

Chronicle on Cuba
SUMMARY OF NEWS ITEMS REPORTED ON CUBA
January-December, 2003

This web resource highlights the most significant news items on Cuba listed in FOCAL's monthly Chronicle on Cuba throughout 2003, and groups these according to a wide range of key topics. Web links to important documents and statements are also included.

EXILE COMMUNITY

CUBAN GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

A group representing several moderate Miami organizations met with officials in Havana to voice their recommendations for topics to be included in the agenda of the third "Nation and Emigration" conference to be held in April. Conference organizer Benigno Pérez said the event will bring together Cubans from as close as Miami and Mexico and as far away as Australia, with a special emphasis on second and third generation Cuban Americans. "We felt it was important before we came over for that conference that our point of view was heard," said Alfredo Duran, a Miami lawyer and Bay of Pigs veteran. "We feel there's a serious effort at establishing dialogue and getting input from the Cuban community outside. This process did not occur during the last two conferences." The Cuban American National Foundation has denounced the event as "a chorus, not a conference." "These conferences could be helpful if they brought up real issues, not a debate between handpicked people overwhelmed by apologists for the regime," said Joe Garcia, the foundation's spokesman. (January, Exile Community)

Cuba might drastically change its migration policies this year, eliminating many of the entry/exit obstacles that affect Cubans on the island as well as those residing abroad. During a meeting of Cuban Americans that this took place in Miami, the President of the Cuban Parliament, Ricardo Alarcón, said via radio that would be one of the topics to be dealt with at the meeting that will take place with émigrés in April. Among the complaints of Cubans residing abroad is the 'entry permit' they require to visit the island. They are also asking for an increase in the weight of goods allowed to be brought into Cuba from its current maximum allowance of 20kg plus 10kg of medicines. (January, Domestic Affairs)

The Government of Cuba is considering relaxing its migration policies including the elimination of 'entry permits' required by all Cubans wishing to visit the island, said the President of the National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón. The 'exit permit' - not always granted - is a substantial expense for Cubans on the island. The process to obtain it costs around \$300. In the case of professionals like doctors there are restrictions in place and in some cases they have to wait years for the exit permits to be granted. Estimates show that the government would lose more than \$70 million in income from travel requirements which Cubans on the island and abroad have to pay. (January, Domestic Affairs)

Ricardo Alarcón, President of the Cuban National Assembly, said that the migratory changes under review in Cuba do not include the elimination of exit permits. In a recent discussion with a group of Cuban émigrés in Havana "the issue of the entry permits was brought up", said Alarcón to the press. "Of course this is being studied." But the issue of exit permits required for Cuban residents was not raised, according to Alarcón. "What has been discussed is our relations with them", he added. "I must say that what we really talked about was their travels to Cuba". (January, Domestic Affairs)

Dagoberto Rodríguez, chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, D.C., met with more than 100 Cuban exiles to gather ideas for the Castro regime's third "Nation and Emigration" conference in April. The conference will be an "open and respectful dialogue about the needs" of Cuban exiles, said Juan Hernández Acen, a spokesman for the Cuban Interests Section. (February, Exile Community)

A news conference intended to boost support for a meeting in Havana next month between Cuban government officials and exiles turned into a parking-lot protest against the hotel management, which unexpectedly kicked participants off the premises. The morning gathering was to take place at the Holiday Inn in Coral Gables. But hotel manager Keith Wynne canceled it minutes before it was scheduled to start. Conference participants had intended to discuss the "Nation and Emigration" gathering scheduled for April 11-13 in Havana. (March, Exile Community)

Cuban exiles opposed to dialogue with Fidel Castro plan a protest at the end of the month in Little Havana. Organizers say the "March for Dignity" is intended to show that the exile community has not softened its stance against Castro -- as indicated in several polls -- and to raise awareness about the perils of negotiating with him. (March, Exile Community)

