Cuba may have 20 billion barrels of oil but cash crunch threatens investment

BY LARRY LUXNER

Does Cuba really have more petroleum reserves than Angola, Qatar or even Brazil? Well, yes — if you believe the latest claim by state-run oil entity Cubapetroleo (Cupet).

Speaking only about an oil belt north of the island deep underneath Cuba’s Gulf of Mexico waters, Cupet’s production manager Rafael Tenreyro Pérez, announced Oct. 16 that “this belt now has resources, calculated not hypothetical, of more than 20 billion barrels. They are the reserves. That could be multiplied several times.”

The geology of the oil belt extends to a basin further north where much larger structures hold the promise of hydrocarbons, he said. “The effect of the [belt] is reflected in this zone in the presence of enormous structures,” Tenreyro told reporters in Havana. “Here we’re talking about structures of 80, 100, 120 sq kms. Therefore, the reserves multiply practically several times and the resources, too.”

Further out in the Gulf, Tenreyro said, are structures that belong to the same geological formations off of Mexico and the United States which had produced celebrated finds such as Mexico’s Cantarell and Poza Rica fields.

“All these geological elements indicate that we are talking about a new oil province — an oil zone that has not been drilled nor has it been touched,” said Tenreyro, adding that the potential is there for “giant and super-giant oil fields.”

Pie in the sky, retorts Jorge Piñón, energy fellow and Cuba expert with the University of Miami’s Center for Hemispheric Policy. “I was in Houston when that announcement was made, and I think it backfired on them, because people in Houston thought Cupet was a little more professional,” he told CubaNews.

“Oil industry people are now taking Cupet less seriously, when they make unprofessional and unscientific statements like that,” he said.

Obama victory could mean substantial changes in Washington’s Cuba policy

BY ANA RADELAT

Sen. Barack Obama’s likely presidential victory will bring about quick and substantial improvements in U.S.-Cuba policy, but a permanent thaw in relations — and an end to the embargo — isn’t imminent, say analysts.

After nearly 50 years of promises by American presidents to put an end to Fidel Castro’s socialism, Obama may be the one who finally witnesses a Cuba without a Castro at the helm. Fidel Castro, 82, is ailing, and his brother and successor Raúl is only five years younger.

While a full normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations won’t occur until the Castro brothers leave the world stage, observers do expect a marked change in U.S. policy, one that lacks the ideological bent of the Bush administration.

Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami’s Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, said the Illinois Democrat is likely to move fairly quickly to end President Bush’s restrictions on Cuban-American travel to Cuba and remittances to family on the island.

As a punitive measure, Bush in 2004 limited visits to once every year and only to immediate family members. He also restricted remittances, but Obama has promised to restore the “unrestricted right” of exiles to visit family and send them money.

“Beyond that, he may initiate discussions with Cuban representatives, but not the top leader,” Suchlicki told CubaNews.

Criticized by his rival for the White House, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), and Bush foreign policy officials for his willingness to negotiate with hostile nations, Obama will probably send U.S. representatives to meet with Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba’s National Assembly, or another Cuban official on the same level while avoiding direct contact with Raúl Castro himself, Suchlicki said.

“But the point is negotiations with the Cuban government is a waste of time,” said Suchlicki, who favors a hard line against Cuba’s socialist leaders.

See Obama, page 2
regime. He said Cuba is already committed — politically and economically — to Iran, China, Russia and Venezuela, and doesn’t need incentives from Washington.

“The United States has little to offer Cuba except tourists and investment in the tourism industry, and that’s not what Cuba really wants,” said Suchlicki. He added that an Obama administration will likely insist on preconditions before easing economic sanctions, such as the release of all political prisoners. “Countries don’t give away their policy; they negotiate,” Suchlicki said.

But Cuba’s government does not accept conditions to changing relations, he said.

