana will be his second Latin American prize. He received Argentina's Silver Condor in 1998 for "Secrets & Lies" (1996), also set to be screened in Cuba and for which he was nominated for a best director Academy Award (*AFP*, 5/12/08).

December 4: The Communications Ministry put into effect a law that instructs the island's Internet providers to "prevent access to sites where the content is contrary to social interests, morals or good custom, as well as the use of applications that affect the integrity or security of the State." The law was published in the latest edition of *Gaceta Oficial* (*The Miami Herald*, 5/12/08).

December 5: Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada, president of the Cuban parliament, announced that the legislature will hold an ordinary session starting December 27 at 10:00 a.m. at the Havana Convention Center, as posted in *Granma* newspaper. Cuba has a one-chamber parliament with legislators elected to five-year terms. The current representatives took their seats in February 2008 (*ACN*, 5/12/08).

December 5: Members of the national executive board of the National Independent Confederacy of Cuba (CONIC) delivered a set of demands at the Office of the Republic's Attorney General. Among other things, they demand that the government and the National Union of Cuban Workers (CTC) abide by the letter of ILO Conventions No. 87 and 98, which guarantee the right of workers to organize and engage in collective bargaining. They also call for the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, independent union activists (*Cubanet*, 15/12/08).

December 5: Police have prohibited Cuba's most prominent blogger from attending an independent cyber-workshop and warned that her activities ran afoul of the law, her husband said. Yoani Sánchez and husband and fellow blogger Reynaldo Escobar were summoned separately on December 3 to a police station near their apartment in Havana's Vedado district and reprimanded, Escobar said. Authorities told the couple they could not travel to the western province of Pinar del Río for a two-day bloggers' workshop. "We aren't attending the inauguration of the workshop, which has not been suspended," said Escobar, without elaborating. "We've just changed the dynamic of how we are meeting." An account of the reprimand appears on Sánchez's blog, *Generacion Y*. The site was blocked to Internet users on the island. Sánchez wrote that police told her, "We want to warn you that you have transgressed all the limits of tolerance with your closeness and contact with elements of the counterrevolution." The gathering was supposed to involve about 20 bloggers and was being organized by Dagoberto Valdés, a Roman Catholic layman in Pinar del Río. Valdés ran the church magazine *Vitral*, which gently called for more plurality and democratic participation, until he was removed from the post by a bishop in April 2007. Valdés now runs the online journal *Convivencia*. A Valdés associate, Virgilio Toledo, said authorities in Pinar del Río also advised two local activists not to attend (*The Miami Herald*, 5/12/08).

December 6: A group of Cuban "bloggers" said they had held a Web-based workshop not sanctioned by the government, in an attempt to increase national awareness of online blogs. The bloggers, including Yoani Sánchez, winner of this year's Ortega y Gasset journalism award, were summoned by local police who forbade them to attend a congress initially scheduled to take place in the city of Pinar del Rio. "We finally found the cracks between the censors' fingers, through which information and knowledge have managed to slip," wrote Sánchez in her online blog *Generación Y*. "We have taken a first step because they (the Government) were only expecting a challenge or cancellation, but did not anticipate that the blogger phenomenon has a thousand ways of camouflaging itself," said Sánchez in reference to her tele-attendance. "Our right to education was being infringed upon," said Reynaldo Escobar, one of the event organizers ([Nota de prensa de los participantes](#); *Reuters*, 6/12/08).

December 7: A Villanueva resident was shot dead during a robbery at Los Villalobos store in Santiago de las Vegas. On December 4, Froilán Cortázar Rodríguez, 25, was shot twice by three "armed men wearing masks" who held up the store. Another customer was stabbed in the hand by the fleeing robbers as he was stepping into the establishment. The dissident publication "Noticias Consenso" denounced the rising wave of unrelenting violence affecting the island (*Cubaencuentro*, 7/12/08).

December 7: Cubans have applauded an American director's new movie on Ernesto "Che" Guevara for its accurate portrayal of his role in Cuba's revolution. They packed into two cinemas over the weekend to see "Che," a four-hour epic directed by Steven Soderbergh, during Havana's annual Latin American film festival. Benicio Del Toro, who plays the Argentine-born revolutionary, was joined at the screening by Leonardo Tamayo, who fought with Guevara in Bolivia. The film covers two parts of Guevara's life -- his role in the 1959 revolution in Cuba with Fidel Castro, and his struggle and death in Bolivia. "It's great. It really reflects the life of Che and his fight in Bolivia and how he was assassinated," said Eugenio Martinez, a retiree at one screening. "It's satisfying to see that his fight was not in vain." Havana festival organizers had said in July that "Che" would not be shown if it attacked Fidel Castro, the ailing 82-year-old who led Cuba for 49 years after taking power in the 1959 revolution. *Granma*, the newspaper of Cuba's ruling Communist Party, praised Del Toro but said Fidel Castro's character lacked charisma and depth (*Reuters*, 7/12/08).

December 8: The Cuban government will not again postpone labor reforms under which workers at the state enterprises that dominate the economy are to be paid on the basis of performance, a top official said. "There will be no more deferrals. We'll work to make what has been planned a fact," Deputy Labor Minister Carlos Mateu said in a letter published in the official weekly *Trabajadores*. Cuban President Raul Castro has made this labor overhaul the spearhead of his economic policy, which means a break with the concept of wage "egalitarianism" that reigned on the island during the almost fifty years of government by his ailing older brother, Fidel. Communist Party daily *Granma* reported at the end of October an extension until December 15 of the deadline for companies to adopt the pay-for-performance system, 4 1/2 months after the initial target date of August

1st. The deputy minister said that, "the reason for the four-month postponement in redesigning the pay-for-performance system was the delay in printing the methodology for its preparation." "It was decided to turn this delay into a strength by including in the discussion of the plan an analysis and discussion of the pay system," Mateu said, adding that in the analyses carried out in October and November, "progress is seen in the application of the resolution" for structuring the new system (*EFE*, 8/12/08).

December 9: Cuba will soon start issuing its first new private taxi permits in a decade as the Communist-run island tries to reduce "economic limitations" in transportation, local state media reported. The changes, aimed at improving public transport services, were the latest under President Raul Castro, who has taken small steps to reform Cuba's state-run economy since formally replacing older brother, Fidel Castro, in February. The government issued permits to private taxis during the economic crisis that followed the collapse of its main benefactor, the Soviet Union, in 1991, but ended the practice around 1998. The new permits were first announced in July. Around 70 private trucks, jeeps and cars will be allowed to take passengers in the central province of Cienfuegos, according to the local "5 Septiembre" weekly paper of the ruling Cuban Communist Party. "Due to the economic limitations in the public transportation service (...) new transport operating licenses will be authorized for private automobile owners in Cienfuegos province," the note said. It was not clear whether more permits would be handed out in other parts of the country, but a government resolution authorizing more private taxis will be published this month in the official gazette, the paper said (*Reuters*, 9/12/08).

December 9: The 50th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution will be celebrated in the island with cultural activities in all the municipalities of the country, said a Cuban Young Communists League leader, Joel Queipo. Queipo, with the National Bureau of the organization, said the program of activities to mark the date was called Todos con la Revolución (All with the Revolution). It includes several cultural and sports activities in a demonstration of the advances made in Cuba in those sectors. The most popular salsa bands of the country will give open concerts at the Jose Marti Anti-Imperialist Tribune, located across from the US Interest Section in Havana, beginning December 25. The central gala for the 50th anniversary of the revolution will take place December 21 in Havana's América Theater, and previously on the 20th several spots for cultural activities will be set up along Calle 23, one of the busiest streets in the Cuban capital (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 9: The opposition Democratic Solidarity Party (PSD) celebrated its 15th anniversary. The event, held in Havana and presided over by Fernando Sanchez, brought together delegates from Santiago de Cuba, Ciego de Avila, Havana and the capital. In his speech, Sanchez recalled that the party had been the result of the amalgamation of several opposition organizations or groups, united in their goals and activity to promote human rights, national reconciliation and a drive towards democracy." Sanchez Lopez favours joint efforts with other non-violent organizations, even if they do not share his political platform or are in no way affiliated with the umbrella project Cuban Liberal Convergence, comprised of the PSD and several other liberal parties (*Cubanet*, 11/12/08).

December 9: Representatives of Cuban dissident groups denounced the arrests of at least 20 activists and said that they would not change their plans to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights scheduled for December 10. Marta Beatriz Roque, the head of the Agenda for the Transition, and Elizardo Sanchez, of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, told the press that among the opposition figures arrested are Jorge Luis Garcia "Antunez," Guillermo Fariñas, Iania Yanes Contreras and Lazaro Alonso. In a communique, the Agenda for the Transition said that Cuban authorities are trying to prevent the dissidents from holding a commemoration of Human Rights Day "behind closed doors" until they ask for official permission. "When there are still several hours until the activity, reports are coming to us from different parts of the island of dissidents arrested during their trips to the capital and deported to their places of origin, as well as extreme vigilance on the houses of several activists in the interior of the country," the note adds. The promoters of the act said that their followers "will not evade the official challenge" and will celebrate "this anniversary in the streets, if necessary." Roque denounced the arrests, most of them of coordinators of her organization, in at least four provinces in addition to Havana. Sanchez said that "there are threats and prohibitions" by the authorities imposed on the opposition figures to get them not to travel to Havana, which, he said, are "connected" with the planned activities on December 10. "This is an effort by the government to abort the planned activities, some by the dissident movement and others by diplomats who have invited dissidents" to meet with them, he said (*EFE*, 9/12/08).

December 10: Up to a dozen human rights activists have been detained in Cuba in police operations apparently intended to keep them from attending Human Rights Day events in Havana, according to exile groups in Miami. The events are being organized to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Protests are planned by various Cuban dissident groups, including the Ladies in White organization formed by wives and female relatives of 75 dissidents and independent journalists who were rounded up during a 2003 crackdown on political dissent. The Federation of Latin American Women, a group that lobbies for an end to Cuba's dual currency, said Cuban State Security agents beat their members and broke one woman's hand. "They did not even ask for identification," FLAMUR President Belinda Salas said in a statement. "My husband Lazaro got such a beating that he was bleeding profusely through his mouth and head, plus he was struck hard on his testicles (...) They ripped my blouse, leaving me naked, and the beating left me with a fractured hand." The incident occurred when several state patrol cars arrived in Havana's Vedado neighborhood, FLAMUR said. The whereabouts of some who were picked up by police cruisers was unknown. The Democratic Directorate, a Miami exile group that works with dissidents in Cuba, said they knew of about a dozen people in cities across Cuba that had been arrested. "Right now we have a list of people detained, and it's going to keep going up," said the Democratic Directorate's deputy national secretary, Janisset Rivero. "We are not sure of all the details of what's going on, because every time we get someone on the line, we get cut off. They are cutting off communications." She said dissident doctor Darsi Ferrer had organized some kind of march in Havana. When Rivero talked to him, he said: "I've got a big police operation in front of my house," and the call ended. Arrests have taken place in Cienfuegos, Pinar del Río, Matanzas, Sancti Spiritus, Santa Clara,

Placetas and Havana, she said. Among the detained is former political prisoner Jorge Luis García Pérez, known as "Antúnez" (*The Miami Herald*, 10/12/08).

December 10: Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez is in Havana to attend the New Latin American Cinema Festival, and give his traditional workshop at the International Film and TV School he helped found in San Antonio de los Baños. Garcia Marquez, familiarly known as "Gabo" by the Spanish-speaking world, has been traveling to Cuba since 1986, to give a workshop titled "How to tell a story." This year is no exception and the young filmmakers will have the opportunity to exchange with the Nobel laureate, reported *Granma* newspaper. This time, Gabo invited Senel Paz, an author and journalist from the central Cuban province of Sancti Spiritus, to be his assistant for the workshop (*ACN*, 10/12/08).

December 10: The Cuban Government defended its human rights record, insisting that there are full civil rights on the island, contrary to claims of political dissidents. The Cuban revolution, which triumphed in 1959, "returned decorum, a sense of dignity, equality and opportunity to our people," said Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque. Perez Roque, speaking at the opening of a workshop to discuss the Human Rights declaration - which Cuba signed in February - said his government has made advances "in civil and political rights, and in social, economic and cultural rights. "We have built an imperfect society where we have not yet reached the society of justice and equality of which we dream. But we have made undeniable progress," he said. Two hundred people participated in the Human Rights workshop, half of them foreigners. They included author Alice Walker and anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan from the US; Chilean rights judge Juan Guzman Tapia; and Spanish singer-songwriter Luis Eduardo Aute (*AFP*, 10/12/08).

December 10: Opponents of Cuba's communist regime said there are some 220 political prisoners on the island, and said dissidents were harassed when they tried to hold events celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The outlawed and fragmented opposition, which the government says acts on behalf of Washington, called for multiparty elections and the release of some 220 political prisoners. Human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez also denounced the brief arrest of 30 opposition activists across the country, which he said was aimed at preventing them from participating in commemorative activities. "This wave of repression during the Universal Day of Human Rights illustrates the situation," said Martha Beatriz Roque, who heads the opposition group Agenda for the Transition. Her group held an event at the home of Vladimiro Roca, one of the Agenda group leaders, but Roca said that only 20 of the 81 dissident guests made it due to heavy police presence. Only two of the 23 diplomats they invited - one British, the other from the Netherlands - showed up, he said. In another event some 30 members of the group Ladies in White - wives and other relatives of 75 dissidents jailed in 2003 - marched through the streets of Havana, handing out flowers and copies of the Human Rights declaration to bystanders (*AFP*, 10/12/08).

December 10: British actress Vanessa Redgrave travelled to Havana for the 30th New Latin American Film Festival to present her film "The Fever". Redgrave has starred in

other films known to the Cuban audience like “Julia” and “Howards End”. “The Fever” is directed by Redgrave’s son Carlo Gabriel Nero. It is a British-American production and includes cameos by Angelina Jolie, Joely Richardson and Oscar-winning documentary maker Michael Moore (*ACN*, 11/12/08).

December 11: Cuba's telephone monopoly Etecsa is cutting the cost of activating a cellular phone from \$120 to about \$65 - a move that could put the once-restricted devices in the hands of more ordinary citizens. In April, the government opened cellular phone service to any Cuban who can afford it. Previously, only foreigners and Cubans holding key government jobs could have cell phones. Customers still must buy a phone card for the calls. Making or receiving local calls costs 30 cents a minute. Calls to the US are \$2.70 a minute. Cell phones are still out of reach for most Cubans, whose salaries average about \$20 month (*AP*, 11/12/08).

December 12: Cuba is a signatory to the main international pacts and agreements on the control of drugs, and has signed bilateral cooperation accords with 33 countries for the same purpose, Cuba’s Attorney General, Juan Escalona, said. During the opening of the 9th International Meeting on Penal Sciences, in Havana, Escalona said some foreign groups of drug-traffickers have occasionally tried to use the archipelago or its surrounding area to transport drugs from the countries producing them or in transit to the main markets. He said that, in 1989, Cuba created the National Commission for Drugs; in 1993, it approved the Master Plan to combat drug trafficking; and, in 1999, the National Integral Program to prevent their improper use was implemented (*ACN*, 12/12/08).

December 12: The 30th International Latin American New Cinema Festival closed after 10 intensive days of screenings, where over 100 movies competed. Coral Award winners were announced at the closing gala held at the Havana Karl Marx Theatre, where French film "La clase," by Laurent Cantet, was screened, reported Prensa news agency. Chile pocketed the first Coral prize in the fiction full-length film category with "Tony Manero" by Pablo Larrain. It managed to beat "Linea de Pase" (Pass Line) by Brazilians Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, and Cuban "The Horn of Plenty" by Juan Carlos Tabio, which finished in the second and third place, respectively. Several collateral awards were delivered, among them that of Telesur TV channel, which went to Uruguayan documentary "El circulo" (*Prensa Latina*, *ACN*, 12/12/08).

December 13: The 7th Committees in Defence of the Revolution (CDR) started in Havana with sessions devoted to analyze officials’ policy, performance, and political-ideological work, among other important issues. At Havana’s Convention Centre, the over 1000 delegates and 200 guests are also debating the work the CDRs should develop to support the economy, services and the food program, as well as the CDRs performance in the recovery works the country is doing after the passing of three hurricanes through the island. Cuban First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura called on delegates attending the Congress to keep fighting crimes, corruption and illegal activities. Addressing the Congress’ Commission on the grassroots organization’s readiness against

illegal acts, Machado Ventura stressed the need to increase political-ideological work in this field (*ACN*, 13/12/08).

December 13: Government officials attended a special service at the Holy Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Havana to thank God for 50 years of the Revolution, the daily *Granma* reported. Among those present were Politburo member Esteban Lazo Hernández and National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcón. The service was sanctioned by the Cuban Council of Churches; the Reverend Raúl Suárez, a deputy to the National Assembly and director of the Martin Luther King Center, officiated. According to *Granma*, the program included prayer, singing, reading from the Bible, testimonies, expressions of thanksgiving, and a blessing to the motherland. Suárez led about 80 Cubans and foreign visitors of various Christian denominations to lay flowers at the tomb of Ernesto Che Guevara in Santa Clara, province of Villa Clara. The ceremonies were part of an international conference in Havana called Religious Communities in a Process of Change (*USISInfo*, 13/12/08).

December 14: Cuba won the World Boxing Cup that concluded at the Winter Palace of Moscow, Russia, with a total of six titles, two silver medals and 42 points. The Cuban eight-member squad, which won 22 bouts and only lost two, was followed in the podium by host Russia. Cuban head coach Pedro Roque, who was chosen as the best trainer of 2008 by the International Amateur Boxing Association (AIBA) during a gala in Moscow, praised the performance and the great progress showed by the young Cuban squad (*ACN*, 15/12/08).

December 14: Opposition activist Oswaldo Paya, leader of the Christian Liberation Movement, denounced the Cuban government's refusal to allow him to travel to Strasbourg for the 20th anniversary of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, granted by the European Parliament. In a press release, Paya said the island authorities denied him the infamous "white card" whereby "they control, at their discretion, their citizens' right to travel out of the country." After receiving the invitation from Hans-Gert Pöttering, the European Parliament's president, Payá and his wife had completed all the paperwork required under the regime's migratory regulations (*Cubaencuentro*, 15/12/08).