A 12-block-long surge of demonstrators, most of them Cuban Americans, flowed across the heart of Little Havana to pump up support for a litany of struggles that stretched from the future of Cuba to the war in Iraq. Cuban exile leaders had called the march to refute recent polls that say exiles increasingly support dialogue with Cuban leaders. Sylvia Iriondo, president of Mothers and Women Against Repression, told the crowd three things must happen regarding Cuba. One, all political prisoners must be freed. Two, political parties, labor unions and the press must operate without government interference. And, three, elections in Cuba must be held without repression and must involve multiple parties. "Until these three things are achieved," she said, "we insist that all US sanctions on the Castro regime must be maintained." (March, Exile Community)

Sponsors called off a major conference between Cuban exiles and officials that was to be held in Havana. The decision to call off the April 11-13 "Nation and Emigration" conference came as dissidents accused of subversion faced a second day of trials. (April, Domestic Affairs)

Cuban-Americans planning to go to the Nation and Emigration conference in Havana said they understand the Cuban government's decision to postpone the conference. "Obviously I was disappointed, but I honestly agree with the decision," said Elena Freyre, executive director of the Cuban American Defense League and one of those invited to the conference. "In reality, this is not the best time to have this type of event there. I think it would draw attention away from what the event was trying to accomplish." (April, Exile Community)

Beginning early next year, Cubans living abroad will no longer need permission from Havana officials to visit their homeland, Cuba's foreign minister reportedly said at a meeting in New York. Roque told the audience that a passport was all that would be required for Cubans to visit, several people at the meeting said. But it was unclear if that meant that Cubans with US citizenship would have to obtain a Cuban passport. (September, Exile Community)

Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, who was in New York for the UN General Assembly, told a crowd of about 250 Cuban Americans that a conference between exiles and Cuban officials would take place in May, according to several people who attended the meeting. The Nation and Emigration conference was called off in April in the midst of an island-wide crackdown that landed 75 dissidents in jail. (September, Exile Community)

Cubans who immigrated to the United States after 1970 will still need a Cuban passport to enter the island, Cuba's foreign ministry said. There is no change in regulations for non-Cubans traveling to Cuba. In addition to entry permits, which cost \$100, most Cuban-Americans must buy a passport from the Cuban Interests Section for \$230, pay travel agency fees ranging from \$15 to \$35, and buy a plane ticket, which costs \$299 to \$399, depending on the season, said Armando Garcia, owner of Marazul, one of the largest travel agencies booking trips to the island. (September, Exile Community)

In Madrid, Fabio Murrieta, vice-president of the Cultural Association "Con Cuba en la Distancia", demanded that Fidel Castro allows Cubans to return to their country "when they wish to." This is a right that should be recognized immediately, he added. In the context of a round table on "Democracy, Development and Civil Society in Cuba," Murrieta indicated that "we must demand the right of all Cubans to be able to return to their country now and not wait for Castro to pass away. There are hundreds of prisoners in Cuba and the right to return any time should be a conquest of the present not for the future, and if we decide to return or not it's every individual's choice", he added. (December, Exile Community)

POLICIES TOWARDS DISSIDENTS

The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) expressed its support for Cuban dissident leader Oswaldo Payá, President of the Christian Liberation Movement. Mr. Payá met with Secretary Colin Powell. "Today's meeting with Secretary Powell is very encouraging. It sends a clear message that the Administration not only recognizes the diverse and growing dissident movement in Cuba, but is also committed to lending support to dissident efforts like Mr. Payá's Project Varela," said Jorge Mas, Chairman of the CANF. "Mr. Payá and the increasing numbers of courageous men and women in Cuba who struggle for the rights guaranteed by international law, yet systematically denied to the Cuban people by Fidel Castro's regime, are worthy not only of our recognition but now, more than ever, of our unwavering support. It is individuals like Mr. Payá that will play a critical role in helping to bring about a transition to democracy in Cuba," stated Mr. Mas. (January, Exile Community)