POSSIBLE GOODWILL GESTURES

Vicki Huddleston, former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, also said Obama would move quickly to end restrictions on Cuban-American travel and remittances. “But sitting down to negotiate is pretty far down the road,” she told CubaNews.

Huddleston, now a visiting fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, said Obama and Raul may move to “improve the atmosphere” of bilateral ties which became increasingly toxic during the Bush years.

For example, both governments might consider eliminating travel restrictions on each other’s diplomats. Huddleston said those restrictions prevented U.S. representatives in Havana from getting any sense of what was happening on the island — making it hard to develop contacts with both dissidents and Cuban officials.

“I could never have carried out my job that way,” she quipped. “I would have left Cuba.”

Huddleston also said Obama may reinstate migration accords instituted during the Clinton administration as part of an immigration pact that stopped a rash of Cuban “rafters” in 1994. Bush ended these bi-annual meetings, which allowed for cautious diplomacy.

Obama could also move to increase American contacts with Cubans by removing Bush’s restrictions on non-exile travel to the island. But Obama’s ambitions would be hampered by a series of laws approved by Congress over the years. First among them is the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which stripped the White House of authority over the embargo. Most of those laws tightened the embargo, but a 1999 regulation that allowed U.S. food sales to Cuba had a tradeoff: it limited the White House’s ability to expand travel beyond what was already allowed.

As part of his “people-to-people” policy, Clinton had increased U.S. travel to Cuba by allowing 13 categories of Americans including scholars, amateur athletes, journalists, religious leaders and farmers negotiating sales to visit Cuba. Most of those who qualified needed licenses from the Treasury Department to spend money on those trips.

Bush restricted the approval of licenses and limited the categories of Americans who could travel to Cuba. In contrast, Obama is likely to encourage the “people-to-people” contacts once again, Huddleston said.

LATIN AMERICA AGAIN A PRIORITY?

Obama has been criticized for never having visited Latin America and seeming to know little about the Spanish-speaking world. And there’s a good reason the region may not be a priority for the new president: wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are certain to take center stage, as are Iran’s nuclear ambitions and instability in North Korea.

But Huddleston said Obama’s promise of appointing a special envoy to Latin America indicates he’s not going to ignore the region. And she said he’ll be a quick learner when it comes to Cuba. “The man’s smart,” she said.

Kirby Jones, founder and president of the U.S.-Cuba Trade Association, said Obama is likely to be pressured by other Latin leaders to improve U.S.-Cuba relations.

“If you want to send a message to Latin America there’s a new team and a new approach: you do something about Cuba.”

But lifting the embargo — even a little to allow all Americans to visit Cuba — would take an act of Congress.

‘A WHOLE NEW PLAYING FIELD’

In the 110th Congress, Bush’s threat to veto any relaxation of sanctions helped derail any efforts to improve relations with Havana. There was another obstacle, too — Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid’s opposition to improved ties.

Jones said that wouldn’t be a factor in a Senate where Democrats have picked up seats and it may be easy to muster the 60 votes needed to thwart an attempt by Reid, or any other senator for that matter, to keep Cuba-related legislation from a vote.

“It’s risky to predict that Reid would have the same attitude, with Obama and other Democrats wanting change,” Jones said.

Besides supporting a move letting all Americans visit Cuba, Obama may back an effort that stalled in the last Congress allowing U.S. oil giants to drill for oil in Cuban waters.

Cuba has recently announced there may be up to 20 billion barrels of petroleum under its Gulf of Mexico exclusive economic zone. The potential of a huge oil find has drawn the interest of major international energy firms.

The biggest change, however, said Jones, is that Cuba policy would no longer be driven by the ideology of hardline exiles and their State Department allies, like Roger Noriega and Otto Reich, both former assistant secretaries of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. Said Jones: “Its a whole new playing field.”

All eyes on S. Fla. as Díaz-Balart brothers fight for their jobs

The battle for the White House may dominate world news, but for Cuba-watchers, what really counts is the outcome of three key Congressional races in South Florida.

Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart and his younger brother, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, face the toughest challenges of their careers in the form of two Democrats: former Hialeah mayor Raul Martinez, who’s seeking Lincoln’s seat in Florida’s 21st congressional district, and Joe Garcia, who hopes to unseat Mario in the 25th congressional district.

The Diaz-Balart brothers — nephews of Fidel Castro from the revolutionary’s failed first marriage — are lifelong Republicans and strongly oppose any easing of sanctions against Cuba, including letting Cuban-American exiles freely visit their families on the island.

A third veteran GOP lawmaker, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, is vying with Democratic upstart Annette Taddeo for control of the 18th congressional district, though few expect Ros-Lehtinen to lose her seat.

Asked what Obama’s victory means for Cuba policy, Garcia told us: “In the short term, it means we’re going to lift family visits and remittance restrictions on Cuban-Americans but not the embargo. That’s what Obama stated, and that’s the policy of the Democratic Party.”

– LARRY LUXNER
fewer tourists are booking cruises to Jamaica. In the Bahamas, sales at duty-free shops along Nassau’s picturesque Bay Street are flat.

And in the Turks & Caicos Islands, a group of disgruntled Chinese construction workers recently took their Israeli bosses hostage, after a Ritz-Carlton resort they were building fell through following the collapse of its chief backer, Lehman Brothers.

Throughout the Caribbean, nothing is making bigger headlines than the worsening global financial crisis. In fact — with the exception of Cuba, which doesn’t depend on American tourism — the repercussions of this crisis on the Caribbean could be deeper and longer-lasting than those caused by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks seven years ago.

“In 2001, it was an issue of security. In this instance, you’re talking about people’s livelihoods,” said Wayne Cummings, director of business administration for Sandals Resorts International and president of the Jamaica Hotel & Tourist Association.

“Eight months ago, I started hearing about problems with subprime mortgages, and that’s when I knew the very foundations of the American economy were shaky,” he said. “Even so, I don’t believe this crisis is a singular event. It’s going to have international catastrophic consequences,” said Cummings. He added that “9/11 was a challenge of great proportions, but with this one, nobody seems to be able to tell what the endgame is.”

In addition to the worsening U.S. economy, tourism-related businesses also face rising energy costs, rising competition and dramatically reduced air service to the Caribbean — all of which could result in lower hotel occupancy levels for the region’s hotels.

“Given the region’s dependence on airlift, the most daunting issues facing the Caribbean hotel industry are the rising cost of airfares and the announced cutbacks in air service,” said Scott Smith, senior vice-president of PKF Consulting.

“Due mostly to the rising cost of fuel, four of the five leading air carriers to the Caribbean have announced cutbacks in service. Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic could see as many as 26% fewer flights in December 2008 compared to December 2007.”

CUBA RIDES OUT THE STORM

Yet so far, Cuba seems immune to the problem — nor has its tourism industry been much affected by the two back-to-back hurricanes that ravaged the island this summer. Reuters reports there have been no cancellations of tours booked for the December-March peak season, and that an expected increase in Canadian visitors should help offset any reduction in Europeans put off by rising airfares and other economic problems.

“There will be some decline in tourism from Europe as airfares are up 30%, but we expect another big jump from Canada to make up at least part of the difference, along with new markets like Russia,” the representative of a European hotel chain told Reuters on condition his name not be used.

Immediately after hurricanes Gustav and Ike hit the island, some tours to hard-hit areas were canceled, but not for the months ahead, he said. The hurricane season ends Nov. 30.

“The hotels are completely taken by tour operators starting in late December, and to date there have been no cancellations of flights or rooms,” he said. The bigger uncertainty now, he told Reuters, was the financial crisis rolling markets around the world.

“We will have to see what happens with the global economy over the next months, but so far we see a good season despite it all.”

The number of tourists from Canada, already the top tourism country for Cuba, could rise as much as 20-30% because of the weak U.S. dollar and increased marketing, the sources said.