December 14: Cuban First Vice President Jose Ramon Machado Ventura described the 7th Congress of the Committees in Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) that concluded at the Convention Centre in Havana as a memorable event that defines a new stage in their work. The Cuban official recalled that 2008 has been a year full of challenges and difficulties for the Cuban people, including the devastation caused by three hurricanes over the last three months, which was aggravated by the US financial, trade and economic blockade of the nation, but he noted that the CDRs maintain vigour and strength and an enterprising spirit to carry out whatever initiative or task the Revolution asks of them. Machado Ventura also recalled that two very important events are ahead: the ordinary period of sessions of the Cuban Parliament and the 50th anniversary of the Revolution (*ACN*, 15/12/08).

December 16: Cuba has lost one of its most important and beloved musicians with the passing away of Harold Gramatges, in Havana, at age 90. In 1942, Gramatges traveled to the United States to further his studies at the Berkshire Music Center with Aaron Coplan and Serge Koussevitzky. In 1945, he founded and directed the Havana Municipal Conservatory Orchestra where he also worked as a professor. In 1958, he was awarded the Reichold Prize for the Caribbean and Central America presented by the Detroit Orchestra for his composition *Sinfonía en mí*. He presided over the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo from its foundation in 1951 to 1961, and created the Music Department at the Casa de las Americas cultural institution. Between 1961 and 1964, Gramatges was Cuba's ambassador to France. Harold Gramatges composed symphonic and choral music, and wrote scores for the theatre and cinema. He put several texts to music including works by Juan Ramon Jimenez, Gongora, Rafael Alberti, Justo Rodriguez Santos and Jose Marti. Among his many distinctions, Gramatges received the Felix Varela Order; the UNEAC Award for his Life's Work; the Alejo Carpentier Medal, awarded by the Council of State; the 2002 National Music Award, from the Cuban Institute of Music; and the Tomas Luis de Victoria Ibero-American Award for Music (ACN, 17/12/08).

December 17: Thousands of Cubans made the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Lazarus, paying tribute, fulfilling vows and seeking favours from the crippled icon known on the island as the miraculous saint. Some crawled for miles on their bleeding hands and knees. Others dragged cinderblocks and stones along the asphalt. It's traditionally one of communist Cuba's most important religious events, but this year the pilgrimage carried a special urgency. Cuba is reeling after three major late-summer hurricanes destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes and sparked continuing food shortages in a country already struggling to feed itself. "You can see the pain in the eyes of people left without homes and without food," said Catholic nun Anabel Palacios, a member of the Daughters of Charity order. "You see the pain of families separated by migration. Nearly every family has relatives who have left." The faithful began arriving on the night of December 16 at the chapel housing a giant statue of St. Lazarus in the dusty village of El Rincon, an agricultural hamlet a 40-minute drive outside Cuba's capital. People started streaming into the church at midnight as the saint's feast day began, bearing flowers and offerings. Many pilgrims arrived at the chapel exhausted and bleeding after excruciating treks barefoot, on their knees, or even dragging themselves along the ground. Many wore the traditional sackcloth of penitence. Observers said there were more young people than usual. "We don't know why more young people are coming, but it must be a sign of their desperation," Palacios said (*Sun Sentinel*, 18/12/08).

December 19: The Cuban National Assembly (Parliament) will discuss on December 27 the social and economic guidelines as well as the State's Budget for 2009 and a new Law on Social Security. According to Granma news daily, on December 23-24, the members of the 12 permanent commissions of Parliament will examine, among other topics, the guidelines and budgets in their respective areas. These reports will then be presented to the members of Parliament who do not belong to any of these commissions. In addition, the members of the Commission of Legal and Constitutional Affairs and the Commission of Economic Affairs, in a joint session, will go through the final version of a

bill on a new Social Security Law. Then, on December 25-26, the parliamentarians will listen to reports from the ministries of Domestic Trade, Foreign Trade, Tourism, Economy and Planning, and Foreign Affairs (ACN, 19/12/08).

December 19: Cuban President Raul Castro returned home along with the delegation that accompanied him during his official visits to Venezuela and Brazil, where he met a tight agenda. First Vice President Jose R. Machado Ventura welcomed the Cuban leader at Terminal One of Havana's José Martí International Airport. President Raul Castro fulfilled an intense and fruitful agenda, which included official visits to Venezuela and Brazil, and his participation in the Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development, and the summits of the Common Market of the South and the Río Group, held in Costa de Sauípe, in the Brazilian State of Bahia (ACN, 19/12/08).

December 19: For the first time in Cuba, scientists are using a natural medicine derived from scorpion toxin for the treatment of cancer. The initiative is part of a national project led by the Pharmaceutical Biological Labs (Labiofam) that seeks to demonstrate the effect of the red scorpion's poison against tumours. The study is the only one being made in the world and it has shown positive results so far, according to Fabio Linares, head of the Homeopathy Department in the province (ACN, 19/12/08).

December 21: Political prisoner Alexander Santos Hernández, the Cuban National Liberal Party (PLNC) coordinator for the eastern provinces, was recently released after serving more than two years in prison, reported the dissident organization. Santos Hernández was imprisoned on July 5, 2006, as he was preparing for a political event. According to the PLNC, he endured public humiliation and beatings, and was sentenced to four years' imprisonment after a summary trial (*Cubaencuentro*, 21/12/08).

December 22: The Cuban Parliament's permanent working committees will be meeting on December 23-24 as a prelude to the second ordinary session of the current legislature to begin on December 26. Among the important points in the agenda are those to be discussed by the Economic Affairs, and Constitutional and Legal Rights committees which include the 2009 budget and the Social Security Law, respectively, Granma newspaper reported. The Economic Affairs Committee will receive a presentation from the ministers of Economy and Planning, and Finances and Prices. That committee, along with the Constitutional and Judicial Affairs, will also meet with the country's labour leadership and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to examine the results of the nationwide workers consultation on a bill to reform the Social Security Law. The discussions by the Food and Agriculture Committee are also considered of high priority, as it will deal with the effects of the hurricanes on food production and the strategy that was put into practice during the current recovery period (ACN, 22/12/08).

December 22: The book *Así es Fidel*, written by journalist Luis Baez, will open the Reading History Festival ongoing from December 22 to 27 at the Cuba Pavilion in Havana and at several sub-venues around the country. The book gathers anecdotes and testimonies from several people who had contact with the leader of the Cuban Revolution, and adds to the long list of titles by Luis Baez. The launching of this book is

part of a joint initiative of the Young Communist League, the Cuban Book Institute, and the Ministry of Culture aimed at encouraging reading on Cuban history (ACN, 22/12/08).

December 23: The vulnerabilities that may favor the impact by hurricanes on the country and the need to keep increasing efficiency in the energy sector were on the spotlight of two Cuban Parliament commissions, which held sessions at Havana's Conventions Center. Colonel Jose Ernesto Betancourt, chief of the Risk Reduction Management Department with the National Civil Defense recalled the recent hurricane season and the impact by hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma. Based on the experience, main characteristics of the impact by the natural phenomena on different territories were studied, since not all such events behave the same in terms of rains and winds. He recalled that major damage was observed in the housing sector, with over half a million homes affected. The member of the Defense Commission of the Cuban Parliament also referred to studies on roofing materials for homes and state institutions and he said efforts are being focused on the need to meet the technical requirements when such elements are set up (ACN, 23/12/08).

December 24: The President of the Cuban National Assembly Ricardo Alarcon said that modifications proposed to a draft bill on Social Security are the result of collective discussion by millions of Cubans, which he described as a really democratic and participatory process. Ricardo Alarcon made his statements during the session of the Cuban Parliament's Permanent Commission on Economic, Constitutional and Juridical Affairs, held at Havana's Conventions Center. Meanwhile, Labor and Security Minister Alfredo Morales Cartaya said that the analysis of the draft bill, first by millions of Cuban workers and later by local deputies, allowed making modifications and amendments to the document (ACN, 24/12/08).

December 24: Cuba's Health Minister Jose Ramon Balaguer reiterated that primary health care is the basis of the Cuban Health System. Balaguer addressed lawmakers during the session of the permanent commission on Health and Sports of the National Assembly, which considered issues like the restructuring of the primary health care program that kicked off a year ago. The Cuban minister insisted on the need that health officials take part at neighbourhood meetings, where local government representatives report on their work. He said that the initiative helps solve problems stated by the people (ACN, 24/12/08).

December 25: With the exception of an occasional plastic wreath or artificial tree with flickering lights, there are few signs of Christmas in the Cuban capital. "A Christmas tree is a luxury now," said Rufina Alvarez, 69, as she picked up vegetables for Christmas Eve dinner. "This year my daughter didn't even put up the little plastic tree. She didn't have time. But we'll celebrate just the same." Communist Cuba shunned Christmas for decades, officially canceling it as a holiday in 1966. The state long discouraged people from openly celebrating Christmas. It reinstated December 25 as a holiday in 1998 after the visit of Pope John Paul II. Schools, government offices and businesses have begun to close on Christmas in recent years. "Christmas for Cubans is about family and friends," said anthropologist Natalia Bolivar, 74. "People get together and eat and drink and laugh.

It has always been like that, even in the leanest years of the revolution. "We've celebrated Christmas with sardines or Russian meat or whatever was available. We've even had Christmas dinner in the darkness of blackouts. I once had a nativity scene carved out of soap. That's the Cuban spirit" (*Sun Sentinel*, 25/12/08).

December 26: Cuban President Raul Castro participated in the parliamentary session on tourism held in Havana. Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero presented the report on the performance of tourism in 2008, and challenges for this sector in 2009. Also participating in this session of the legislative assembly devoted to tourism - among other leaders- was the President of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcon (*ACN*, 26/12/08).

December 26: Cuban Olympic hurdler Dayron Robles and Greco-roman style wrestler Mijain Lopez shared the title of best sportsmen in Cuba for the year 2008, the island's sports institution INDER announced in Havana. Robles and Lopez, Olympic champions of their nation, were selected by INDER as their best sports men. In the women's category, the recognition went to judoka Yalennis Castillo (*Prensa Latina*, 26/12/08).

December 27: Five Cuban Roman Catholic bishops, including Cardinal Jaime Ortega, celebrated Christmas mass in a Cuban prison for the first time in 50 years, Catholic magazine Palabra Nueva said. "It was wonderful. There were tears running down many faces because it seemed like an incredible experience," said clergyman Felix Hernandez, who accompanied Ortega to Havana's Combinado del Este penitentiary, Cuba's largest. The religious delegation "was met by the prison director and other prison authorities," Ortega's Archdiocese of Havana said on its website. Besides officiating mass, Palabra Nueva said, Ortega and the bishops also spoke with inmates (*AFP*, 27/12/08).

December 27: The Cuban Parliament unanimously adopted the new Social Security Law, which was previously submitted to discussion by Cuban workers. The name of the upcoming year as "Year of the 50th Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution," was also approved during the meeting. The law was passed in the afternoon session, which was attended by Cuban President Raul Castro. The lawmakers announced that the rules complementing the law are currently in the works and will soon be submitted to the Council of Ministers. The draft bill was discussed by over three million workers, who made more than 900,000 proposals to enrich the document. Some of the changes to the original draft included the expansion to fifteen years of the span of time considered to pick the five years with the highest salaries for a worker to obtain his or her pension, after retirement (*ACN*, 27/12/08).

December 27: Cuban President Raul Castro called for austerity measures including fewer subsidies for workers and stricter management to pull the country out of an economic morass aggravated this year by three hurricanes and the global financial crisis. He told a year-end meeting of the National Assembly the government would cut official trips abroad by 50 percent and eliminate programs that reward good workers with free vacation trips but cost the government \$60 million a year. "The accounts don't square up," he said. "You have to act with realism and adjust the dreams to the true possibilities," said Castro. "Two plus two always equals four, never five," he said. Castro

implemented reforms when he took office, including opening the sale of computers and cell phones to Cubans and allowing them to go to hotels and stores previously reserved for foreigners. But he said the country's economic problems would postpone some changes, including a planned government restructuring. Castro lamented the economic effects of hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma, which caused \$10 billion in damages, and warned that no one can tell how bad world economic problems will get ([Discurso de Raúl Castro ante la Asamblea Nacional](#); *Reuters*, 28/12/08).

December 29: There was already a shortfall of more than half a million homes before three hurricanes wrought widespread destruction in 2008. Overall, the housing stock is in a dilapidated state. The precariousness of the Cuban economy, which the government says is partly due to the impact of the US trade embargo, means the new building programme is not keeping up with demand. So the black market is thriving. "It's the biggest, really the biggest in Cuba," says Juan Triana, an economist at the Centre for the Study of the Cuban Economy. Mr Triana is unwilling to guess at what the housing black market is worth in cash terms, but he is troubled. "Everybody's losing. And for me, as an economist, it's frustrating. Today if you want to buy your home, you have to use the black market." Although Cubans are not allowed to buy and sell properties privately, they are permitted to swap. And on a Saturday morning, hundreds of people gather on the Paseo del Prado in central Havana in the hope of finding someone they can exchange homes with. Officially no money should change hands. Yet in practice, swapping a smaller property for something larger will mean parting with several thousand dollars. Cuba is marking the 50th anniversary of its revolution. One of the most popular moves of Fidel Castro in his early years of government was housing reform. Many tenants got legal title to their homes and rents were capped. Multiple property ownership was prohibited: Cubans can still only legally own one home in the town where they live and another in the countryside. But 50 years on from those heady, optimistic beginnings, housing is close to the top of the list of complaints among Cubans (*BBC*, 31/12/08).

December 29: Prisoner of conscience Alfredo Dominguez Batista denounced that he and fellow political prisoner José Daniel Ferrer Garcia have been threatened by the authorities of the Provincial Prison of Las Tunas to be delivered to inmates "adept at abusing and harassing others." In an open letter to Fidel Castro, Dominguez said their lives were in danger and accused Lt. Col. Idalmer Campos Corrales, the prison's warden, of attempting "to instill fear through the use of brute force." Dominguez and Ferrer are members of the group of 75 opposition activists jailed in the spring of 2003. They are serving 14- and 25-year prison terms, respectively (*Cubaencuentro*, 29/12/08).

December 30: Cuba reduced its infant mortality rate in 2008 to 4.7 deaths per every 1000 live births, which confirms the Caribbean nation as one of the world's leading medical powers. According to Deputy Health Minister Joaquin Garcia Salabarría, nine out of the country's 14 provinces maintained their infant mortality rates under five in 2008 (*ACN*, 30/12/08).

December 31: Cuba is facing the 50th anniversary of the revolution confronted by an uncertain future. Fidel Castro, who led the revolution and ruled the country for almost

half a century, has not been seen in public since undergoing major surgery almost two-and-a-half years ago. His brother Raul Castro has pushed through some modest but symbolic reforms since taking over the presidency, but has also raised expectations which have yet to be met. The majority of Cubans were born after the revolution and declaration of a communist state, knowing no other system or way of life. So what sort of future are they hoping for? Claudia, 28, is a receptionist at a hotel in Havana. "At the moment we have an impasse. We are waiting for change. We hope that the relation between us and the United States would be better and we hope that we have some economic change and social change." Claudia dreams of opening a restaurant one day, and says she is prepared to wait. "I'm an optimist. You know it takes time to make big changes. Raul is new in power - he has had only one year and he has to move very carefully. If Claudia is optimistic about the future, 23-year-old Isabel is not. An English-language graduate from the University of Havana, she feels she has no prospects of earning a decent living. "I want to abandon the country. It's not because I don't like my country - I enjoy being in Cuba, but I don't think I have a future here. Tens of thousands of young Cubans are still fully signed up members of the Union of Young Communists, the party's youth wing. One of them is 21-year-old waiter Alberto. "We don't want capitalism here, we want socialism," he say. "I want to fight to maintain the revolution. Fidel is our star. He's our leader. He's amazing - I think he's the best man in the world that's ever been, like Caesar or Napoleon only better." He is hoping Raul Castro will move Cuba towards a Chinese or Vietnamese model with the Communist Party maintaining control, but allowing free market reforms. Alberto would also like the right to travel abroad - he has family in Miami he would like to visit and dreams of going to Spain one day. Even with party faithful, Cuba at 50 faces pressure for change (*BBC*, 31/12/08).

Economy

December 1: The implementation of the labour reform promoted by the government of Raúl Castro, whereby work efficiency and quality will determine Cuban workers' wages, continues to experience delays and could be postponed yet again, reported the official print media. The weekly paper *Trabajadores*, the main publication of the National Union of Cuban Workers (CTC), referred to the "urgent need" of not leaving to "spontaneous initiative" the challenges of managerial reform and of adjusting to the new pay-for-results model. "Otherwise, when the next evaluation comes along in February, it might be necessary to postpone the implementation date (...) again or to acknowledge across-the-board failure to comply," indicated the newspaper. The official daily *Granma* reported at the end of October that the new system implementation period had been extended until December 15, four and a half months past the initial deadline of August 1 (*EFE*, 1/12/08).

December 2: In an effort to increase the production of the anti-meningococcal vaccines for Cuba and other countries, a new plant will be inaugurated, at the Havana-based Finlay Medical Research Institute. The new facility has a production capacity of up to 100 million doses of vaccine active components, said Research Institute director Dr. Concepcion Campa. The production plan also includes a vaccine against typhoid, while in the near future the plant will also add to its list the multivalent vaccine against pneumococcus, a bacterium associated with pneumonia and some forms of meningitis.

The new plant was built with the participation of the Ministries of Construction, Basic Industry, the Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the Council of State, among other institutions. All its facilities were designed and built taking into account the international standards of the pharmaceutical industry, Dr. Campa explained (*ACN*, 2/12/08).