While polls show that many Cuban-Americans support the Varela Project, the Cuban Liberty Council and some 10 small Cuban-American organizations issued a joint statement in Miami asserting that Oswaldo Payá's efforts are not viable. The groups said Payá and his supporters give legitimacy to Cuba's National Assembly, judiciary and communist system without explicitly demanding an end to the one-party state in Cuba. "We feel it is important to establish that Cuba's internal opposition is much larger, varied and extensive than Project Varela," said the statement, which was signed by groups representing Bay of Pigs veterans, physicians, former political prisoners and other exile groups. Those groups did not include the Cuban American National Foundation, the largest exile advocacy group. (January, Exile Community)

With a message of unity and a call to action, Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas spent a hectic day in Miami urging Cuban Americans to support his Varela Project. He courted support from Miami's Cuban community, saying it will have an important role in his referendum and in the country's reconstruction after Fidel Castro. "The role of the exile community is important in whatever changes happen in Cuba, primarily because they are an inseparable part of the Cuban people," said Payá. "The [Cuban] reality is very complex, and solutions to it are as well," Payá said after meeting with several hundred prominent members of the Cuban American community. "It's important that we respect each other in diversity." "This is where the other half of the heart of the Cuban people is, and when a heart is divided, both parts suffer," Payá told the Miami Cuban Americans. "Help me. This is a task for all of us." (January, Exile Community)

Ten exile organizations issued a joint statement expressing skepticism about the Varela Project. In contrast, Payá is a genuine "freedom fighter," said Joe Garcia, executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, which is seen as the most influential of the exile organizations. Some Cuban Americans may dispute some of Payá's views, as Garcia does the dissident's call for an end to the long-standing US embargo on trade with Cuba. But there can be no doubt he is a "real hero," Garcia said. For Frank Calzon, executive director of the Center for a Free Cuba, Payá is a deep and courageous thinker on a par with the late Soviet dissident Andrei D. Sakharov, and merits serious attention. Cuban-American Republican Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, representing South Florida, suggested Payá, who has been jailed in his homeland for his activism and continues to suffer harassment there, is playing into the hands of the Fidel Castro regime. "If the Cuban government should accept the Varela Project and permit, for instance, dissident representatives, this would be interpreted internationally as an illusion of openness," Diaz-Balart said. "And this is precisely what Castro wants." Other Cuban Americans wondered if the fact that Payá was allowed to travel meant he was in accord with Castro, or being used to give a more human face to the only communist-ruled country in the Western Hemisphere. (January, Exile Community)

According to two polls released on a range of Cuba-related topics, a majority of Cuban Americans in South Florida say they support dialogue with Cuban government officials and believe that dissidents on the island are more important than exiles to Cuba's political future. More than half of South Florida's Cubans support recent efforts at dialogue between exiles and Cuban government officials, according to a poll commissioned by The Miami Herald. And nearly 70 percent of Cuban Americans believe dissidents in Cuba play a more important role in a democratic transition than exile leaders, according to another, unrelated survey conducted for the Cuba Study Group, an organization of prominent Cuban Americans. Each survey separately polled 400 Cubans in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. Both polls also showed that a majority of Cuban Americans – between nearly 60 percent and 66 percent -- support the Varela Project, an initiative by opposition leaders on the island to bring about democratic changes through a referendum based on the Communist Party Constitution. (February, Exile Community)

Ex-commander Huber Matos, a legendary figure among anti-Castro exiles, criticized Miami-based Cuban organizations that attempt to use the call for a popular demonstration to undermine the strategies of the internal opposition on the Island. "We do not believe that demonstration is opportune," said Matos, president of Cuba Independiente y Democrática (CID) (Independent and Democratic Cuba). "Although it is not said in so many words, this summons is a veiled attempt to discredit (Oswaldo) Payá and the Varela Project, and this political fractiousness only serves the interests of Castro's tyranny," added the anti-Castro activist. (March, Exile Community)

In a fervent declaration of unity, representatives of the Cuban dissidence in Miami rejected allegations of divisions within the domestic opposition in Cuba. The representatives abroad of All United called a press conference, with the participation of Vladimiro Roca, via telephone from Havana. (July, Exile Community)

The Miami-based organization Unidad Cubana (Cuban Unity) has launched an on-line campaign on behalf of two political prisoners in Cuba. The organisation is encouraging web users to write to world leaders, asking them to intercede in Martha Beatriz Roque and Oscar Elías Biscet's behalf on account of their failing health. (July, Exile Community)

The Cuban-American Bar Association plans to send financial aid to the family of imprisoned Cuban dissident Oscar Elias Biscet and possibly other political prisoners jailed since a crackdown against opposition groups on the island. The move is part of a larger plan hatched by CABA following the mass arrests and convictions of Cuban dissidents by the Fidel Castro regime in March and April. CABA is seeking to ratchet up pressure on the Castro government and keep a spotlight on the fate of the prisoners who were sentenced to terms of six to 28 years after summary trials and convictions. (October, Exile Community)

The dominant sector of Miami's Cuban exile community, a much-courted bloc of votes in next year's elections, blasted moves by Congress to lift travel restrictions to the communist-ruled island and urged a presidential veto. The Cuban American National Foundation, or CANF, which opposes lifting any of the US-imposed sanctions on Fidel Castro's government, described the rationale for adopting the amendment as "immoral." "For as long as there is no freedom for the Cubans themselves in Cuba, including the freedom to travel within their own country, it is immoral to even raise the possibility of allowing US citizens to travel there freely," CANF human rights director Omar López Montenegro told the press. (EFE, 24/03)

As anti-Castro groups wait for the presidential veto, others who favor easing the restrictions on travel to Cuba hailed the Senate vote. "We congratulate the Senate for voting like that with the support of a substantial majority. We believe it is one more step toward reconciliation, toward change in Cuba," Cuban Committee for Democracy chairman Ricardo González told the press. Lifting the restrictions will draw more tourists to Cuba, he said, and this will help the people on the island. "Those who maintain that the money will end up in Castro's pockets don't know what they are talking about," González said. (EFE, 24/10/03)

The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) supports a declaration from the Cuban internal dissidence calling for the rule of law on the island. "It is a matter of principle for our organization to support any initiative from Cuba to bring about a peaceful transition to democracy," said in a communiqué CANF President Francisco Hernández. (November, Exile Community)

THE LATIN GRAMMYS

For some Cuban exiles, performers from the island are representatives of Cuba's communist government. That's why a coalition of Cuban exile groups is planning to protest against them during the Latin Grammys Awards. "If [Fidel] Castro's people are coming to Miami, there are going to be protests," Cuban Coalition spokesman Emilio Izquierdo said. But Izquierdo says the groups will only demonstrate if the Cubans actually show up -- which music industry insiders say is not likely given the time it could take for Cuban performers to obtain visas. The nominees will include nine Cuban artists or groups, among them acclaimed jazz pianist Jesus "Chucho" Valdes, the storied rumba group Los Muñequitos de Matanzas and the contemporary dance band Los Van Van -- whose Miami concert in 1999 was marred by egg- and can-throwing detractors who heckled concertgoers. (Sun Sentinel, 23/7/03)

With nine Cuban artists receiving nominations for Latin Grammy awards, two of the local Cuban exiles who worked to bring the awards show to Miami said they would boycott it if any of the Cubans are invited onstage to do anything other than accept an award. "If, by any chance, they choose any Cuban artist to perform or to present an award, I will be out of there as quick as I came in," Willy Chirino said in a telephone interview with the press. "I'll probably go join the people demonstrating outside." Emilio Estefan, who was instrumental in bringing the Grammys to Miami for the inaugural 2001 show -- and in luring it back this year after it moved to California because of concerns over protesters -- said he didn't think Cuban artists would be named to perform or to present awards. (The Miami Herald, 23/7/03)

Tense negotiations about proposed protests at the Latin Grammys award show have produced a compromise between the city of Miami and Cuban exile groups. Protesters can come, but they must keep their distance. Protesters agreed to gather 168 feet away from the awards show. (August, Exile Community)