December 2: Cuba could soon authorize the planting of 124 acres of genetically-modified corn for the first time to help reduce its dependence on costly food imports, Cuban scientists said. Regulators are expected to approve this initial crop of biotech corn, which would provide enough seed to expand to 14,830 acres next year, said Carlos Borroto, deputy director of the state-run Institute for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology. "We expect over the next few days to get the license for those 50 hectares," he told reporters. "This is very important, because the alternative is to keep relying on imports." Some environmental groups oppose transgenic crops because they say the food may hold unknown long-term health dangers. But GMO supporters say the crops carry no health risks and are the only way to reduce world food shortages. Borroto said biotech corn similar to the Cuban type had already passed strict controls in Japan, Canada and Europe. Cuban laboratories are also in the development stages of producing genetically modified soy, potatoes and tomatoes (*Reuters*, 2/12/08).

December 2: Ukrainian truck manufacturer Autokraz announced it has signed an agreement with Cuba to set up an assembly line in Cienfuegos for its vehicles for distribution in the continent. A press release from the company said that it has sold more than 200 dump trucks and concrete-mixing trucks to Cuba since December 2007 and that this contract turns the relationship into a "systems operation." Autokraz will begin by repairing more than 10,000 Kraz vehicles that have been circulating in Cuba since 1961; it will then create an assembly line for Kraz trucks and other vehicles in an existing factory in Cienfuegos. The company says it did US\$17 million worth of business with Cuba in 2008, adding proudly that that amount approximates the total trade between Ukraine and Cuba in 2007 -- \$20 million (*The Miami Herald*, 3/12/08).

December 3: Telecom Italia SpA, Italy's largest phone company, cut its revenue growth forecast for a fifth time in three years because of a deteriorating economy and said it will trim another 4,000 jobs in Italy. The company may consider selling its European broadband operations, Telecom Italia Sparkle, a provider of international wholesale voice services and the owner of the long-distance network, and its stake in Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba ETECSA, Cuba's mobile operator (*Bloomberg*, 3/12/08).

December 4: Cuba's economic growth topped more than 4 per cent in 2008, despite a year of crises for the island. "The Cuban economy grew by just over four per cent in 2008," said Finance Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez, quoted by the official AIN news agency. Mr Rodriguez, who also serves as Cuba's vice-president, stressed that 2008 will "go down in history as a difficult year for Cuba." The island felt the effects of the global financial crisis, the ongoing US trade embargo and the trauma of the island's devastating hurricane season, he said. The period, he added, tested the country's resilience, "the flexibility of its economy and its ability to redirect central planning efforts to deal with phenomena that are not in our control". Mr Rodriguez emphasised that in addition to the

hurricane season that cost the island some \$US10 billion (\$15.4 billion) in damages, Cuba had been severely affected by the 53 per cent increase in fuel prices, and the rising cost of imported food. All told, he said, the 2008 fuel and food price increases “will cost more than \$US800 million”. The Communist nation, which has laboured under a US trade embargo for almost half a century, also faced the effects of the “global crisis in the capitalist economy,” he added (*AFP*, 4/12/08).

December 4: Estimates indicate that, since 2004, climate change-generated anomalies, like hurricanes and droughts, have cost the country roughly 20 billion USD, revealed the Cuban deputy-minister of Science, Technology and Environment, José Antonio Díaz Duque. The official told journalists that, from an ecological perspective, this year has been "the worst" for the island in the last five decades. Last season's hurricanes “Gustav,” “Ike” and “Paloma” compounded the damage caused by previous droughts, which affected forest cover and the coastal line, with a negative impact on the wildlife (*AP*, 4/12/08).

December 7: Cuba began its 2008-2009 sugar cane harvest in the central province of Santiago de Cuba on time, despite the fact that the hurricanes that hit the island damaged hundreds of thousands of hectares of the crop, local media reported. The Paquito Rosales sugar factory, in Santiago de Cuba, was the first to get started on this year's harvest, for which Cuban authorities are predicting similar results to last year in spite of the hurricane damage, the state-run AIN news agency said. Hurricanes Gustav and Ike hit the island in early September, knocking down 156,600 hectares (391,500 acres) of the sugar cane crop and flooding another 519,000 hectares (1.3 million acres) of Cuba's roughly 750,000 hectares of the crop. In addition, 40,000 tons of not-yet-processed sugar in warehouses was drenched by the storms and had to be reprocessed to save it. Three other sugar processing plants in Santiago de Cuba will get started on the harvest this coming week, and Jorge Lazaro Guerrero, the president of the Sugar Growers Business Group in the province said this year's harvest was kicking off with preparations "superior" to those of other years. The harvest is being undertaken after on November 25 President Raul Castro named Luis Manuel Avila to be the country's new sugar minister, replacing General Ulises Rosales del Toro, who took over the Agriculture Ministry (*EFE*, 8/12/08).

December 8: Cuba is reducing gas prices by as much as 27 percent, citing falling crude prices worldwide, after raising them by more than 100 percent in September when oil prices were still high. A liter of regular gasoline is dropping from \$1.45 to \$1.08, or from about \$5.50 to \$4 a gallon. The higher-grade "special" brand is falling from \$1.62 to \$1.18 a liter, or a little more than \$6 to about \$4.50 a gallon. The new prices were published in Cuban state media. In September, a liter of regular gas jumped from about 60 cents to \$1.45, when oil was still selling for about \$100 a barrel. Still, the hike was steep considering Cuba receives nearly 100,000 barrels from Venezuela daily on preferential terms (*AP*, 8/12/08).

December 8: Cuba's vacation industry has remained as hot as the tropical sun, even as the world economic crisis sparks cancellations and layoffs elsewhere in the Caribbean. The communist country says it's booked solid through December and expects a record

2.34 million visitors this year — largely because global financial woes have so far been softer on Canada, its top source of visitors. Luck also played a role: While the island suffered three devastating hurricanes, its key tourist sites were largely spared. And where beachfront resorts did get hit, the tourist-hungry government has made sure to repair hotels — in some cases even before damaged homes and infrastructure. So while other islands in the region are laying off hotel workers and suspending construction of new property, Cuban resorts are gearing up for a strong season. "We've had a few cancellations, but overall our numbers are still strong," said David Gregori of WowCuba, a travel agency in Charlottetown, Canada, that specializes in bicycle trips and other Cuba tours. "People still like to get away. They might try to save some money while doing it, but they're still traveling." The number of foreign visitors has swelled nearly 11 percent this year, making up for 4 and 3 percent declines in 2006 and 2007, government figures show. Officials offer no explanation for those slower years. But tour operators blame the island's low returning-visitor rates: Some tourists complain of poor service, crumbling infrastructure and lousy food, indicative of a communist system where shortages are common and state employees are unaccustomed to putting customer service first. Still, the island is often cheaper than its subtropical neighbours, because many foreigners buy all-inclusive packages offering dozens of direct flights from Europe and Canada to airports all over Cuba, as well deep discounts on hotels, food and booze. Others are enticed by the prospect of seeing one of only five communist countries left on the planet (*AP*, 8/12/08).

December 9: The Clothing Company of eastern Las Tunas province, 670 kilometers east of Havana, is finishing off 36,000 children outfits half assembled in China. This joint production is part of a test contract signed by both nations, and the outfits are made up of shorts and shirts for boys and shorts and blouse for girls. The fabric was woven and cut in the Asian nation and the finishing part is done in the Cuban facility. China is the world largest textile exporter, and has the lowest production costs in this field, the reason it can compete successfully in terms of pricing. Tania Reigada, an official with the Cuban company, told the press that due to the damage caused by Hurricane Ike to several facilities in the eastern province, the process is being done in their central workshop, located in Las Tunas city (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 9: The role played by agriculture in the development of Vietnam and Cuba was the major topic of a seminar hosted by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in Hanoi. Participants examined the achievements, prospects, factors and policies relating to the development of the agricultural sectors in Vietnam and Cuba, as well as bilateral agricultural cooperation between the two countries. Vietnam and Cuba embarked on a programme of agricultural cooperation during the 1970s, when the latter assisted with the training of Vietnamese university graduates in biology, agriculture, animal husbandry and veterinary science. Cuba also provided Vietnam with cattle and poultry breeding stock, coffee and sugarcane varieties and new farming techniques, in addition to supporting the building of irrigation systems to raise Vietnam's agricultural production levels. In return, Vietnam has been supplying Cuba with agricultural experts to transfer knowledge of rice cultivation techniques. The two sides have cooperated in a project to grow rice on small and medium scales, with the third phase currently being implemented. Dang Phong, an

expert from the Vietnam Institute of Economics, said that although Cuba can boast of basic advantages regarding land, water sources and weather conditions, it has failed to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency due to a lack of oil and farming machinery (VNA, 10/12/08).

December 11: Textiles, medical equipment and biotechnology are possible areas of collaboration between Pakistan and Cuba, Cuban Ambassador Gustavo Machin Gomez said. Gomez met Pakistan's Minister of State and Board of Investment chairman Saleem H. Mandviwala 11, and was keen for an early finalization of the Pak-Cuba Joint Ministerial Framework for the promotion of investment, trade and cooperation. The mainstay of the Cuban economy was tourism and a joint venture with Pakistani textile companies which would be beneficial to both countries, he said. Bio-technology and bio-pharmaceutical were other areas of mutual benefit and Machin indicated that technology trades and joint ventures in drug manufacture were areas where Cuba was interested in developing relationships with Pakistan (*Asia Pulse*, 16/12/08).

December 13: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuban President Raul Castro signed agreements to expand Cuba's oil-refining capacity. The agreements during a meeting at the presidential palace in Caracas, Venezuela, include the expansion of the refining capacity at the Hermanos Diaz refinery in Cuba to 50,000 barrels a day from the current 22,000 barrels. Castro and Chavez, both critics of US capitalism, agreed to form a holding company to expand Cuba's oil refining system and to build a new refinery in Cuba that will have the capacity to process 150,000 barrels of oil a day, according to the state-run Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias. Cooperation relations between Cuba and Venezuela in 2008 translated into 1,355 billion dollars, following the implementation of 76 joint projects. In Caracas, the leaders agreed to cooperate on 173 joint projects worth more than \$2 billion in areas including energy and communications (*AP, Bloomberg, ACN*, 13/12/08).

December 14: The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) is growing, without giving up on a single idea of its unifying dream of solidarity and justice for all, said Cuban President Raul Castro in Caracas. Castro made the statement at the closing ceremony of the 9th Cuba-Venezuela Joint Commission after he received the South American country's highest distinction to an international personality: the Order Liberator. He was also presented with gold-plated replica of Simon Bolivar's sword, by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. "ALBA is a higher form of association for our countries. It is an instrument for Latin American and Caribbean nations to confront neo-liberalism and the world financial crises, and to become more just and more equitable societies," said the Cuban head of state. Raul Castro reviewed the development of collaboration accords between Cuba and Venezuela, marked by the signing of a Comprehensive Collaboration Agreement signed by Chavez and Fidel Castro eight years ago. He said such agreement could be considered the prelude to the creation of ALBA ([Discurso de Raúl Castro](#); *ACN*, 15/12/08).

December 15: Cuba and Sri Lanka agreed to explore new fields and to strengthen already existing cooperation ties in the sectors of health and trade during an

intergovernmental meeting held in Havana. During the First Session for Cooperation between Cuba and Sri Lanka, Cuban Deputy Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation Ramon Ripoll expressed both countries' interest in increasing bilateral economic relations. He added that, in spite of the devastation caused by hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma recently - which left more than \$10 billion in economic losses -, Cuba will fulfil its commitments and will maintain its solidarity with the Third World. For his part, Deputy Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka Hussein Bhaila said that, "Sri Lanka has benefited from the support, experience and generous contribution of Cuba in the fields of education and public health, including the control of diseases such as malaria and dengue fever" (*ACN*, 15/12/08).

December 15: After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba planted thousands of urban cooperative gardens to offset reduced rations of imported food. Now, in the wake of three hurricanes that wiped out 30 percent of Cuba's farm crops, the communist country is again turning to its urban gardens to keep its people properly fed. "Our capacity for response is immediate because this is a cooperative," said Miguel Salcines, walking among rows of lettuce in the garden he heads in the Alamar suburb on the outskirts of Havana. Salcines says he is hardly sleeping as his 160-member cooperative rushes to plant and harvest a variety of beets that takes just 25 days to grow, among other crops. As he talks, dirt-stained men and women kneel along the furrows, planting and watering on land next to a complex of Soviet-style buildings. Machete-wielding men chop weeds and clear brush along the periphery of the field. Around 15 percent of the world's food is grown in urban areas, according to the US Department of Agriculture, a figure experts expect to increase as food prices rise, urban populations grow and environmental concerns mount. Since they sell directly to their communities, city farms don't depend on transportation and are relatively immune to the volatility of fuel prices (*Reuters*, 15/12/08).

December 16: Cuba will install a modern biogas industrial plant in central Cienfuegos province next year. The plant will generate electricity by way of using the excrement of pigs from the General Swine Complex in the town of Palmira. The equipment, using German technology, will take advantage of the biogas obtained from the pigs, reports the *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper. This experience will place Cuba at the forefront of this technology in Latin America and the Caribbean, explained the executive secretary of the Science and Technology Forum in this province, Saturnino Sosa. He added that this will be the beginning of a national program to be developed in short, medium, and long-term stages. The first objective of this investment is to protect Cienfuegos Bay from the dumping of solids –highly aggressive- from the aforementioned complex. It is estimated that only 50% of the more than 700 biogas plants in the country are in operation, but efforts are being made for their renewal in light of the world movement towards obtaining sustainable and cleaner production (*ACN*, 16/12/08).

December 16: Jamaica will sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Cuba, which will provide for joint destination marketing and airlift arrangements between the islands. Tourism Minister Edmund Bartlett speaking at a media forum on issues affecting Jamaica's tourism sector at the Creative Production and Training Centre (CPTC) in

Kingston, said the MOU evolved out of negotiations, which Prime Minister Bruce Golding commenced with the Cuban administration earlier this year when he led a delegation to that Spanish-speaking nation. "We started the negotiations, and the foreign affairs team, along with a team from my ministry, visited Cuba again (...) about September, and we are ready now (to sign the MOU) ," Bartlett explained. He said the agreement will facilitate the "marrying" of both countries as destinations of choice for visitors (*The Jamaica Observer*, 16/12/08).

December 16: Cuba and the Dominican Republic agreed on expanding their commercial relations and to look for new fields of cooperation, during an intergovernmental meeting held in Havana, to contribute to the social and economic development of the Caribbean. During the opening of the 8th Session of the Joint Commission for Bilateral Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, specialists from the two countries agreed on the need to expand and deepen scientific, technological, environmental, and agricultural exchanges. Other sectors under analysis included sports, culture and education, as well as Civil Defence and preparedness to face natural disasters. Presiding over the meeting were the Deputy Minister for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, Orlando Requeijo, and the undersecretary for technology and planning of the Dominican State Secretariat for Youth, Roxana Rojas (*ACN*, 16/12/08).

December 16: A key United Nations commission has agreed after several years of dispute with Cuba to include social investment in calculations of the communist-run country's Gross Domestic Product, a Cuban official said. The decision by the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), considered an authoritative source on the region's economies, was a victory for the Cuban government, which has argued that the international body's national accounts methodology was biased against non-market economies. "We have worked all year with ECLAC, including its top officials, to perfect the method that can really measure our growth," Oscar Mederos Mesa, director of the Cuban National Statistics Office, told the press. The dispute centred over whether Cuba could include in its growth calculations estimates of the market value of free social services and subsidized goods, as well as massive medical and other services exported mainly to Venezuela in exchange for oil. Cuba began including the items in its GDP calculations in 2003, but ECLAC said the Cuban formula was under study and began noting its reservations when publishing the Caribbean island's data (*Reuters*, 16/12/08).

December 17: Three hurricanes and the global financial crisis have left Cuba strapped for cash, forcing the government to juggle debt payments and seek new financing, diplomatic and business sources say. France is the latest government to receive notice from Cuba that it needs to reschedule upcoming debt payments, European diplomats said. "A few months ago, Cuba told Japan and Germany it could not meet debt payments but those problems apparently have been worked out. Now France has received the same news," a diplomat said. The information was confirmed by French business sources. Cuba, whose foreign debt rose by \$1.1 billion to \$16.5 billion in 2007, recently rescheduled some debt with China. The government did not immediately respond to a request seeking comment, but Cuba's planning and economy minister, Jose Luis

Rodriguez, recently said the island, like all countries in the region, faces a difficult year ahead due to the global financial crisis. Various foreign businessmen, who like the diplomats asked that their names not be used, said payments had slowed from Cuban state-run banks, with cash transfers that usually took 48 hours now sometimes put off for weeks. "It appears they do not have the cash on hand so they delay and then pay you and delay payment to someone else," one Western businessman said. Despite the problems, few think Cuba is in such dire straits that it will stop payments altogether because, as another businessman said, "that would send a very negative signal" (*Reuters*, 17/12/08).

December 18: This year Cuba registered a GDP growth of 4.3 %, falling short of 2007's 7.3 %, due to the impact of tropical storms and hurricanes that caused approximately 10 billion USD in losses, reported the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). This growth also falls short of the authorities' expectations, who were anticipating an 8% increase, according to the Preliminary overview of the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean 2008 of the regional UN agency. For the next year, ECLAC estimates that the Cuban GDP will reach 4%, driven among other factors by the construction sector, which will play key role in the recovery efforts of the hurricane-affected regions (*EFE*, 18/12/08).

December 19: Programs linked to the development of the petrochemical area in central Cienfuegos province are advancing very favourably, scarcely one year after the celebration of the 4th Petrocaribe Summit, where they originated. The first stage of the civil engineering work at the Petrocasas housing factory is being concluded on time. Likewise, the premises for technology, carpentry, and the warehouse are receiving the final touches, while they're also working on a cistern, the channels for the electrical system, floors, and lighting. The administrative building is also being finished at the extension of the Camilo Cienfuegos Oil Refinery, another of the agreement's programs, while the land where four tanks of finished product will be located is being prepared. During a tour of these facilities, Cuban Basic Industry Minister Yadira García, considered the development of these strategic programs as favourable, and they will contribute to the development of the territory and the country (*ACN*, 19/12/08).

December 19: Spain's Telefonica said it was interested in Cuba as a potential market, but there were no talks in progress. "Cuba is a small market but it could have a lot of potential," said Chief Executive Julio Linares at an event in Madrid (*Reuters*, 19/12/08).

December 21: Cuban state entities consume 51 percent of the island's electricity, and state-owned utility Union Nacional Electrica is working to reduce public sector energy consumption in 2009 via conservation, the official press reported. Union Nacional Electrica chief Vicente de la O Fernandez told the official Juventud Rebelde newspaper that among "the projections for 2009 is continuing actions to reduce electricity consumption, especially in the state sector." Residential electricity consumption accounts for the remaining 49 percent of power usage, the newspaper reported. Over the past three years, the Cuban government has made reducing electricity consumption a priority and one of the pillars of the so-called "energy revolution" launched by Havana, which is also looking at renewable energy sources and an upgrade of the island's grid (*EFE*, 21/12/08).

December 22: Cuba's economy will grow more than 4 percent in 2009 as new accords with foreign countries and economic reforms compensate for negative international factors, the country's economy minister said. Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said hurricanes and other factors would restrict 2008 economic growth to 4 percent, compared with the planned 7 percent. "We are going to grow more next year than this year," Rodriguez said in an interview broadcast by state-run Radio Rebelde. "The country has important cooperation agreements. Those signed with Venezuela, with Brazil and with Russia. Relations with China will continue and broaden," he said. Communist Cuba's economy, which grew 7.3 percent in 2007, is more than 90 percent controlled by the state. Cuba and Venezuela this month announced more than 150 cooperation agreements for 2009 valued at \$2 billion, including continued expansion of a joint venture oil refinery and petrochemical complex in central Cienfuegos province. The presidents of Brazil, Russia and China all visited Cuba over the past few months and said economic relations would broaden in 2009. They gave no details. Cuba has restructured debt and delayed payments to various foreign companies in recent months, its coffers hit by three powerful hurricanes, falling nickel prices and the international financial crisis. Rodriguez said growth would also get a boost from reforms undertaken in agriculture and wage policy by President Raul Castro since taking over in February for his ailing brother, Fidel Castro (*Reuters*, 22/12/08).

December 23: Cuban cigars are present in 150 nations, especially in the Americas, affirmed Oscar Basulto, president of TABACUBA, in western Pinar del Río province. At the end of a plenary session presided over by Agriculture Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro, the Cuban official also highlighted that currently there are 136 Habano Houses in the world, which shows the preference for the Cuban product. The tobacco industry in the archipelago, he assured, is ready to meet the demands of the various markets, and underlined that tanned tobacco leaves are used through the natural premium mechanized project --24% of the world's production is Cuban. With respect to the next harvest, he said that the whole country is under the pressure of the re-construction of the infrastructure devastated by the recent passage of three hurricanes, concentrated mainly in Pinar del Río (*ACN*, 23/12/08).

December 23: "By the end of 2008, exports of the Cuban iron and steel industry have increased by 20% compared to last year," said Fernando Acosta Santana, Minister of the Iron and Steel Industry. Acosta Santana noted that the main commercial contracts are linked to Latin American and Caribbean countries that belong to the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) regional integration and cooperation bloc. The minister added that 2008 was characterized by the strengthening of international relations, cooperation plans, exchange of specialists, and the design of new joint projects. "Preliminary reports show a 12-15% increase of sales and productions," he said (*ACN*, 23/12/08).

December 23: Cuba's economy minister said the communist-ruled island's industry and agriculture need structural changes to meet the goal of amassing sufficient international reserves to cope with contingencies such as the current global financial crisis. Jose Luis

Rodriguez told members of parliament that the Cuban economy must become more productive and efficient, the official Prensa Latina news agency reported. Addressing Cuba's substantial current-account deficit, the minister blamed this year's 53 percent increase in international oil prices - though prices have since fallen sharply - and a doubling in food prices. He also pointed to a decline in the prices of nickel, Cuba's main export, and to the estimated \$10 billion in damage caused by the three hurricanes that battered the island in August, September and November. Also present for the session with legislators were Agriculture Minister Ulises Rosales del Toro and the minister of Basic Industry, Yadira Garcia Vera. Rosales del Toro said that restoring agricultural production to pre-hurricane levels and cutting food imports were the top priorities for his ministry. Predicting that 2009 would be "a difficult year" for Cuba, Basic Industry chief Garcia said the island needs to mobilize alternative sources of energy (*EFE*, 23/12/08).

December 23: A country that shunned Christmas for decades is now looking to cash in on the holiday season, promoting an online shopping site designed to let Cubans overseas buy everything from flowers to flat-screen TVs for delivery to relatives on the island. Spanish-based Grupo Excelencias teamed with Cuba's communist government to create mallhabana.com, which offers prices in US dollars and says it can deliver products within 24 hours to homes in Havana and get purchases to even the country's most-remote addresses within three weeks. "It's a good business but it's also a way for Cubans (overseas) to help their family members here," Sergio Perez, the Havana director of the Spanish-language site, said. It also appears to directly challenge US legal limits on shipping funds to Cuba or spending money on the island. Dozens of the products listed are made in Cuba — like Havana Club rum or iconic guyabera shirts. Others are imports already stocked by upscale government-run stores, such as 29-inch Panasonic TVs or crunchy peanut butter from Canada. The site was created in August 2006, but Cuba's government has been promoting it heavily over the Christmas holiday (*AP*, 23/12/08).

December 24: Cuba's exports and the effort to replace imports with national production has not been able to reduce the commercial deficit nor the financial tensions the country faces, said Ricardo Cabrisas, vice president of the Council of Ministers. Speaking at one of the Cuban parliament's permanent commission meetings, Cabrisas emphasized the need to improve planning, finance management, controls and above all the strict compliance with these activities, which are vital for the economic and social development of the nation. The vice president noted that despite the priority given to both exports and substituting imports, in many aspects there is a large distance between the approved plans and subsequent implementation at the ground level. He said that the current limitations the country is facing demand greater rigor at each level and that the participation must be active and not formal. Cabrisas said that the Ministry of Foreign Commerce can not find effective solutions on its own. While the ministry is obliged to strengthen its leadership role and authority in the country, progress in both areas of the national economy doesn't depend on the ministry alone, added Cabrisas (*ACN*, 25/12/08).

December 25: Cuba's trade deficit soared by nearly 70 percent, or an estimated \$5 billion, in 2008 due mainly to rising prices for imports such as food and oil and falling prices for nickel, its main export, official media said. Foreign Trade Minister Raul de la

Nuez said in a speech to parliament deputies that imports surged 43.8 percent while exports grew just 2.1 percent, said the Communist party daily, Granma. The news follows reports that Cuba, battered by three hurricanes and the global financial crisis, is facing a cash crunch that is forcing it to seek debt restructuring with various countries and companies and delay cash transfers for payments abroad. Granma gave no figures for 2008, but estimates based on the numbers from de la Nuez and data for 2007 would place imports at \$16.1 billion and exports at \$4.4 billion, leaving a deficit of \$11.7 billion. That would be an increase of \$4.8 billion, or 69.5 percent, over official figures for 2007 that showed a deficit of \$6.9 billion, with exports totalling \$4.3 billion and imports \$11.2 billion. The government reports foreign exchange data in the convertible peso, which it pegs at \$1.08 (*Reuters*, 26/12/08).

December 25: Serbia's tourism magazine YU Travel awarded Cuba the Amphora of Gold trophy that recognizes the island as a tourist destination par excellence during 2008. The prize was received by Cuban ambassador in that country, Julio Cesar Cancio Ferrer. The publication is one of the most important magazines specializing in tourism in Serbia. According to YU Travel representatives, Cuba has become one the most favoured destination for Serbian travellers (*ACN*, 25/12/08).

December 26: The recently established Ukraine-Cuba business council is aimed at broadening and diversifying economic, commercial cooperation between both countries, a diplomatic source said. Welcoming this step as a significant event in bilateral relations, Cuban Ambassador Felix Leon stressed that the business group is set to become a driving force for Cuban-Ukrainian economic links. He described the initiative as timely and necessary in finding new ways to exchange and diversify collaboration and exports. Leon highlighted new prospects in Cuban biotechnology industry exports to Ukraine and in the field of transportation with repair and assembly of Ukrainian-made trucks in Cuba. He noted that bilateral trade tripled in 2008, compared to 2007, despite the world financial crisis (*ACN*, 26/12/08).

December 27: Cuba's economy will grow 6 percent next year, after a disappointing 2008 that has been one of the worst years for the country in recent history, Cuban Economy Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez said. Government ministers, in speeches to a year-end meeting of the National Assembly, admitted the optimistic forecast for 2009 was based on plans that were more tentative than usual because of the financial crisis that has plunged the global economy into recession. They called for fiscal discipline to help the communist-run country get through economic difficulties touched off by a swelling trade deficit caused by rising import costs and three hurricanes that inflicted \$10 billion in damages. "The year coming to an end has been without doubt one of the most difficult since the special period began," Rodriguez said, referring to the years of economic crisis that followed the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's key benefactor. Despite the difficulties, he said, Cuba's economy grew 4.3 percent in 2008 -- about half the government forecast of 8 percent. Highlights included a 9.3 percent increase in the number of tourists, to 2.35 million, and a 7.2 percent rise in exports of goods and services. Also, officials said oil and gas production had increased 1.6 percent. On the

down side, prices for nickel, Cuba's top export, fell 41 percent, which cost the island \$250 million in expected revenues, while import prices rose 53 percent, Rodriguez said. The budget deficit for 2008 rose to a higher-than-expected 6.7 percent of gross domestic product, said Finance Minister Georgina Barreiro Fajardo (*Reuters*, 27/12/08).

December 27: Cuban Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero announced that this sector grew by 2 percent in 2008 and will end the year with 2.3 million visitors, a number that breaks the record set in 2005. Marrero said that the sector managed to reverse the decrease that occurred in 2007, while giving an account of his management at a plenary session of Parliament attended by President Raul Castro. Marrero, who gave no revenue figures for tourism, said the sector grew despite the devastation wrought by three hurricanes between August and November at resorts in the eastern cities of Holguin and Camagüey and the western city of Pinar del Rio. He said that plans for 2009 estimate that the island will welcome 2.5 million foreign visitors and increase both revenues and profits for the sector. In 2007 Cuba received more than 2 million tourists, generating revenues close to \$2 billion. Canada remained the chief source of tourists to the island with more than 800,000 people, accounting for 24.5 percent of the growth, followed by Italy, Spain and Britain (*EFE*, 27/12/08).

December 29: Cuba's national operator Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba (ETECSA) will end 2008 with 330,000 mobile subscribers, ETECSA vice-president, Máximo Lafuente, said to Italian news agency ANSA. The operator, which recently announced cuts of nearly 50% in its mobile activation fee, added 4,000 new subscribers just one day after the announcement. Lafuente also said that the operator is considering future cuts in the cost of mobile handset and the introduction of cheap phones in order to increase access to cellular services. At the current growth rate, ETECSA expects to reach 250,000 new customers during 2009 and reach 1.6 million customers by 2012. ETECSA, Cuba's only telecommunications provider, currently offers fixed-line services, including voice and internet, mobile telephony, and public payphones. In March 2008, the government had lifted previous restrictions on mobile phone ownership by ordinary Cubans (*Global Insight*, 29/12/08).

December 30: Cuba has broken its tourist arrival figures, welcoming close to 2.35 million visitors to the island this year. Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero said that 2008 will close with a 9.3 per cent increase over arrivals for 2007. The Cuban News Agency quoted Mr Marrero as saying that the record breaking performance was recorded despite booking cancellations, the closure of 6,000 hotel rooms and the damage to 1,000 more as a result of storms which hit Cuba during this year's Atlantic hurricane season. He projected a nine per cent growth in visitor arrivals from Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain and also predicted that overall tourist income will grow by more than 8.8 per cent. Mr Marrero, however, pointed to some problems affecting development in the sector, including the high cost of imports and the insufficient supply of fresh fruit and vegetables (*ACN*, 30/12/08).

December 31: Cuba has downsized plans to mark the 50th anniversary of the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power with a big military parade, firework displays, extra

food rations and days of parties. The lower key celebrations, to include just an hour-long official ceremony with no foreign leaders expected to attend, are more in keeping with the prevailing mood on an island battered by three powerful hurricanes this year and an economic slowdown. "Our plans to stage a big extravaganza complete with a military parade were scrapped after the hurricanes, in favour of a more austere celebration in tune with the times," said one official involved in organising the main event in the eastern port city of Santiago where the revolution began. José Luis Rodríguez, economy and planning minister, said that 2008 growth was 4.3 per cent, not the 8 per cent planned. He said 2009 would be particularly difficult, due mainly to international economic conditions. The shaky global economy has led foreign investment to be put on hold. Sherritt International, the Canadian mining and energy company, said its plans to expand nickel production as part of a joint venture would be postponed. Telecom Italia also said it was selling its stake in Cuba's telecoms monopoly Etecsa. Cuba's central bank has notified France it needs to restructure debt payments after doing the same with Germany, Japan and numerous foreign companies, European diplomats said (*Financial Times*, 31/12/08).

Exile Community

December 2: More than one out of two Miami-Dade Cuban Americans think the US trade embargo against Cuba should end, according to a new poll. The poll, conducted by Florida International University's Institute for Public Opinion Research and funded by the Brookings Institution and the Cuba Study Group, indicates that 55 percent of those polled favour discontinuing the trade embargo imposed in 1962. Sixty-five percent favour re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba. "The poll has an extraordinary historical importance," said Guarione Díaz, president of the Cuban American National Council, a non-partisan advocacy group in Miami. The results, particularly as they relate to the embargo, reflect "the fact that the Cuban Americans who were born in the United States or left after 1980 do not have the same vision as those who came in the 60s," Díaz said. Ninoska Pérez, director of the conservative Cuban Liberty Council, dismissed the results. "I am tired of these polls that mean nothing," she said. "The point is that three Congress members who support the embargo were elected by an overwhelming majority of the people. The re-election of these Congress members tells me that this sample is not a majority. I don't believe this poll." "It's a significant jump," said Hugh Gladwin, director of the Institute for Public Opinion Research at FIU. "I'd give two explanations. The first one is that there's been this continuing demographic change. The other factor is the election of Obama. There's a process of change. People see the handwriting on the wall," he added. Support for the embargo remained strong among Cuban-American registered voters. A majority, 56 percent, said they support continuing it. Carlos Pascual, vice president for Foreign Policy at the centrist Brookings Institution in Washington, said the results indicate a new perspective "in what is going to result in a favourable policy change towards Cuba" ([2008 Cuba/US Transition Poll](#); *The Miami Herald*, 2/12/08).

December 29: The Cuba Study Group, a moderate organization funded by Cuban American businessmen, has recommended US President-elect Barack Obama to lift all travel restrictions and to allow remittances by any US citizen as a way to "strengthen the internal pro-democracy movement" in Cuba. Carlos Saladrigas, a businessman and

founder of the group, believes the best way to promote change in Cuba is through US tourism. "We should allow the forces of American culture creep into Cuba and then let the Cubans be the agents of their own change. That would put the Cuban government on the spot," he said. Saladrigas said the US president has wide discretionary powers to engage Havana, even to restore the diplomatic ties severed by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1961, and allow Cuba back into the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. But lifting the travel ban requires Congressional action and that would be difficult to get passed without clear signs from Cuba that political reforms are forthcoming, he said. "Is the Cuban government really interested in significant change? I really do not see it", he said (*Reuters*, 29/12/08).

Foreign Affairs

December 1: The Cuban National Ballet (CNB) will soon take Cuban prima ballerina assoluta Alicia Alonso's version of "Nutcracker" – based upon the original by Lev Ivanov - to Canada. Led by First Dancer Anette Delgado and Main Dancer Elier Bourzac as well as First Soloists Veronica Corveas, Yanela Piñera, Jose Lozada and Ernesto Alvarez and Soloists Ivis Diaz and Leandro Perez, the CNB will perform in Canada on December 11-14. The Cuban company will offer five performances of "Nutcracker", a co-production of the CNB and the Italian foundations Theatre La Fenice of Venice and Carlo Felice, of Genoa (*ACN*, 1/12/08).

December 2: Bolivian President Evo Morales met with visiting Cuban Culture Minister Abel Prieto at the Quemado Palace in La Paz. Prieto traveled to the Bolivian capital accompanied by journalist Katuska Blanco to present the book 'La Paz en Colombia' (Peace in Colombia) by Fidel Castro, to whom Morales sent warm greetings. According to Prensa Latina news agency, Prieto and Morales spoke of several topics of common interest such as the work of Cuban and Venezuelan teachers and activists in Bolivia. Before returning to the Caribbean nation, Abel Prieto announced that Bolivia and Cuba are exploring ways to increase bilateral cooperation in sectors such as literature, arts, etc. During his stay in Bolivia, the Cuban Culture Minister also met with Education Minister Roberto Aguilar, and with Pablo Groux, deputy Minister of Culture Development, and he invited them to participate in the annual International Book Fair of Havana that takes place in February (*ACN*, 2/12/08).

December 2: Cuba has no plans to join the Caribbean Community regional trade bloc, but will host its leaders at a summit nonetheless. Leaders from all 15 of the group's member states will discuss how to combat high food and energy costs, the global financial crisis and global warming at the meeting, Cuban Deputy Foreign Minister Alejandro Gonzalez said. At a July summit, members established a \$60 million fund to market Caribbean tourism. Cuba maintains strong relations with members of the bloc, which is known as CARICOM, despite US efforts to pressure the small nations to isolate Havana, Gonzalez said. Still, the communist-led island hasn't considered joining the group, he added. "The relationship between Cuba and the Caribbean goes beyond matters of ideology," he said (*AP*, 3/12/08).

December 2: The 3rd International Conference “50 Years of Cuba’s Revolution, its Impact in the Caribbean” will be held from December 3 - 6, as a preliminary to the 3rd Cuba-CARICOM Summit. Organized by the University of Havana’s Department for Caribbean Studies, the inaugural ceremony will include the keynote lecture “El Caribe tras 50 años de Revolución cubana” (The Caribbean after 50 Years of Revolution in Cuba), by Dr. Roberto Fernández Retamar. The conference will focus on the presentation of the results of research work on the Caribbean, with a thematic spectrum covering disciplines like Social Sciences, Humanities, Economy, and studies on the environment. The inaugural ceremony in the Main Lecture Hall will also include the presentation of the Doctor Honoris Causa in Economic Sciences to Jamaican intellectual Norman Paul Girvan, according to a report by the Group for Communications and Public Relations of the University of Havana (ACN, 2/12/08).