A group of Cuban-Americans who plan to support the right of Cuban musicians to attend the Latin Grammys could throw a wrench in the city's plans for a smooth awards ceremony. City officials and civic leaders in Miami are praising a Miami police plan that would accommodate Cuban-American protesters who charge that the island's musicians are representatives of Fidel Castro's "oppressive regime." The Latin Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences has agreed to the city's plan to place anti-Castro protesters about 260 feet from the red carpet entrance of the AmericanAirlines Arena. However, representatives of Alianza Martiana, which supports an end to the US embargo of Cuba and dialogue between the United States and Cuba, also applied for a permit -- to demonstrate in support of the right of musicians from Cuba and all over the world to express themselves. "Art unites us," said Alianza spokesman Max Lesnik. "Politics divides us." (August, Exile Community)

Several Cuban musicians who had been nominated for the Grammy awards held their own gala concert in Havana, broadcast to the rest of the world via satellite. Fidel Castro attended the concert at the Karl Marx Theater. Cuban officials have blasted the Latin Recording Academy with accusations that the organization caved into pressure from Miami exiles by failing to send its artists the letters of invitations required to apply for US visas. "They've fixed everything to make money and to not have problems with the Miami mafia," Deputy Culture Minister Abel Acosta Acosta told reporters in Havana. (September, US-Cuba Relations)

Cuban officials analyzed "The Shameful History of the Latin Grammys in Miami" during a nightly televised broadcast called Mesa Redonda, the Communist Party newspaper Granma announced. Granma said none of the 103 Cuban musicians and producers linked with recordings nominated for Latin Grammys received letters of invitations from the organizers. Latin Recording Academy President Gabriel Abaroa denied the accusations to the Associated Press and said that invitations were sent out for all the nominated artists, including the Cuban acts. "The Latin Academy did its homework and sent the invitations. If any

country is saying that, it is for political purposes only," Abaroa told the press. (September, US-Cuba Relations)

TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

In a bid to participate in Cuba's political future, exile leader Jorge Mas Santos offered to discuss a democratic transition on the island with any of three specific Cuban government officials, eliciting mixed but emotional reactions from Cuban Americans. Though Mas Santos excluded Fidel and Raúl Castro from the list and has not made an official move to open a dialogue, it was the first time the Cuban American National Foundation chairman has publicly named Cuban officials with whom he is willing to talk -- a very public signal that Cuban exiles are staking a claim in a future political transition. Mas Santos -- the son of Jorge Mas Canosa, CANF's founder -- said he was ready to sit down and talk to Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage, National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon or Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque. "They're the face of the regime now," Mas Santos said. "The fact that we have named these individuals is for them to know that in a change toward a democratic and free Cuba, they also have a place." (January, Exile Community)

Secretary General of Cuba Independiente y Democrática, Huber Matos, said that the "ideal" scenario to restore democracy in Cuba and bring down Fidel Castro's regime would be a transition process and cautioned that the "greatest tragedy" would be the restoration of democracy through a U.S. military intervention. (June, US-Cuba Relations)

A reconciliation project at Florida International University seeks solutions to the thorny issue of how Cuba's record of human rights violations will be dealt with in a transition. The project, headed by FIU sociology professor Marifeli Pérez-Stable, comes at a time when particular attention has been paid to the island's human rights record, given the government's crackdown on dissidents and its execution of three men who tried to hijack a boat to the United States. "We need to have fresh thinking and fresh approaches to Cuban matters from within Miami," said Pérez-Stable, chairwoman of the task force that issued the report Cuban National Reconciliation. (June, Exile Community)

US POLICY TOWARDS CUBA

[See also, US-Cuba Relations; Embargo, Travel Ban, Radio and TV Transmissions; Exile Community]

As many world leaders condemned the crackdown, anti-Castro groups seized on the recent developments to pressure the Bush administration to toughen its stance against Castro's government. The Cuban Liberty Council has urged robust measures, including suspending all travel and remittances to Cuba, cash sent by Cuban Americans to their families on the island, two of the nation's most important lifelines. "The victims, martyrs and all their families do not need to see more crimes to validate the position that one cannot negotiate with the oppressors," said Silvia Iriando, of Mothers Against Repression, which supports sanctions against Cuba. "There can be no dialogue with a regime that is not only responsible for crimes in the past but continues to commit brutal crimes to this day." (April, Exile Community)

Liberal and moderate Cuban Americans, whose pro-dialogue position steadily has gained ground in recent years, say Havana's actions against the opposition movement confirm the need for improving diplomatic relations with the island, though they acknowledge their views have become less popular for the time being. "The hardliners from Miami are on top right now and they're making a lot of noise," said Silvia Wilhelm, a Miami Cuban-American who advocates against economic sanctions. "But our position remains, that we are pro-dialogue, pro-opening, for changes in the embargo and the reconciliation of the Cuban family." (April, Exile Community)

The Bush administration is facing a novel force as it considers how to respond to Fidel Castro's recent crackdown on dissidents: a newfound moderation among Miami's formerly hard-line Cuban-American activists. "The overwhelming position of our board is that the US should not react to Castro's provocation," says Joe Garcia, spokesman for the Cuban American National Foundation. More important, Mr. Garcia

says, Washington shouldn't follow through with a proposal by some legislators to curtail the ability of Cuban-Americans to send remittances, which some say could be as much as \$1 billion a year, to relatives in Cuba. (April, Exile Community)

The Cuban American National Foundation met with Bush administration officials to advocate boosting the signal power of TV and Radio Marti and giving more money to assist dissidents in the wake of the recent crackdown. But the prominent exile group lobbied against further restricting travel or remittances that families send to the island. At least one other group, the Cuba Liberty Council, has advocated suspending all remittances and travel to the island. But foundation members said the US should strengthen its pro-democracy programs already in place. (May, Exile Community)

Leading Cuban-American organizations in southern Florida are endorsing proposed legislation in the US Congress, lifting restrictions on travel to Cuba by US citizens. The draft bill, "The Freedom to Travel Act, S. 950," was introduced in the Senate by the Cuba Working Group. According to Alfredo Durán, Secretary of the Cuban Committee for Democracy, lifting the travel ban "is welcomed by the majority of Cuban-Americans." He said that recent polls of Cuban-Americans show increasing support for ending all restrictions imposed on US citizens to travel to the island. Silvia Wilhelm of Puentes Cubanos said: "Now, more than ever, we must build bridges of support with the Cuban people, and lifting the travel restrictions will be a major step forward to accomplish such a difficult but necessary task." For his part, Delvis Fernández, President of the Cuban-American Alliance Educational Fund, stated that "respectful engagement, commerce and freedom to travel will best serve the interests of both nations." (May, Exile Community)

Representatives of South Florida's politically hefty Cuban exile community said they hope Washington's expulsion of 14 Cuban diplomats is only the first punch in a combination designed to knock out Fidel Castro's regime. "This is a first step the US government has taken in the correct direction, but we hope there will be others to show Fidel Castro that his behavior is unacceptable in a civilized world," Ninoska Perez Castellon, the director of the Cuban Liberty Council (CLC), told the press. "The expulsion is totally justified as part of the battle against Cuban spies disguised as diplomats," said Mariela Ferreti of the Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF). Both the CLC and CANF, two of the country's most important exile organizations, have met over the past few weeks with officials from Washington and suggested concrete measures to be taken against Cuba, such as aid to dissidents within Cuba and the adoption of an official policy clearly aimed at "regime change." (May, Exile Community)

José Basulto, a Cuban-American activist, wants the Bush administration to launch a media blitz into Cuba. He believes US programming would be a more effective weapon than tighter economic sanctions in responding to the latest crackdown against dissidents by Cuba's longtime leader, Fidel Castro. "The graphic depiction of life outside will make Cubans realise that there is an alternative way of living," says Mr Basulto. The Cuban-American National Foundation, the most significant Cuban lobbying group, opposes measures that would cut contacts. "We have told them [the US administration] not to over-react," says Joe García, the foundation's executive director. (May, Economy)