December 2: Cuba is hosting, for the first time, the Greater Caribbean Conference on Culture, which is aimed at strengthening different cultural aspects of the region. The conference is being attended by experts from a dozen Ibero-American countries and was called by the Andres Bello Project and organized with the support of the Cuban Culture Ministry. According to Cuba’s Deputy Culture Minister Fernando Rojas, the conference has focused on cultural policies and ways to foster common projects, the training of culture experts and bonds among attending nations. The list of participants include the vice-director of UNESCO’s Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, Herman Van-Hoff. Angel Eduardo Moreno, with the Andres Bello Agreement project, said the Greater Caribbean Conference will serve as a tool to have the cultural issue not only stand as a concern only related to Fine Arts, but also as a contribution to the quality of life (ACN, 2/12/08).

December 2: On behalf of the Cuban government and people, Cuba’s President Raul Castro expressed his condolences and solidarity with the Indian people for the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The Cuban leader sent a message to India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, saying “on behalf of the Cuban government and people I extend my deepest condolences to the Indian people and government.” Prensa Latina news agency reported that the message expresses condolences in particular to the families of the victims of the terrorist acts (ACN, 2/12/08).

December 2: The Minister for Youth and Sports from the Republic of Lebanon, Mir Talal Majid Aíslan, described his visit to Cuba as very fruitful and profitable. As the culmination of his stay on the island, where he held important talks, the visitor met with the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, José Ramón Fernández, who is also the president of the Cuban Olympic Committee. He also met with the head of the Cuban Institute for Sports, Physical Education and Recreation, Christian Jiménez. During the meeting, the two parts analyzed the possibilities of expanding bilateral cooperation in this field (ACN, 2/12/08).

December 3: Executives from China’s Great Wall Drilling Company made a 100,000 Euros donation to Cuba to alleviate damage caused by the recent passage of three hurricanes. During the ceremony, held in Havana, an official from the Cuban Ministry

for Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation, Ezequiel Díaz, said this gesture of solidarity strengthens the ties of friendship between the two peoples, and constitutes another example of international support for Cuba (*ACN*, 3/12/08).

December 4: The Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, expressed his wish and confidence that US president-elect Barak Obama will take steps to ease the tension with Cuba. "I hope that the things that were said during the campaign (...) are carried out," declared the head of this regional forum, from which Cuba has been suspended from 1962. At the seminar on "Latin America and summit diplomacy", held in Paris, Insulza stressed that the new US administration is expected to take steps to ease "substantively" the blockade imposed on the Caribbean country and to lift the ban on travel to and from the island. If that is done, added the OAS leader, there would be "a very important reduction in bilateral tension," which "could be followed by a much more systematic policy for the incorporation of Cuba into the inter-American system." Insulza revealed that the Cuban situation will be addressed in the next General Assembly of the forum. The representative of the Cuban embassy in Paris, who also attended the seminar, said that, "any concerns the OAS may have regarding Cuba are a step in the right direction (*EFE*, 4/12/08).

December 4: Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that the Rio Group has entered a new stage of maturity with the recent admission of Cuba as a full member of this regional bloc. "For the first time the Rio Group will be complete with the integration of Cuba, the only country that was missing," Ortega said. According to Prensa Latina news agency, the Nicaraguan leader added that the incorporation of Cuba will allow the group to work on the creation of its own security and defence doctrine that, for the first time, will not be dictated from the United States. "They are no longer the owners of the world and they have to accept this reality," Ortega stressed and added that the Rio Group represents the sovereign power of Latin America and the Caribbean today (*ACN*, 4/12/08).

December 4: Cuba has donated 5.2 million doses of anti-meningococcal vaccine to African countries as an expression of its solidarity and assistance to people suffering from meningitis – a disease that causes a lot of deaths in Africa. Concepcion Campa, member of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party, explained that in order to increase its cooperation with the World and the Pan American Health organizations and also to contribute to the prevention and eradication of meningitis, Cuba inaugurated a modern plant that has the capacity to produce 100 million doses of active components of diverse vaccines. Campa, who is also the Director of the Finlay Institute in Havana, announced the inauguration of other facilities linked to Cuban biotechnology (*ACN*, 4/12/08).

December 4: Media advocacy group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has awarded its top annual prize to Cuban journalist, Ricardo Gonzalez Alfonso. Mr Gonzalez, who founded the island's first independent magazine, is serving a 20 year jail term in Havana. Awards were also given to dissident North Korean broadcasters Radio Free NK and to two jailed Burmese bloggers. RSF said the annual awards are intended to raise awareness

of the right to be kept informed and to inform others. The Paris-based group said it was giving Mr Gonzalez the Journalist of the Year award for his efforts in "helping an independent press to survive in Cuba". The journalist was arrested in 2003 with dozens of other journalists, in a crackdown known as "Black Spring". He was accused of being "in the pay of the United States" and "undermining Cuba's independence and territorial integrity," and was sent to jail, said RSF (*BBC*, 5/12/08).

December 4: Mexico is sending illegal Cuban migrants home for the first time under a new immigration accord. A Mexican immigration official says authorities are preparing to send the Cubans back to the communist island after they were caught in Mexico. The official is not releasing additional information. Cuban immigrants trying to reach the United States have turned to Mexico in recent years after it became harder to enter through Miami. Almost all were given temporary visas in Mexico and continued on to the US. In October, Mexico agreed to send the Cubans home. An Associated Press photographer in Cancun saw about 60 immigrants being loaded on to buses, and some said they were being sent to Cuba. A Cuban Embassy official had no information (*AP*, 4/12/08).

December 5: In a meeting in Cuba with Palestinian leaders, the Cuban-Arab community reaffirmed their solidarity with Palestine subdued by Israel, reported *Trabajadores* newspaper. Saleh Ra'fat, general secretary of the Palestine Democratic Union Party and Suleiman T. Hamdan, with the political body of the organization, recently held a meeting with members of Cuba's Arab Union. The president of the Union, Alfredo Deriche, said Israel's repression against the Palestinian people was cruel and inhumane. He went on to tell the visitors about the history of the Levant immigration to Cuba. Saleh Ra'fat thanked the Cuban Union, and other organizations and institutions in the island for its permanent and active solidarity. He stated that the peace in the Middle East will not be reached as long as Israel sustains its policy of extermination against the people of Palestine (*ACN*, 7/12/08).

December 5: Cuba defended issues that are punctual for poor nations at the Conference on Climate Change underway in Poznan, Poland. Some aspects proposed by Cuba include the adjustment, mitigation, technology transfer, and the financing of Adaptation Funds. Cuba's Deputy Minister of Science, Technology and the Environment, José Antonio Díaz, said his country prioritizes the adaptation to the effects of global warming, due to its consequences for developing nations. The government official pointed out that, with regard to mitigation, Cuba will demand that rich countries should honor the Kyoto Protocol, which established a 5.2 reduction, with respect to 1990, of gas emissions causing the greenhouse effect. Jose Antonio Diaz added that developing nations –which are not historically responsible in terms of global warming- should make good will contributions, like the use of renewable energy sources, which don't produce pollutants. The Deputy Minister explained that the objective of the Poznan meeting is not that of setting commitments, but to adjusting the countries' positions in order to reach an agreement at the Conference of the Parties to be held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009 (*ACN*, 7/12/08).

December 5: The President of Spain's Olympic Committee Alejandro Blanco Bravo arrived in Havana to exchange with Cuban authorities and analyze areas for future cooperation. Blanco was welcomed at Havana's Jose Marti international airport by Jose Ramon Fernandez, head of the Cuban Olympic Committee and vice president of the Council of Ministers. During his visit, the Spanish sports official will hold talks with Cuban sports authorities about future joint projects, sports cooperation and exchange between the two Olympic committees (*ACN*, 6/12/08).

December 7: Raul Castro and leaders from 14 other Caribbean nations are gathering in the eastern city of Santiago to discuss ways to strengthen tourism to the region despite the global economic crisis. Castro and Caribbean Community trade bloc officials will meet behind closed doors. Climate change, health care and rising global food prices are also on the agenda. Officials also plan a tribute to Castro's ailing 82-year-old brother, Fidel, who has not been seen in public since undergoing emergency intestinal surgery in July 2006. Raul Castro and the other leaders placed flowers at the tomb of 19th-century independence leader Jose Marti (*AP*, 7/12/08).

December 8: Cuban President Raul Castro officially opened the 3rd Cuba-CARICOM Summit at the Hotel Santiago in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba. The meeting is taking place with the participation of the heads of state and government from the 15 member countries of the regional bloc and representatives from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), who will analyze joint projects and ways to increase cooperation as well as actions to face the current international financial crisis and recession, among other aspects. The opening session of the event includes speeches by Raul Castro and also by Baldwin Spencer, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda and pro-tempore president of the Conference of Heads of Government of CARICOM; and Edwin Spencer, General Secretary of this bloc. CARICOM is comprised of the independent states of Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Surinam, and Trinidad & Tobago. Also part of the bloc is Montserrat while the Virgin Islands is an associated state. Anguilla, Cayman Islands, Mexico, Venezuela, Aruba, Colombia, the Ditch Antilles, Bermudas, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico are observers ([Discurso de inauguración de Raúl Castro](#); *ACN*, 8/12/08).

December 8: The head of the Caribbean Community trade bloc said the United Nations should do more to help small countries better shield themselves from world financial crises. Antigua Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the 14-nation Caribbean Community, said the UN "should analyze the possibility of establishing a true international monetary reserve system under which we wouldn't have to depend on our own national currencies to accumulate our countries' reserves." Many countries already hold cash reserves in foreign currency such as dollars and euros, however. Spencer did not offer details of his proposal, which he made in opening remarks at a summit of the trade bloc, known as CARICOM. The one-day gathering of regional leaders underscores Cuba's increasingly warm ties with other Caribbean nations. CARICOM chose to hold the summit in Cuba, even though the

communist state is not a member of the group. They were expected to bestow an honorary leadership post on 82-year-old Fidel Castro, making Cuba's ailing ex-president the first official of a non-member country to receive such a designation. "Today we pay tribute to a man who was a source of great inspiration," said CARICOM Secretary-General Edwin Carrington. "He has been a true Caribbean citizen." Cuba promised to open new eye surgery clinics in Jamaica, Saint Lucia and Guyana, as well as 10 "health diagnostic" facilities in Haiti and one in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It also said it would offer 480 regional scholarships next year ([Palabras de clausura de Raúl Castro](#); *AP*, 8/12/08).

December 8: Caribbean countries urged US President-elect Barack Obama to end the trade embargo Washington has imposed for more than four decades on Cuba in the latest signal to the incoming administration. The 15-member Caribbean bloc CARICOM said in a statement at the end of a summit in Santiago de Cuba that the governments "call for an end to the economic, commercial and financial embargo against the Republic of Cuba." Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister W. Baldwin Spencer, head of CARICOM, said the "transformational change" under way in Washington should relegate the embargo to history (*Reuters*, 8/12/08).

December 8: The 10th Mexico-Cuba Inter-parliamentary meeting was inaugurated at the Mexican Chamber of Deputies in Mexico City with a commitment to strengthen cooperation. According to Prensa Latina news agency, Mexican legislator Victor Hugo Olivares, head of the Mexico-Cuba Friendship Group, said the meeting takes place in the context of total normalization of bilateral relations and at the threshold of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. For his part, Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban Parliament, thanked Mexicans for their support and the Congress for its effort to obtain freedom for the five Cubans imprisoned in the United States. Meanwhile, Cesar Duarte, chairman of the Chamber of Deputies directive board, noted that the meeting will consider pending matters and face the new challenges presented by the adverse international situation. "Together we can help to reactivate the bilateral mechanisms in areas such as the fight against drug trafficking, commerce, industry, agriculture and fishing, foreign trade, tourism, health, energy, biotechnology, oil, education and scientific-technological investigation," said Duarte (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 8: The head of the Spanish Olympic Committee, Alejandro Blanco Bravo, spoke positively about bilateral meetings between his country and Cuba that are aimed at increasing cooperation in the field of sports. Blanco Bravo visited the Anti-doping Laboratory in Havana, and told the press that in his talks with Cuban authorities they shared several of his points of view. The Spanish official considers the improvement of sporting relations as being important for the advancement of both nations. Blanco, who has headed the Iberian Judo Federation for 13 years, said one of the points discussed was the exchange of coaches, which he hopes becomes a reality soon (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 9: A brigade of Cuban doctors working on a collaboration program in Zimbabwe have committed themselves to help the country overcome a cholera epidemic that has taken a toll on nearly 600 people. The brigade, made up of 134 health specialists,

responded to a call made by the Zimbabwean government to face the scourge, reports the Prensa Latina news agency. In a statement released in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, the Cuban doctors said they are willing to do their regular job in the hospitals and work against the epidemic as well (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 9: Raul Castro's first official trip abroad since assuming Cuba's presidency will be to attend a summit in Venezuela. Venezuelan Information Minister Jesse Chacon said Castro will be in Venezuela's capital on December 14 for a meeting of the regional trade bloc known as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, or ALBA. Representatives of 18 Central American and Caribbean countries that benefit from Venezuela's Petrocaribe oil program, which sells oil to members at preferential prices, are also expected at the summit (*AP*, 9/12/08).

December 9: After the conclusion of its sessions in Panama, the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) requested via a Declaration the return of Cuba to the Organization of American States (OAS). About 100 legislators from 18 Latin American countries attended the 24th Ordinary Assembly of Parlatino, held December 5-7 in Panama, which serves as the permanent venue of the organization. The document, unanimously approved during the plenary session of the Assembly, underlined "its support to all diplomatic efforts conducive to the full reinstatement of the Republic of Cuba to the Organization of American States" (*EFE*, 9/12/08).

December 10: As part of a bilateral agreement between the Cuban and Chinese governments, more than 117,000 patients have been treated thus far in two joint ophthalmological hospitals in the Asian country. Dr. Eddy Milvia Hernandez, representative of Cuban Medical Services, told Prensa Latina news agency that the program is on the right track. Hernandez recalled that the first of these two hospitals was inaugurated two years ago in Xining, capital of the Chinese province of Qinghai, where 103,745 patients had been treated by November 30, 2008. She added that the second one opened only eight months ago in Hebi, in the province of Henan. "A total of 13,500 patients have already been treated there," she stressed. Hernandez said that the Cuban ophthalmologists in these two medical facilities have performed more than 4,000 surgeries during this period (*ACN*, 10/12/08).

December 10: President Viktor Yuschenko has urged the Cabinet of Ministers to provide humanitarian aid to Cuba. Yuschenko considered it necessary to provide humanitarian aid to Cuba due to the crisis situation caused by bad weather conditions (*Ukrainian News*, 10/12/08).

December 10: Nearly 30,000 Cuban doctors, dentists, nurses, and technicians are providing healthcare to the poor through a Venezuelan government-sponsored program, officials said. Some 13,020 doctors, 2,938 dentists, 4,170 nurses and 9,868 health technicians from Cuba participate in the "Barrio Adentro" work program, Venezuelan Health Minister Jesus Mantilla told reporters. Cuban workers provide healthcare services to a network of 6,571 clinics across the country, of which more than half operate in poor neighbourhoods. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez launched the "Barrio Adentro"

program as a joint Cuban-Venezuelan initiative in 2003. Human rights organization PROVEA said however that Cuban cooperation in the program has declined and that only around 8,000 health professionals from Cuba work in Venezuela (*AFP*, 11/12/08).

December 10: Rene Preval, President of the Republic of Haiti held an exchange with Latin American and Caribbean journalists from 12 countries, who participated at a Scientific Seminar on Journalism, which wound up in Havana. The Haitian president wished success to all delegates at the event, hosted by the Jose Marti International Journalism Institute and sponsored by the United Nation Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO). “This seminar is a great opportunity for improvement and you should take advantage of it” Preval told to his countryman Eugene Louicis Micius, from Minustrah-FM radio station. Minustrah-FM radio station is one of the nearly 20 media outlets from the region that attended the event, which was also sponsored by the Cuban Science, Technology and Environment Ministry. Other countries represented at the event included Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Jamaica, Guatemala, Ecuador, Chile, Guyana and the Dominican Republic (*ACN*, 10/12/08).

December 11: Cuba and France have updated an educational agreement dating back to 2004 that sets out the exchange in that sector and covers the teaching and advanced training of Spanish and French. The document was signed by Deputy Education Minister Rolando Forneiro, and the president of the rector's confederation of France's teacher training institutes, Patrick Baranger, in a ceremony held in Paris, reported PL news agency (*ACN*, 11/12/08).

December 12: Canadian rock band Doris and Ses Roberts will give three concerts in Holguin province, one of them at a municipality hit by Hurricane Ike in September. Accompanied by Canadian artist Vic Bogel, the young band will be playing for the first time out of their country, as part of activities organized to mark the 50th anniversary of the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution. The band's manager Bob Pover, thanked Cuban authorities and specially those in Holguin for allowing the band to play for its people, which have been gradually recovering from the effects of the category-three hurricane (*ACN*, 12/12/08).

December 12: Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Patrick Manning arrived in Cuba to undergo surgery to remove a malignant tumour in his left kidney. He left Port of Spain with his wife Hazel after he was advised by Cuban doctors to take the surgery as quickly as possible. Several years ago in Cuba, Manning had a pacemaker implanted to regulate his heartbeat and took the opportunity to undergo medical tests last week while in the communist state to attend the third Cuba-CARICOM summit, when the cancerous tumour was diagnosed. The surgery is scheduled to take place over the Christmas period and Manning has cancelled all government and diplomatic leave. Manning was asked why he did not go to the United States for the surgery instead of Cuba, and he responded that he had every confidence in the Cuban doctors (*Caribbean Net News*, 13/12/08).