The offices of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) in Washington are up for sale and have a price tag of \$3.3 million. Joe García, a senior Foundation staff member, indicated that the sale of the building should not be construed as a CANF withdrawal from Washington. "It is about our new approach to freedom in Cuba, which cannot be won in Washington, or the streets of Little Havana, but on the streets of Cuba itself," he stressed. (May, Exile Community)

Miami-based Cuban exile groups welcomed EU sanctions against Havana. Cuban Liberty Council director Ninoska Perez told EFE she was pleased with the "initiative that confirms the only possible attitude towards dictators such as Fidel Castro." Mariela Ferreti, spokeswoman for the Cuban American National Foundation, told EFE that the sanctions leveled further encourage the island's internal opposition. (June, Exile Community)

Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade County, who political observers have long thought to be rigid in their attitudes toward Cuba, are softening their hard-line stances, according to a poll released. The poll, commissioned by the Southwest Voter Research and Education Project and its research arm, the William C. Velásquez Institute, surveyed 600 Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade between June 24 and July 1. Among its findings: 62 percent of those polled thought it was more important to spend time and money improving the quality of life in South Florida, compared with 19 percent who said it was more important to work to change the government of Cuba. 65 percent want politicians in Miami to focus more on issues within the local community, as opposed to 12 percent who said politicians need to focus more on international issues. While 49 percent of those polled said the US should use force to overthrow Fidel Castro, 68 percent said the residents of Cuba should decide how and when the political system in Cuba should change. 49 percent said they would vote for a candidate who would take a hard-line approach and continue the US embargo against Cuba. But while 62 percent of respondents 65 or older would prefer the hard-line candidate, only 34 percent of Cubans under age 45 said they preferred such a candidate. (July, Exile Community)

An influential Cuban-American exile organization says President Bush has failed to live up to political promises and could be without their support in the 2004 election. Leaders of the Cuban American National Foundation said they are particularly incensed the president sent back a dozen Cubans suspected of hijacking a boat to reach Florida's shores. The US agreed to return the suspected hijackers after Castro's government pledged to spare their lives and sentence them to no more than 10 years in prison. "This will cost them," Jorge Mas Santos said in a speech to the Cuban American National Foundation's board of directors. "They can't count on the support of our community if they don't fulfill their promises," said Mas Santos, the foundation's chairman. "This administration until now has done absolutely nothing to fulfill the promises they made to this community." (July, Exile Community)

The leading organization claiming to speak for Miami's electorally important Cuban exile community called on President George W. Bush to fulfill his pledges to aid the internal opposition on the communist-ruled island. That was the heart of the message conveyed by Jorge Mas Santos, president of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). "We want the president to fulfill the pledges he made in May 2002 when he said he would give full support to internal dissidents that are struggling in conditions of poverty and solitude," Mas Santos said. "We demand that the migration accords (between Washington and Havana) that provide for all Cubans detained at sea to be returned to Cuba where they are tried by a regime without morals or justice, be revised," the opposition leader said. According to the accords signed in 1994 during the administration of then-President Bill Clinton, Cubans intercepted at sea are repatriated to the island. (August, Exile Community)

Ruling out tighter sanctions against Cuba, the Bush administration is pushing for a democratic transition on the island through increased international pressure and more robust support for Cuba's dissidents. The administration dispatched three officials to Miami in hopes of coming up with fresh ideas for bringing about a democratic Cuba. They have been consulting with elected leaders of the Cuban-American community. The US delegation dispatched to Miami consists of Otto Reich, White House special envoy for Latin America; Dan Fisk, a top State Department Cuba specialist; and Adolfo Franco, an assistant administrator at the Agency for International Development. (August, US-Cuba Relations)