December 13: Raul Castro began his first foreign trip as Cuba's president in Venezuela, a symbolic destination aimed at strengthening ties with the island's socialist ally and main

benefactor. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez — a longtime ally of Fidel Castro who says he is building "21st century socialism" in his oil-rich South American nation — told the Cuban president: "I say that Fidel is my father and Raul is my uncle." The leaders agreed to cooperate on 173 joint projects worth more than \$2 billion in areas including energy and communications. "We didn't come to this brother country to receive honors," said the 77-year-old Castro, adding that Latin American relations have changed dramatically since Chavez and Fidel first signed a cooperation agreement eight years ago. "But to give tribute to a people who have stuck with Cuba through a very difficult moment." Castro offered Chavez and the Venezuelan people "a hug" from Fidel, who has not been seen in public since undergoing emergency intestinal surgery in July 2006. "There is a revolution on this continent, Raul," Chavez said, apparently referring to a wave of leftist governments elected in Latin America. Chavez presented Castro with a gold-plated replica of a sword that once belonged to South American independence hero Simon Bolivar. The Cuban leader, in turn, gave Chavez a photograph taken of him during his years as a guerrilla commander. Earlier, Chavez greeted Castro at an airport outside Caracas where marines dressed in white uniforms stood in formation under a bright Caribbean sun. "I bring a salute, a hug for all Venezuelans from the Cuban people and from the leader of the revolution, comrade Fidel Castro," Raul said (*AP*, 13/12/08).

December 14: President Raul Castro met with Cuban diplomats and workers who are currently making their contribution in Venezuela as part of an official visit to this South American nation. "Your mission here is very important," Raul told the members of the Cuban embassy in Caracas and a representation of thousands of Cuban workers who are making their contribution in the health, education and sports sectors as part of a series of social programs promoted by the administration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. According to Granma news daily, Raul congratulated them for their responsible and disinterested work and added that their effort reminded him of other Cuban internationalist missions such as that of Angola and other countries. During the one-hour meeting, the Cuban leader praised the immediate and effective assistance given to Cuba by the Venezuelan Government and people after the passage of hurricanes Gustav, Ike and Paloma, which recently hit Cuba leaving huge economic losses. For his part, the Cuban ambassador in Caracas, German Sanchez Otero, described Raul's visit as historic and said that it will strengthen the bonds of friendship between the governments and peoples of Cuba and Venezuela (*ACN*, 15/12/08).

December 14: "Only on a few occasions has Paraguay acknowledged the great solidarity of the Cuban government and people, but we do it sincerely and not blushing," said Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo. According to Granma news daily, Lugo was speaking during the inauguration of several facilities that will serve to accommodate patients of the free eye-surgery program Operation Miracle in the municipality of Maria Auxiliadora, in the Paraguayan province of Hitapua. During the ceremony, Lugo handed diplomas with his signature to the Cuban volunteers who are participating in this initiative for low-income people in Paraguay (*ACN*, 14/12/08).

December 15: Cuban President Raul Castro concluded a three-day visit to Venezuela after signing a major trade accord with Cuba's closest ally in Latin America. It was

Castro's first foreign state visit since being chosen president in February. Castro and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez signed an agreement for 163 joint projects next year worth \$2 billion. In 2008, the two nations had 78 bilateral projects with a value of \$355 million, according to the Venezuelan government. The official visit included stops at the Plaza Bolivar in central Caracas and the National Pantheon. As he has done with previous visiting dignitaries, Chavez gave Castro a replica of Simon Bolivar's sword. Upon his departure, Raul Castro headed to Brazil for the Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development, which will be held on December 16-17 (*CNN*, 15/12/08).

December 16: Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva welcomed his Cuban counterpart, Raul Castro, to his first Latin American-Caribbean summit, which was being held in the Brazilian coastal resort of Costa Do Sauipe. "The presence of President Raul Castro at this meeting is very important for us, and I hope it is the first of a series of meetings that he will have with us," Lula told delegates. He was speaking as he opened the plenary session of Mercosur, the South American trade bloc comprising Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Castro, and Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, were special guests at the gathering. The Cuban President will attend the Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development, and will meet with other heads of state and government, highlighted the official Granma newspaper. At the end of the summit Raul Castro will start his official visit to Brazil, following an invitation made by his Brazilian counterpart Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (*AFP, ACN*, 16/12/08).

December 16: Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations Ileana Nuñez denounced the bleak prospects for the world economy and threats to poor countries' efforts towards sustainable development. Speaking to a UN General Assembly session to monitor the results of the Millennium Summit, the diplomat said that the final document of the Doha Conference on Financing does not address the seriousness of the current world situation and its implications for the poorest countries, reported Prensa Latina news agency. Nuñez said that foreign indebtedness adds to that discouraging panorama, worsening the structural crisis of the Third World economies and the stagnation of trade negotiations, which she said should have been focused on development (*ACN*, 16/12/08).

December 16: Latin American leaders used Cuba's entry into the Rio Group to call on President-elect Barack Obama to end the US embargo of the Caribbean island. At a summit of 33 Latin American and Caribbean nations, Cuba was formally introduced into the Rio Group. The group was formed in 1986 to help end armed conflict in Central America. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva says he hopes Obama will end the embargo. He says it no longer makes political or economic sense. Cuban leader Raul Castro thanked his fellow Latin American leaders and reminisced about the Cuban revolution during a 20-minute speech. He says Cuba's entry into the group indicates a new, more independent era for Latin America is dawning ([Discurso de Raúl Castro en la reunion del Grupo de Río](#); *AP*, 16/12/08).

December 16: The Presidents of Cuba and Mexico, Raul Castro and Felipe Calderon held talks in the framework of the Latin American and Caribbean Summit for Integration and Development underway in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. During the meeting, held in a

friendly and cordial environment, the two presidents talked about the state of relations between the two countries, the regional situation and other topics of interests for both countries. President Raul Castro reiterated the invitation for Calderon to visit Cuba, while the Mexican leader officially asked Raul to visit his country. They both agreed to schedule the visits for 2009 and the exact dates will be coordinated via diplomatic missions (ACN, 16/12/08).

December 16: Presidents Raul Castro, of Cuba and Rafael Correa, of Ecuador, held talks after the closing of the Group of Rio Summit, in Costa de Sauipe, Brazil. The friendly exchange between the two heads of state and their delegations allowed them to consider different issues of bilateral interest, Granma daily reports. Both presidents expressed their satisfaction with the positive state of relations between their countries and their willingness to keep strengthening those links. They agreed that only regional integration could successfully face the effects of unjust relations prevailing in the world's economic arena, which have been worsened by the global economic crisis. Rafael Correa was particularly interested in learning about the history of Cuba and its Revolution. He said that he had the privilege of listening to the testimony of someone who, along Fidel, has been one of the major actors in Cuban history over the past 50 years. The Ecuadorian President ratified that he will visit Cuba soon in order to respond to an invitation issued by Raul Castro (ACN, 17/12/08).

December 16: Cuba's First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bruno Rodríguez, described as excellent the level of exchange between his country and the Socialist Democratic Republic of Sri Lanka. Our ties are historical, and are constantly developing, said Rodríguez, after receiving a delegation, at the local chancery, headed by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of that Asian nation, Hussein Bhaila. He thanked the Sri Lanka authorities' willingness to contribute to alleviate the material damage caused to the island by the recent passage of three hurricanes, and spotlighted the agreement of criteria of the two nations in international forums. The top official expressed the acknowledgement of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse for the help received from Cuba for the training of technicians and specialists, particularly when the southern and eastern coasts of Sri Lanka were devastated by the effects of the tsunami of December 2004. Bhaila and his delegation arrived to Havana to attend the meeting of the First Intergovernmental Session of the Cuba-Sri Lanka Joint Commission (ACN, 16/12/08).

December 17: A summit of Latin American leaders demanded an end to the 46-year-old US embargo on Cuba and focused on hopes that strained ties with Washington will change under incoming president Barack Obama. Presidents and top officials from 33 countries covering virtually all of Latin America and the Caribbean -- including Cuban President Raul Castro on his first foreign tour abroad -- were keen to turn the page on their experience with US President George W. Bush's administration. The two-day summit in the northeastern Brazilian resort of Costa do Sauipe flew high its assertion of independence from the United States right from the start. The leaders issued a special statement demanding an end to the US economic sanctions imposed on Cuba since 1962. The Rio Group -- a policy-coordinating bloc covering most of the region -- also

welcomed Cuba as its newest member in a pointed challenge Washington's bid to isolate Havana. Castro, making his first appearance at a multilateral forum outside Cuba since taking over from his brother Fidel more than two years ago, called his country's welcome into the group a "transcendental moment" ([Declaración sobre el bloqueo](#); *AFP*, 17/12/08).

December 17: Cuban president Raul Castro told Evo Morales that the island will continue helping his country as long as necessary, in a meeting in Costa de Sauipe, Brazil. The two presidents met within the framework of the First Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development that concluded later in the day, reported *Granma* newspaper. Morales thanked the people and government of Cuba for their support of his nation, in particular the assistance provided in the fields of health and education by hundreds of Cuban specialists, said *Granma* and noted that Raul Castro stressed that Cuba will maintain its collaboration with Bolivia as long as it requests it (*ACN*, 18/12/08).

December 17: Cuban President Raul Castro underscored the similarities between the Cuban and the Brazilian people, during the unveiling of a bust of Latin American Independence Hero Simon Bolivar in the Brazilian city of Salvador. The solemn ceremony, which marked the 178th anniversary of the death of Bolivar, known as the Liberator, was attended by the presidents of Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Honduras, as well as by members of delegations from those countries who participated in the recently concluded Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development, *Granma* newspaper reports. Following the anthems of Venezuela and Brazil, President Hugo Chavez extended warm greetings to the people and authorities of Bahia, to President Lula da Silva and to Fidel Castro, "who has won the admiration and respect of the people in the continent," he said. A smiling Cuban President Raúl Castro said he has "a problem" with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez because he talks for long. Castro said he turns down the volume on his TV when Chávez talks but then sometimes asks an assistant to write up a summary because the Venezuelan "says interesting things." Chávez looked solemn as Castro spoke at the rally (*ACN, The Miami Herald*, 18/12/08).

December 18: Raul Castro visited Brasilia to cement Cuban-Brazilian relations, one day after emerging triumphant from a Latin American summit that sided with his communist island against its arch-enemy, the United States. Castro attended a meeting of 33 countries making up Latin American and the Caribbean that handed him a diplomatic victory. The summit concluded with an appeal to incoming US president Barack Obama to end the 46-year-old US economic embargo imposed on Cuba, and the "immediate" scrapping of reinforced sanctions brought in by outgoing President George W. Bush over the past five years. Castro, 77, called the summit outcome "magnificent." "I find the result very good, and I'm very content," he told the press before flying to Brasilia. Brazil has declared it wants closer ties with Cuba. Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said in May his country wants to be Cuba's principal partner -- a position currently held by oil-rich Venezuela. Castro and Lula greeted each other with a hug before they began their discussions on their bilateral relationship. "They wanted us to be like the politicians from the European Union, who shake hands, smile -- but who don't have the brotherly relations we have," Castro joked as he posed for photographs with his Brazilian counterpart.

Brazil's foreign ministry said Castro's visit was merely a follow-up meeting and no substantive accords were expected to be signed (*AFP*, 18/12/08).

December 18: Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said in Brasilia that there are no political, ethical and moral reasons for the US embargo against Cuba to continue. The statement was made during the first visit of Cuban President Raul Castro to Brazil. Lula also defended the inclusion of Cuba in the Organization of American States (OAS). Lula praised the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which according to him served as an inspiration to an entire generation of Brazilians during the country's military regime, which lasted from 1964 to 1985. "The legacy of that revolutionary people inspired us during the terrible times of oppression and continues to motivate us to build a better world," he said. He added that the Revolution has helped Cuba grow into an extremely developed nation in terms of health and education (*Xinhua*, 18/12/08).

December 19: Bolivian President Evo Morales made an appeal to the international community to join the demand for the lifting of the US blockade against Cuba. "We're morally obliged to rise against that measure -in Bolivia, in Latin America, and in the rest of the world", said Morales, during the main activity to mark the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution carried out at La Paz, Granma newspaper reported. The Bolivian leader expressed the need to awaken people's consciousness so they pressure the US government. "It will be a hard task, but we can't allow the country that has given so much solidarity to the world to suffer an economic, commercial and financial blockade", underlined the president, who also demanded the release of the five Cubans incarcerated in the United States (*ACN*, 19/12/08).

December 19: The Vice President of the Supreme Popular Assembly of the Popular Democratic Republic of Korea, Yang Hyong Sop, reaffirmed his government's position of consolidating its cooperation with Cuba, the North Korean press reported. The struggles led by Fidel Castro, which ended in the defeat of the Batista dictatorship, were remembered by Hyong Sop during the activity held at the Cuban embassy in Pyongyang to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution (*ACN*, 20/12/08).

December 19: Tanzanian Prime Minister Mizengo Peter Pinda received Cuban ambassador Ernesto Gomez in Dodoma, the capital of that African nation. During the friendly meeting, Pinda and Gómez reviewed the development of bilateral cooperation and agreed on the need to expand and diversify ties in other fields of common interest. The Tanzanian leader expressed his government's willingness to increase exchanges to their historical levels and expressed his profound gratitude toward the devotion of Cuban voluntary workers in his country, reported the Cuban embassy in Dodoma (*ACN*, 20/12/08).

December 20: Bolivian President Evo Morales said his country has won its war against illiteracy. The three-year effort, which helped about 820,000 people learn to read and write, was sponsored by Cuba and Venezuela. Officials said that about 97 percent of the adult population in Bolivia can now read and write. In 2001, a government census found nearly 14 percent of Bolivians were illiterate and nearly 26 percent of people in rural

areas could neither read nor write. "Thanks to help from our brothers from Venezuela and Cuba, today we are eradicating illiteracy in our country," Morales said in a ceremony (UPI, 20/12/08).

December 23: Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's Independence leader and first President expressed in Lusaka his gratefulness to Cuba for its assistance to the Zambian people, particularly in the fields of health care and education. During a meeting with Cuban ambassador to Zambia, Carmelina Ramirez, the former head of state condemned the US economic blockade of Cuba, which has translated into over 90 billion dollars. Kaunda recalled his visits to the Caribbean nation and sent greetings to the Cuban people, who will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the triumph of their Revolution January 1st, 1959 (ACN, 23/12/08).

December 23: The high level reached by Cuba's foreign relations, mainly with Latin American and Caribbean countries was stressed by the Cuban Parliament's Foreign Relations Commission during its session held at Havana's Conventions Centre. Cuban lawmakers with the permanent working commission highlighted that the effort includes the work carried out by the Cuban Parliament, which has allowed the country to have been elected to important leading roles, such as the board of directives of the Latin American Parliament (PARLATINO). Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, member of the Secretariat of Cuba's Communist Party Central Committee said that the work of the Cuban Parliament in the foreign affairs area for 2009 will take place amidst the world economic crisis and the contradictions of the capitalist system, plus the political changes taking place in Latin America (ACN, 23/12/08).

December 23: Cuba is covering all the cost of a cancer operation on Trinidad's prime minister, Trinidadian officials said. Foreign Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon said that Cuban officials had refused Trinidad's attempts to pay for surgery on Prime Minister Patrick Manning, who is recuperating at Havana's Centre for Medical and Surgical Research. She attributed the act to "extensive, cordial friendship with Cuba." Trinidad has recruited doctors and nurses from Havana and Cuba also recently sent a team of agricultural experts to help Trinidad boost local food production. Opposition leader Basdeo Panday has questioned the motive behind the free operation. "I would like to know what are the conditions under which this gift is being received," he said. "The country should know about it since it is the prime minister involved" (AP, 24/12/08).

December 26: Russian-Cuban relations will serve as the starting point to advance Russia's interests in the entire Latin American region, a Russian diplomat said in an interview with the press. Russia's ambassador to Cuba, Mikhail Kamynin, said that "Cuba holds a key role" in Russia's foreign policy because Cuba "has much authority and a lot of influence in the region." The diplomat noted that cooperation with Cuba is not simply bilateral, but more of a starting point for Russian interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to Kamynin, Russia and Cuba have always had good relations and this year was particularly notable for the sharp increase of bilateral activity in practically all spheres. "One of the key moments that characterized our relations on a new level was, undoubtedly, the official visit to Havana by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the

end of November," the ambassador said. The visit was the first by a Russian leader since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Kamynin expressed his confidence that 2009 would prove to be "just as dynamic in character" as 2008 was. "In January, there is already an intergovernmental session planned in Moscow and preparations for a Russian Federation Council delegation to visit Havana, headed by the chair of the Audit Chamber, Sergei Stepashin," the ambassador said. "There will also be an official visit by Cuban President Raul Castro to Moscow in early 2009" (*RIA Novosti*, 26/12/08).

December 26: Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque highlighted that Cuba managed to beat all US attempts against the revolution during 2008. Cuban FM presented a report at the session of deputies of the National Assembly of People's Power and emphasized that Cuba shares in this moment diplomatic relations with 181 out of the 192 nations represented at the UN, as expression of the failure of Washington. There are also 108 foreign delegations accredited in Havana, which constitutes one of the greater diplomatic bodies in Latin America, with 123 Cuban embassies representing the country abroad. More than 500 foreign delegations visited Havana during 2008, including 30 Heads of State and Government and 185 countries that rejected the blockade imposed by US against Cuba at UN General Assembly, FM recalled. Most important achievements in this battle against the US blockade were the demands held against it during the Ibero-American, Government and Heads of State of Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuba-CARICOM Summits, and others. Perez Roque recalled that during this year Cuba managed to obtain the total reintegration into Latin America and the Caribbean, its natural region, and he highlighted its entry to Grupo de Rio, as well as the invitation to MERCOSUR Summit. Perez Roque mentioned the consolidation of strategic relations with China and Venezuela. He recalled as positive results registered in Cuban foreign policy during 2008, the reestablishment of the political dialogue with the European Union, on the basis of non-interference and mutual respect and the lifting of the diplomatic penalties imposed by that authority. He considered Cuban-Russian relations are in their best moment since the disappearance of the Soviet Union and expressed that the visits to Cuba of the Presidents of that country, China, and Brazil prevented US actions from advancing (*ACN*, 26/12/08).