A group of Florida Republican state representatives has drafted a letter warning President Bush he risks losing their support for the 2004 election if he does not adopt a tougher Cuba policy. The letter echoes demands expressed recently by other Cuban Americans: revise current migration policy; indict Fidel Castro for the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down; ensure that TV Martí is seen by people in Cuba; and increase assistance to dissidents on the island. "We feel it is our responsibility as Republican elected officials to inform you that unless substantial progress on the above-mentioned issues occurs rapidly, we fear the historic and intense support from Cuban American voters for Republican federal candidates, including yourself, will be jeopardized," reads the letter, signed by 13 members of the state's Republican Hispanic Caucus. (August, US-Cuba Relations)

Two Republican state legislators who signed a letter to President Bush urging him to get tougher on Cuba or face a loss of Cuban American political support said they received phone calls from Bush staffers indicating an eventual positive response. State Representative David Rivera, who helped draft the letter

signed by 13 Hispanic lawmakers, said a Bush administration official called him to talk about news reports of the document. Rivera declined to identify the person or the topic, but said, "I am optimistic that positive news is forthcoming on US-Cuba policy." State Representative Marco Rubio, another of the signers, said he also got a call from a White House staffer whom he wouldn't identify. "They said, 'You can be sure the right people, the decision makers, are going to know about this today,'" Rubio said. (August, US-Cuba Relations)

The former diplomat who runs the Washington office of the Cuban American National Foundation has resigned in the midst of a disagreement over the organization's decision to criticize the Bush administration on Cuba policy. Dennis Hays, executive vice president of CANF, acknowledged that he doesn't agree with the foundation's public criticism but said that did not lead to his resignation. Hays downplayed his disagreement with others in CANF's leadership: "The important thing is to move forward to advance the cause of freedom and democracy in Cuba, and there is a variety of ways it can be done. And there will be disagreements over what the best of those ways may be." Camila Ruiz, a former aide to US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican-Miami, was appointed to succeed Hays. (August, Exile Community)

Miami exile leaders said that the indictment of a Cuban air force general and two MiG fighter pilots by the federal government is a direct result of a recent series of letters sent to President Bush by the Cuban American National Foundation, Republican state legislators and other local officials. Cuban Americans have suggested that the president risked losing the community's financial and electoral support for his reelection campaign next year if the administration did not move aggressively to target the Castro regime. Exile leaders said they took the administration's moves as evidence that, ultimately, the United States under Bush might bring charges against Castro himself and rewrite the so-called "wet foot, dry foot" policy that allows fleeing Cubans to remain in the United States only if they reach land -- although there was no direct suggestion of that from the White House. "These are very, very positive steps," said Jorge Mas Santos, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation, in an interview. "Still, there's a lot more that can and should be done." (August, Exile Community)

National security advisor Condoleezza Rice has written South Florida Republican legislators to stress that President Bush is committed to the economic embargo against Cuba and bringing democracy to the island. Her letter underscores the importance in the next presidential election of the Cuban-American electorate, a voting block considered necessary by the GOP to win in Florida, which is expected to be a key state. Rice, writing to State Representative David Rivera, Republican-Miami, was responding to a letter that GOP state legislators had sent Bush in August asking him to get tougher on Cuba or risk losing the political support of Cuban Americans. (September, US-Cuba Relations)

A Cuban exile organization accused the US government of having a "double standard" because it has granted visas to members of Cuba's National Ballet, after having denied visas to other artists from the communist island this fall. "This is one more demonstration that, with respect to Cuba, the current government says one thing and does another," Joe Garcia, executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation, one of the main US exile groups, told the press. (October, Exile Community)

The Cuban American National Foundation applauded President Bush's remarks at a Rose Garden ceremony where he articulated a tougher-line policy towards Cuba's communist regime. "Today's announcement is a definite step in the right direction; it demonstrates that the President is moving Cuba's freedom to a top spot on his foreign policy agenda, that he is taking an interested and active role in developing a Cuba policy that will hasten democratic change on the island. We are very encouraged that he's made clear that the time for change in Cuba is now, and that there is no better ally of Cuban freedom than the United States of America," said Jorge Mas Santos, Chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation. (October, Exile Community)