December 27: Hundreds of Cubans are applying for Spanish citizenship as part of Madrid's new "law of grandchildren", which comes into force by the end of the year. The new law makes provision for grandchildren of Spaniards born in Spain or exiled during the regime of Spanish dictator late General Franco. According to estimates of the Spanish consulate in Havana, in the two or three years that the law will be in force, some 100,000 Cubans a year could obtain Spanish nationality. Spain's Law of Historical Memory opens the possibility for grandchildren of Spaniards to acquire Spanish citizenship either by showing that a grandparent was a Spaniard born in Spain, or by being the grandchild of someone exiled from the Iberian nation after General Franco's victory in the 1936-1939 civil war. "We have to be ready for anything. That's what you have to do to win at anything," Francisco, a 48-year-old Havana resident, told the press. Francisco wants to become Spanish thanks to the right given him by being the grandson of a Spaniard and with the idea of seeking his fortune in Spain, where he has Cuban friends. For Teresa, the 56-year old granddaughter of natives of Spain's Basque region, the Spanish passport will

enable her to travel to the United States because "you don't need a visa" (*IANS*, 27/12/08).

December 28: Cuba has condemned Israel's bloody raid of Gaza, which has left hundreds dead or injured, describing the Zionist attacks as "genocidal". The Cuban newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* released a government statement, in which the Caribbean island had urged international players to help bring immediate end to the massacre of innocent Palestinians in Gaza. "Cuba voices its firmest condemnation of this genocidal act by Israel, and urges the international community to condemn this massacre and mobilize to demand an immediate end to these attacks on the Palestinian civilian population," the statement said (*Press TV*, 29/12/08).

December 29: Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin will make a historic visit to Cuba in the new year, becoming the first Irish Minister to travel to the island in an official capacity. The visit will take place against a background of changing international policy towards Cuba. Earlier this year the EU decided to formally restore relations with the island, five years after Brussels imposed diplomatic sanctions following a crackdown on dissidents that resulted in dozens being rounded up and imprisoned. US president-elect Barack Obama has said he plans to ease restrictions on family travel and remittances to Cuba when he takes office next month but he has stopped short of saying he will end the 46-year trade embargo on the island. The timing of the Minister's trip is yet to be confirmed but *The Irish Times* understands it is likely to take place the week beginning February 16th (*The Irish Times*, 29/12/08).

December 29: More than 400 Cubans of Spanish ancestry mobbed that country's stately embassy in Havana, waiting to apply for citizenship under the newly enacted "law of grandchildren." Spain has begun accepting citizenship applications from the descendants of people who went into exile after its brutal 1936-1939 Civil War, part of a 2007 law meant to address the painful legacy of the conflict and the ensuing right wing dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. But a new provision also allows anyone whose parents or grandparents were born in Spain but went overseas because of their political beliefs or economic hardship to become Spaniards. Those accepted do not have to renounce their current citizenship. Norberto Luis Diaz, 38, was the first person in Cuba to be approved for citizenship under the new provisions. A Spanish consular official signed the forms authorizing his passport, and Diaz excitedly hugged his family members moments later. "I have more Spanish blood than Cuban blood because almost 75 percent of my genes are Spanish," said Diaz, whose grandfather arrived in Cuba in the early 1900s and married a fellow Spanish exile just to be sure he preserved his homeland's citizenship. Diaz is a cardiologist who began applying for permission to travel to Spain in 2002. Because many Cuban health care workers have to wait six years for approval to head abroad for extended periods, official Cuban permission to leave only came last week, days before the law took affect - making him the first Cuban eligible (*The Miami Herald*, 29/12/08).

December 29: Some fifty members of the 26th Contingent of the Southern Cross Friendship Brigade -coming from Australia and New Zealand- were welcomed at the Julio Antonio Mella International Camp, located in the municipality of Caimito, on the

outskirts of Havana. The vice-president of the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), Alicia Corredera, highlighted that this group of friends will have the opportunity of celebrating in Cuba the 50th anniversary of the triumph of the Revolution (ACN, 29/12/08).

December 29: Zambia's president, Rupiah Banda, praised the Cuban Revolution's achievements, especially in the sectors of healthcare and education and said it was an example for the Third World Countries. Banda made the statements upon welcoming the new Cuban ambassador to his country at a solemn ceremony. He appreciated the Cuban help to Zambia in the training of human resources by granting scholarships, reported the Cuban Foreign Ministry's website (ACN, 29/12/08).

December 29: Cuban pitcher Yadel Marti and outfielder Yasser Gomez have departed their Communist island homeland in a bid to launch Major League Baseball careers, ESPN reported on its website. Citing unnamed sources, the US sports telecaster reported that relatives and friends of the players in Cuba confirmed the duo had departed and were in an unknown location but attempting to reach the Dominican Republic. Players who become available through such nations as the Dominican Republic are free agents and available to the highest bidder among the 30 North American clubs rather than having their rights assigned in a draft like US collegians (AFP, 30/12/08).

December 31: The leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) wished for a steady development of its ties with Cuba in a greeting message on Cuba's 50th National Day. "The traditional comradely relations of friendship and cooperation between the parties, governments and peoples of the two countries will steadily develop," said Kim Jong Il and Kim Yong Nam, top legislator, in the message, quoted by the official KCNA. The DPRK will firmly support Cuba in their cause to defend sovereignty and oppose imperialists, they said (Xinhua, 31/12/08).

Security

December 4: Russia sees no need to set up permanent military bases in Venezuela or Cuba, but could use their military infrastructure, the prime minister said. "There is no need to build permanent bases, although we have such agreements with the Venezuelan leadership. I do not think the Cuban leadership would object either. If necessary, we will be able to use these countries' ports to refuel and replenish supplies for our warships," Vladimir Putin said during a televised question-and-answer session. He said Russia also has several such agreements with other countries. "I'm going to reveal a big military secret to you. When we announced that our warships were headed for Venezuela to participate in a joint exercise, we received many questions - honestly speaking, I had not expected this - requests from many countries for our warships to call at their ports," he said (RIA Novosti, 4/12/08).

December 15: A group of Russian warships will visit the Communist island of Cuba, from December 19-23, the Russian navy said. "This will be the first visit to Cuba by Russian warships since the Soviet era," the Russian naval headquarters said in a

statement. The destroyer Admiral Chabanenko and two other ships will visit Havana in what the navy described as a "significant practical step towards strengthening and developing ties between the two states' navies." Russian ships have been touring countries close to US waters in what is seen as a riposte to Washington's own moves in Russia's Soviet-era sphere of influence, including US naval deployments in the Black Sea. "The Russian naval command believes visits by Russian ships to Venezuela, Panama and Nicaragua signify long-term prospects for developing cooperation among these countries' naval forces in the interest of developing stability and trust on the world's oceans," the navy said. During the Cuba visit, residents will be welcomed aboard the Russian ships and Russian officers will lay flowers at a memorial to Cuban campaigner for independence and critic of US expansionism Jose Marti, the navy said (*AFP*, 15/12/08).

December 19: Three Russian warships entered Cuban waters as part of a voyage aimed at boosting Russian ties with several Latin American nations. Cuban soldiers fired ceremonial shots to welcome the three ships as they steamed into Havana Bay. The naval group is led by the Admiral Chabanenko, an advanced destroyer built for anti-submarine combat. Cuban state media said the Russian crews will spend nearly five days in Cuba for meetings and cultural exchanges. It is the first time Russian warships have visited Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Union, which was one of Havana's main supporters for decades. Frank Mora of the National War College in Washington said he was surprised that Cuba's government agreed to the military visit. "The Cubans are more than willing to engage the Russians on a whole range of economic and technological cooperation agreements. But they are much more reluctant to engage on military-to-military or security cooperation," he said. The Russian warships also visited Venezuela for joint training exercises with Venezuela's navy (*VOA*, 19/12/08).

December 22: Cuban President Raul Castro met with the head of a flotilla of Russian navy ships touring Cuba, the first such visit to the Soviet-era ally since the end of the Cold War. Russian Vice Admiral Vladimir Koraliov commanded the flotilla, which included destroyer Admiral Chabanenko and two support vessels. The warships arrived in Havana as part of a Latin American tour that included stops with US foes Venezuela and Nicaragua, and saw the ships pass through the Panama Canal for the first time since World War II. It was the first visit by Russian warships to Cuba since 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a staunch military, economic and political ally to Cuba for 30 years. The meeting took place "in an environment of friendship (...) that characterizes relations between the people, governments and armed forces" of Cuba and Russia, according to a statement read on state-controlled television. Also at the meeting were Cuba's most senior military brass, as well as Moscow's envoy to Havana. The Russian ships are scheduled to sail back home on December 23, officials said (*AFP*, 22/12/08).

US-Cuba Relations

December 3: Néstor Nazario, from Puerto Rico's National Hostosiano Pro-Independence Movement (MINH), made the official delivery of humanitarian aid collected in that

Caribbean nation for the victims of recent hurricanes in Cuba. In a ceremony held at Havana's Friendship House, Nazario stressed that the cargo is made up of food and clothing, and described the archipelago as the nation that most exemplifies solidarity in the world. The president of the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), Jorge Martí Martínez, thanked Puerto Ricans for this gesture (*ACN*, 4/12/08).

December 4: A veteran spy catcher, who publicly named people he claims are Cuban government agents, was sued in Miami federal court, where he was accused of malicious defamation. Lt. Col. Chris Simmons is an Army Reserve counterintelligence officer and former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst with a career in catching Cuban spies. Now he's writing a book, starting a new business, and going on Spanish language TV shows to "name names." On October 8, Simmons appeared on América TeVe Channel 41 show "A Mano Limpia" and identified anti-embargo activist Silvia Wilhelm as a Cuban government collaborator. Wilhelm, executive director of Puentes Cubanos and the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights, filed a defamation suit against Simmons seeking more than \$75,000. Simmons had said former FIU professor Carlos Alvarez, convicted of spying for Cuba, identified Wilhelm in his confession to the FBI. She since "retired" from her duties after the FBI approached her, Simmons said. "My suit speaks for itself," Wilhelm said. She referred questions to her attorney, Bruce Rogow, who could not be reached for comment. Simmons, who lives in Virginia, also could not be reached (*The Miami Herald*, 4/12/08).

December 4: President-elect Barack Obama should start soon to loosen five decades of trade curbs on Cuba and begin a comprehensive review of US policy toward the communist-run island, US business groups said. "We support the complete removal of all trade and travel restrictions on Cuba. We recognize that change may not come all at once, but it must start somewhere, and it must begin soon," the groups said in a letter to Obama. They recommended the United States start by holding talks with Cuba to discuss how to repair nearly 50 years of distrust and by allowing Americans to visit the island. Washington should also consider exempting agricultural machinery, heavy equipment and certain other goods from its embargo to help in the rebuilding of Cuba in the wake of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, the groups said. The groups included American Farm Bureau Federation, Business Roundtable, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Retail Federation and Grocery Manufacturers Association, whose collective membership comprises a broad cross-section of American industry and agriculture. "We are pleased that you support suspending restrictions on family remittances, visits and humanitarian care packages from Cuban Americans. These are excellent first steps, but we urge you to also commit to a more comprehensive examination of US policy," the groups said (*Reuters*, 4/12/08).

December 4: Fidel Castro said that President-elect Barack Obama is a man Cuba can talk with and indicated that communist officials would be willing to meet with him wherever he wants. But the former Cuban leader expressed disappointment with some of Obama's Cabinet choices, including Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state and Robert Gates as defence secretary. In his latest essay distributed to official media, the ailing 82-year-old former president wrote that with Obama "a conversation can be held wherever he

wants," and that Cuban officials don't expect the new US administration to be marked by violence and war. But he added that Obama must remember that a carrot-and-stick approach won't work with Cuba ([Swimming Up Stream](#); *Reuters*, 4/12/08).

December 5: Cuba's foreign minister urged US President-elect Barack Obama to keep his promise to ease restrictions on family travel and remittances to the island, saying it would be a positive step toward normalizing diplomatic relations. Felipe Perez Roque told reporters at the opening of Pakistan's new embassy in Havana that "we are willing, as we've always said, to one day normalize relations between the United States and Cuba." Obama has said he plans to loosen restrictions on Cuban Americans who want to travel or send money to Cuba. Those with relatives here are currently allowed to visit only once every three years. Perez Roque said Havana would view such changes positively — calling them "a positive first step" — but he repeated the communist government's demands that Washington close its military prison at Guantanamo Bay, rewrite immigration rules for Cuban migrants and completely lift nearly 50-year-old economic sanctions that outlaw nearly all trade with the island and prohibit US tourists from visiting. "Cuba's position is very clear," he said. "We firmly demand the lifting of the embargo, the ceasing of extraterritorial measures taken to persecute our trade with other countries." Ending the embargo entirely would require congressional approval, and Obama has said he does not intend to do that (*AP*, 5/12/08).

December 5: The goals of the US economic embargo on Cuba remain exactly the same as when the embargo was first imposed almost 50 years ago, US Commerce Department official Walter Bastian said. Interviewed at the December 1-3 Miami Conference on the Caribbean and Central America, Bastian said that even though the embargo's major goal - to encourage Cuba's peaceful transition from communism to democracy - has not yet occurred, the message remains that the Cuban regime's illegal expropriation of US property has serious consequences. "That message is as strong today as it was back" in October 1960 when the United States initiated the embargo, said Bastian, who is Commerce's deputy assistant secretary for the Western Hemisphere. Bastian's comments came after a forum on Cuba at the 32nd annual Miami conference in which the event's organizers, the Washington-based Caribbean-Central American Action, said Cuba is at a crossroads, where the country's leaders can choose to reintegrate Cuba into the region or continue old policies (*Daily News*, 5/12/08).

December 7: President Raul Castro said that Cuba has battled Washington's trade embargo for nearly 50 years and is prepared to do so for another 50 if need be. His comments appeared to be a small swipe at Washington at a time when President-elect Barack Obama has raised expectations that warmer US-Cuba relations could be on the way. He spoke as leaders from the 14 member nations of the Caribbean Community trade bloc, or CARICOM, gathered in the eastern city of Santiago to discuss ways to strengthen tourism in the region despite the global economic crisis. During an event at Santiago's Plaza of the Revolution, Castro said of the US economic sanctions that "we have learned to resist for half a century, and we are prepared to fight for another half century" (*The Miami Herald*, 8/12/08).

December 8: The 17 Cubans discovered wandering about Boca Grande on Thanksgiving Day have been released on their own recognizance by the US Border Patrol from a detention facility in Pembroke Pines, Florida. They are now waiting to appear before a US immigration judge. Victor Colon, US Border Patrol assistant chief patrol agent, said the Cubans had been fingerprinted and it was determined that none of them has a criminal record in the US. While he didn't know how many, Colon said some of the Cubans had family members already settled in the United States (*Charlotte Sun*, 8/12/08).

December 8: Thirteen organizations including academic, business, humanitarian, and advocacy groups in the United States joined to send a letter to President-elect Obama asking him to lift policies toward Cuba that limit people-to-people exchanges, family travel, and remittances. A report posted at the Association of International Educators's website (NAFSA), which is one of the signatories of the letter, says the organizations asked the president-elect to take actions that send a "clear and welcome signal of change and reverse actions that have proven counterproductive to our shared goal of assisting the Cuban people." The letter dated December 8 specifically urges Obama to lift executive-branch amendments to the Cuban Assets Control Regulations published in 2003 and 2004 that have decimated academic and cultural exchanges with Cuba and severely restricted travel to and from the island. Among the signatories are also the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, American Friends Service Committee, Church World Service, Fund for Reconciliation and Development, Latin America Working Group, Latin American Studies Association, National Foreign Trade Council, Operation USA, Social Science Research Council, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, USA*Engage, and Washington Office on Latin America (*ACN*, 10/12/08).

December 9: Cuba reiterated its denunciation of the release in the United States of terrorist Luis Posada Carriles. During a session of the UN Security Council dedicated to the threats that terrorist actions pose to peace and security, the Cuban ambassador to the United Nations, Ileana Nuñez, recalled that it has been a year and a half since the release of Posada Carriles in the United States. "However, in spite of all the evidence that the US Government has of his vast terrorist record, Washington has not accused him," Nuñez said. According to Prensa Latina news agency, the diplomat added that this is a clear and flagrant violation of UN Resolution 1373 and others pertaining to the UN Security Council and the General Assembly and several international legal instruments regarding the fight against terrorism (*ACN*, 9/12/08).

December 9: The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) is calling on President-elect Obama to permit Americans to travel to Cuba. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, the President-elect indicated that he supports changes to US policy toward Cuba, including a suspension of restrictions on family remittances, visits, and humanitarian care packages from Cuban Americans. While these proposals are encouraging, ASTA believes that Americans would best be served by an elimination of current restrictions on travel to Cuba. In a letter dated December 4, 2008, ASTA and a host of organizations from across the business community formally requested that the incoming Obama administration make immediate changes to US policy toward Cuba, including a removal of the travel ban (*ASTA Press Release*, 10/12/08).

December 10: Cuban exile leaders and US academics urged President-elect Barack Obama to ease restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba as a first step toward ending Washington's 46-year-old economic embargo against the island and normalizing bilateral relations. The executive director of the Cuba Study Group, Tomas Bilbao, and the president of the Emergency Coalition to Defend Educational Travel, former US diplomat Wayne Smith, told the press that although they have different strategies, they are united in their desire to eliminate a "failed" policy of isolation against the communist-ruled island. The two leaders believe that it is time for Obama, who will take office on January 20, to extend a bridge to Cuba and breathe new life into a bilateral foreign policy that, in their judgment, is a vestige of the Cold War. "If the 28 countries of Eastern Europe taught us anything it's that there is a direct correlation between the level of opening of a society and the successful transition to democracy," Bilbao said. In his opinion, the United States should lift the travel and remittance prohibitions not only for Cuban Americans - as Obama has promised to do - but "for all Americans." The Cuba Study Group says the restrictions imposed by the Bush administration in 2004 "violate ethics, fundamental US freedoms and international human rights" with regard to freedom of movement and family reunification (*EFE*, 10/12/08).

December 10: The US Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez released a statement on Human Rights Day highlighting that it is important to remember "the Cuban people, who live under a totalitarian dictatorship". "It is important to remember the plight of the Cuban people, who live under a totalitarian dictatorship that has denied them human rights for almost half a century", the statement says. "The Castro regime prevents its citizens from having an elected and democratic government, freedom of speech and fundamental human rights. "The Cuban government jails hundreds of political prisoners who continue to suffer under dismal conditions and are denied access to human rights organizations such as the International Red Cross", it adds. "On this very day, Cuban authorities have detained and beaten dozens of Cuban citizens who were attempting to peacefully celebrate human rights day in Cuba". Secretary Gutierrez co-chairs the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, a US Cabinet-level commission formed to explore ways the United States can help hasten and ease a democratic transition in Cuba (*US News Service*, 10/12/08).

December 11: Cuban authorities arrested more than 30 people in the days leading up to International Human Rights Day, a New York-based human rights watchdog said. Human Rights Watch cited press reports and Cuban human rights groups as saying many of those arrested were trying to travel to Havana for marches on December 10, the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "The Cuban government should immediately and unconditionally free the dissidents who have been arbitrarily detained in recent days," Human Rights Watch said in a statement. The statement said some of those arrested had since been released and it was not known how many remained in detention. Rights groups say Cuban authorities have in the past briefly held dissidents planning protests ([Cuba: Free Dissidents](#); *Reuters*, 11/12/08).

December 11: Investigators say Isla Express scammed at least 502 customers of some \$189,000 in late 2007, taking their money but never delivering the funds to family in Cuba. The heartless crime, police say, became clear when angry crowds on three separate days gathered outside Isla Express wire service during last year's holiday season: They wanted to know where tens of thousands of dollars destined for family members in Cuba had gone. One year later, authorities said, two of Isla's three operators were jailed on charges of illegal money transfers. One has vanished. The money disappeared, too. "These people were waiting for food and medicine," Hialeah Police Chief Mark Overton said of the victims in Cuba. Norberto Alzar surrendered. Eiler Rubio was arrested. Prudencio Garcia Leon is a fugitive believed to be in Cuba. Each is charged with operating an unauthorized currency transmitting business. Grand-theft charges have not been brought because investigators cannot go to the Communist island to prove the money was not delivered. "Although we may have hundreds of potential victims, we can only prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, these particular charges," explained Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle (*The Miami Herald*, 12/12/08).

December 12: Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage said that the island's society is ready to receive tourists from the United States in the event that Washington liberalizes tourist travel there, banned up to now by its 46-year-old embargo against the communist-ruled nation. "Our tourism and our people are ready. It's barbaric to prohibit a citizen from visiting his family," the Cuban leader said in a statement quoted by the state news agency Prensa Latina. Lage pointed out that while US President-Elect Barack Obama has mentioned "enabling Cubans residing in the United States to travel, he has said nothing about the right of US citizens that is included in the Constitution." "Among the things that it (the Constitution) talks about, and it doesn't say much because it isn't very long, is the right to travel, but that is violated by the embargo of the United States against Cuba," he said. The Cuban vice president said that, "he (Obama) has talked about travel for Cuban citizens living in the United States and the sending of remittances." "That's the situation that existed before" the administration of the current president, George W. Bush, he said (*EFE*, 12/12/08).

December 12: Throughout his campaign, President-elect Barack Obama said that he'd loosen some restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba and rebuild the already slight ties to the communist nation cut by the Bush administration. With an Obama government soon to become reality, many in the U.S. capital are pushing for much more. The question of what US Cuban policy will look like under Obama has fed one of the moment's biggest foreign-policy debates, and a loose coalition of legislators, free-trade advocates and leftist groups believes that it has an ally in the president-elect. Legislators such as Representatives Jo Ann Emerson (Republican-Missouri), and Rosa DeLauro (Democrat-Connecticut), want to pass legislation that would allow all US citizens to travel to Cuba, which would undo prohibitions that the US government has imposed almost continuously since 1962. That embargo prohibits many types of trade, travel or other types of exchanges with Cuba. The Bush administration tightened those regulations even further in 2004 by allowing Cuban-Americans to visit the island only once every three years rather than once a year, as previous rules had allowed. Those who support lifting the travel ban argue that history is on their side. The nearly 50-year-old embargo

has failed to promote democracy and freedom, they say, and has even helped Fidel Castro and his brother, Raul, stay in power. "If you've been running the same play for 40 years and you're not getting results, why not change the play?" Emerson asked. "It's time to move forward. If we can lift the status of our relations with North Korea or a country like Libya, why can't we do it with Cuba?" (*The Miami Herald*, 12/12/08).

December 13: Ricardo Alarcon, President of the Cuban National Assembly of People's Power (Cuban Parliament) underscored the need to show the US Supreme Court that the world is closely following the case of the five Cubans incarcerated in the North American country. In his speech in the closing ceremony of the 9th Criminal Sciences International Seminar, Alarcon called for strengthening international solidarity in order to secure justice in the appealing process in favour of Gerardo Hernandez, René Gonzalez, Ramón Labañino, Antonio Guerrero, and Fernando Gonzalez, incarcerated in the United State since September 12th, 1998. Alarcon recalled that defence attorneys will take their Cuban Five case to the US Supreme Court, and highlighted the importance of the introduction of Friends of the Court documents, a way within the US legal system to assure people and institutions from within or abroad their right to express their concern about the topic on trial (*ACN*, 13/12/08).

December 14: Barack Obama's election is rekindling the hopes of US agribusiness for an end to the trade embargo with Cuba. At the least, farmers hope he'll loosen restrictions on exports of American food. How far he'll go to increase trade is far from clear, however. Obama carried Florida, the linchpin in US policy toward Cuba because of the power of the Cuban-American community there and its long antipathy toward the Castro government. Obama's victory in Florida was aided by strong support from the state's growing non-Cuban Hispanic community. But Obama has made no commitment to overhaul US policy toward Cuba beyond easing curbs on Cuban-Americans' visits to the island and their ability to send humanitarian aid there. "Our overall goal is elimination of the embargo," said Chris Garza, who follows trade policy for the American Farm Bureau Federation. "I don't think that's going to happen overnight." For now, the bureau would be happy to see the reversal of restrictions imposed by President George W. Bush, who relied on the Cuban-American vote to win Florida in 2000 and 2004. The Farm Bureau joined several U.S. business organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable and the Grocery Manufacturers Association, in a recent letter to Obama asking him to remove all restrictions on travel to Cuba (*The Advertiser.Com*, 14/12/08).

December 16: Cuban President Raul Castro told reporters that his administration is ready for a dialogue with US President-elect Barack Obama. After arriving in northeastern Brazil for a summit of Latin American and Caribbean leaders, Castro said he'd discuss the blockade that prohibits nearly all US commerce with the island if Obama wants to. "If Mr. Obama wants to discuss it, we'll discuss it," he said to journalists before the summit in Costa do Sauipe, Brazil. "If he doesn't want to discuss it, we won't discuss it." "It has become more and more difficult to isolate Cuba from the outside world," he said, predicting that the summit would issue a resolution condemning the blockade. "We may be small, but we have demonstrated to the whole world that it is impossible to break us,"

Castro said, adding that more than 70% of Cuba's population has grown up under the US sanctions. The regional gathering excludes the United States and Canada and is the first large-scale meeting of Latin American leaders in recent times to take place without the presence of an outside power (*AP, RIA Novosti, 16/12/08*).

December 16: One of Manatee County's two congressional representatives has joined the growing chorus calling on President-elect Obama to ease travel and remittance restrictions to Cuba. The restrictions by the Bush administration have prevented Cuban-Americans from seeing dying relatives on the island nation and sending humanitarian aid to family members after hurricanes, Representative Kathy Castor (Democrat-Tampa), said in a letter sent to Obama. "The restrictions have proven ineffective in altering the political situation and interfere with fundamental family relations and human rights," Castor's letter said. "By lifting the burdensome restrictions we can provide relief to families while maintaining the pressure for human rights and change the island needs." Now, a Bush executive order restricts travel to Cuba once every three years and limits monetary remittances to family members in Cuba to \$300 annually. Before the order, Cuban-Americans could travel to Cuba once a year and send up to \$3,000 annually. Obama has said he favors easing the restrictions. Castor's district includes Tampa, which has the nation's second-largest Cuban population after Miami (*Bradenton Herald, 17/12/08*).

December 16: Russian warships have been plying the waters off Venezuela and Panama and are now heading for Cuba, but US officials are not so much wringing their hands as yawning. Asked about a Russian warship transiting the Panama Canal earlier this month, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- who saw the ship while crossing the canal -- told the press: "I guess they're on R & R. It's fine." R & R is rest and recreation. It was the first such passage by a Russian or Soviet warship since World War II. The Pentagon, while puzzled by the Russians' actions, also is taking a ho-hum attitude. The US military commander for the region, Adm. James Stavridis, head of the US Southern Command, said that from his vantage point there is no reason to be concerned about the Russian naval activity. "They pose no military threat to the US," he said in an email to the press. "We will continue to focus on our own naval missions in the region with international and interagency partners medical training, disaster relief, peacekeeping support, counter-narcotics, and logistic humanitarian support to US interagency activities" (*AP, 17/12/08*).

December 18: Though agricultural leaders' expectations for the impending Obama Administration are mixed, one thing that excites many of them is the prospect of freer and more abundant trade with Cuba. Many states and trade groups have sent delegations there with the hope of selling increasing amounts of their products to the island nation of 11 million people, a potential 30 million bushel market for wheat alone. "It's already the eighth largest customer for hard red winter wheat even though we only have 50 percent of their market," said US Wheat Associates president Alan Tracy. "By comparison, the US has 90 percent of the market in the rest of the Caribbean." Industry leaders don't want to risk losing out on the market as trade relations continue to thaw. Tracy, who grew up in the family seed business and was once the Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture, has been president of the check-off funded U.S. world wheat development agency since

1997. He made stops last week in Colorado and Oklahoma for meetings of the two states' wheat grower organizations. "With a different president, there is a good chance of a different approach," he told the growers. "Both houses of Congress have passed legislation to lift the travel ban against Cuba, but they were always taken out of the final bills by the leadership because they knew it would ultimately not be signed by the president" (*Ag Journal*, 18/12/08).

December 18: Cuban President Raul Castro proposed a swap of prisoners with the United States as a goodwill "gesture" to pave the way for talks with incoming US President Barack Obama. His offer to release political dissidents in exchange for the release of five convicted Cuban spies in US prisons was the most specific proposal yet to ease ties with the United States since Obama, who takes office on January 20, was elected in November. "Let's do gesture for gesture," Castro answered angrily to reporters during a visit to Brasilia. "These prisoners you talk about -- they want us to let them go? They should tell us tomorrow. We'll send them with their families and everything. Give us back our five heroes. That is a gesture on both parts," he said, referring to the convicted Cuban spies (*Reuters*, 18/12/08).

December 18: Cuba's offer to release jailed political dissidents in Cuba in exchange for five Cubans convicted of spying in the United States was rejected by the State Department and Cuban rights groups. "The issue of political prisoners held against their will, merely for making peaceful protests, is independent of the case of the five spies tried and convicted under due process of the US judicial system," the department's deputy spokesman Robert Wood told the press. The five Cubans were convicted of espionage conspiracy against the United States and sentenced in a Miami, Florida federal court to long prison terms in June 2001 (*AFP*, 18/12/08).

December 18: Raul Castro's offer to release jailed political dissidents in Cuba in exchange for five Cubans convicted of spying in the United States was rejected by Cuban dissident groups in Havana. "It's vulgar blackmail because these men should never have been prisoners and that's why they can't be used as bargaining chips," said Laura Pollan, a leader of a group of prisoners' wives. In Cuba, there are 219 political prisoners behind bars, including 67 adopted as prisoners of conscience by rights group Amnesty, according to the illegal Cuban Commission of Human Rights and Reconciliation. Castro did not state a number of dissidents which could be involved in a possible exchange for the five Cubans. He spoke after a meeting with leftist Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, during a first official trip overseas since formally replacing his ailing brother Fidel in February (*AFP*, 18/12/08).

December 19: US physician and clown Hunter "Patch" Adams, known internationally as "the doctor of laughter," put on an act for homeless people in the Cuban town of Santa Cruz del Sur, devastated in November by Hurricane Paloma. "It was a really important experience to be part of this and make friends," Adams told reporters, after taking his art to this town in the eastern province of Camaguey, where he found "a spontaneous welcome of friendship." Adams, 65, has visited Cuba six times since 1998, and this time came with a cast made up of 15 Virginia medical professionals and students to present his

shows of "humanitarian clowning." The group shared the stage with members of the Cuban children's theater company La Colmenita (Little Beehive), which Adams judged "the most beautiful meeting of two countries with such a complicated history" in which "the bridge is this group of children" with whom "we were working as a team." Another of the group's actors, Dr. John Glick, said that for a week they put on shows in which language was "never" a barrier and through music and dance they communicated with an audience of different generations (*EFE*, 20/12/08).

December 19: A former aide to President George W. Bush pleaded guilty to stealing money meant for democracy programs in Cuba. Felipe Sixto, a former special assistant for intergovernmental affairs at the White House, pleaded guilty to stealing more than \$500,000 from the Center for a Free Cuba when he was its chief of staff. He faces up to three years in prison and a fine of \$60,000 when he is sentenced March 18. Sixto admitted he overcharged the program, which supports democracy efforts in Cuba, for radios and flashlights he supplied. He resigned March 20 as an aide to Bush after admitting he engaged in improprieties. All the money was eventually recovered, according to the centre. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino declined to comment on the Sixto plea (*Bloomberg*, 19/12/08).

December 21: President-elect Barack Obama represents the future to most of the nation, but some Southeast Texas rice farmers see in the president-elect a chance to return to the past. Under the new administration, farmers expect to see some change in the United States' agriculture trade relations with Cuba, which has been under an embargo since the 1960s. Cuba was once a top buyer of Southeast Texas rice, and for several years, area growers have lobbied for a loosening of relations to allow local farmers to compete with the rest of the world. "We're sitting 80 or 90 miles from this country, and we're really limited on what we can ship to 'em," said Mike Doguet, president of Doguet Rice Co. "They buy everything from foreign sources from Vietnam and Thailand. All it does with the embargoes is help our competitors." Before the 1960s, Beaumont Rice Mills sold about 90 percent of its rice to Cuba under the brand Sunset. A series of trade restrictions began after Fidel Castro seized power in a 1959 revolution, and the United States imposed a full embargo against the communist island nation in 1962. "It would get more people growing rice and other commodities if we would just do away with that stuff," Doguet said of the embargo. "It doesn't work. All the leaders they're trying to hurt, I don't think they've missed a meal. But it does hurt the poor people and the American farmer" (*Beaumont Enterprise*, 21/12/08).

December 23: The US rice industry is hoping President-elect Barack Obama's campaign mantra of change will apply to the country's relations with Cuba, which analysts say could become a key customer if the US would allow it. Although the US eased trade sanctions against Cuba at the end of the Clinton administration, there are still enough restrictions to limit sales to the island neighbour. "The best case in our view would be to remove the restrictions regarding trade and economic relations and travel and all that, and just kind of open it up," said Reece Langley vice president of government affairs for the USA Rice Federation, which represents rice producers, millers and merchants. "Whether that's going to happen, I think that's a long shot, at least initially." Cuba is a big rice

consumer and natural customer of US rice given its proximity, analysts said. "From what we can tell, they're using about 1 million tons per year, and we think can supply them 350,000 to maybe 500,000 metric tons of that, if things were completely opened up," Langley said. "Maybe not even completely opened up" (*Alibaba. Com*, 23/12/08).

December 23: The President of the Cuban National Assembly Ricardo Alarcón denounced that the US administration is promoting illegality and social indiscipline in Cuba, by way of its Helms-Burton Law. Our nation is the only one in which the most powerful country in the world insists on fomenting dissolution, vice, and social disobedience, warned Alarcón during a meeting of the District Attorney's Office and the Popular Supreme Court, held in Havana's Astral Movie Theatre. He reiterated his denunciation of the US administration's prevarications on the five Cubans incarcerated in that country (*ACN*, 24/12/08).

December 25: The Cuban Five's defence attorneys will request the US Supreme Court to revise the sentences of their defendants and issue a venue, other than Miami, to hold a new trial. The appeal for justice will be presented at the US Supreme Court before January 30, said one of the prisoners' defence attorneys Richard Klugh. In an interview with the National Committee to Free the Cuban Five, attorney Richard Klugh pointed out that the appeal will request that all of the sentences be revised, after the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals of Atlanta refused to grant a change of venue, or recognize the misconduct of the prosecution and the improper and discriminatory jury selection in the Cubans' trial in 2001 held in Miami (*ACN*, 25/12/08).

December 27: A joint University of Alabama and Cuban archaeological dig in eastern Cuba is revealing how the natives there lived when Christopher Columbus found them and, more importantly, how Indians reacted to the Spanish. "We have very few cases in the Caribbean where we can point to a certain place and say, 'This is exactly what happened when Europeans hit the scene,' " said UA professor Jim Knight. "Of course, we have the Spanish documents, but archaeology can tell a different story sometimes. Some of these documents tend to whitewash what happened, but artifacts won't lie." It took Knight nearly seven years to get permission and forms signed for UA to lead an expedition in Cuba. For the past two summers, UA graduate students worked alongside professional archaeologists with the Central-Eastern Department of Archaeology of the science ministry of Cuba to dig through El Chorro de Maita, a large Indian settlement on a hillside off the island's eastern shore. The effort was sponsored by the National Geographic Society (*Tuscaloosa News*, 28/12/08).

December 31: During a press briefing at Crawford Middle School, Texas, Deputy Press Secretary Gordon Johndroe was asked if the Bush Administration had a message for the people of Cuba, given the 50th anniversary of the revolution that put Fidel Castro in charge. "President Bush's message to the people of Cuba is that we stand with you. We want to see them live in freedom. And the United States will continue to stand with the people of Cuba", Johndroe said. "The Castro brothers have not treated their people particularly well. Many political dissidents are in jail. The economy is suffering and not

free. And the United States will continue to try to seek the freedom of the people of Cuba, and support them”, he added (*The White House Press Release*, 31/12/08).