HOTEL OCCUPANCY STEADY AT 58.9%

Cuba’s currency is pegged to the dollar, which makes the country an inexpensive destination for Canadians seeking warm tropical beaches during their country’s long winter.

 Reuters reported that while Gustav and Ike inflicted $5 billion in damage on the island, key tourist areas like Havana and the Varadero beach resort were largely spared.

Spanish firm Sol Meliá, which has 24 hotels in Cuba, said it was back up to full speed after the hurricanes. “Sol Meliá’s hotels and resorts are open and operating normally after complete recovery from minor damage,” said Gabriel García, the company’s marketing director in Cuba.

Hotel occupancy through the end of August reached 58.9%, and tourism revenues rose by 20%, according to Cuba’s Ministry of Tourism.

Varadero, located 150 kms east of Havana, has welcomed 700,000 tourists so far this year, and may reach one million by year’s end.

“We’ve maintained a progressive increase since the second half of 2007, and specifically this year we’ve seen very good results, even though we know the sector can be more efficient,” said Armando Acosta, a Tourism Ministry official in Matanzas province.

During the first eight months of 2008, Cuba received 1,693,054 visitors, 13.5% more than the year-ago period. Tourism revenues were up 20% and are expected to total some $2 billion this year. With 17,300 rooms, Varadero is the most important tourism attraction in Cuba, followed by Havana.

New edict lets farmers buy what they need

Cuba will allow most farmers to purchase basic supplies at stores for the first time since the 1960s, as Havana seeks to encourage farmers to increase production, Reuters reported Oct. 27.

The Castro regime nationalized all small businesses, including wholesale and retail farm supply outlets, decades ago. Since then farmers have had to wait for the state to deliver what they need in exchange for their products.

Farmers complain the cumbersome system does not work, leaving crops to rot and farmers without timely supplies.

Reuters correspondent Marc Frank, quoting from Villa Clara province’s Communist Party weekly Vanguardia, reports that as of late October, farmers were accumulating credits on top of normal prices in exchange for product delivered to the state, redeemable starting in January 2009 for supplies at special stores.

“To increase production of vegetables, roots, grains and fruit, and direct sales to prioritized sectors, the ministries of agriculture and sugar have decided to make it easier for producers to obtain various supplies,” Vanguardia said.

“Farmers will be able to use the credits to buy hand tools, work clothes, tires, batteries, spare parts for irrigation systems,” the Ministry official in Matanzas province.

Shortly after President Raúl Castro took over in February from his ailing brother Fidel, the new government quickly implemented a similar supply scheme for cattle ranchers in exchange for milk. It decentralized decision-making in agriculture and announced it would lease all vacant land to whomever wanted to till it.

Hurricanes Ike and Gustav devastated crops in September resulting in food shortages, but there was no indication the new measure was related to the current crisis.

Sources in two other provinces said farmers had heard for months they’d join cattle ranchers in buying some supplies, but there’s been no official announcement.

“When you have something to work with, obviously you produce more, and this system will allow us to buy what we need to work and at the same time stimulate us,” said Alaida Hernandez, a member of a private cooperative in central Camagüey province, said in a phone interview.

More than 70% of Cuban land is owned by the state and farmed by state companies and cooperatives. Some 250,000 family farmers and 1,000 private cooperatives own the remainder of the land but must sell most of their output to the state.
EU, Cuba revive cooperation accord after 5-year chill

On Oct. 23, Brussels and Havana finally kissed and made up. The 27-member European Union — ending a five-year standoff with the Castro regime — agreed to re-establish cooperation with Cuba and send the island $1.3 million in immediate hurricane recovery aid and up to $38.8 million more in financing next year.

Cuba’s foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, and the EU commissioner for development and humanitarian aid, Louis Michel, signed a declaration pledging new cooperation in what Michel called “a turning point for EU-Cuban relations.”

The agreement calls for the two sides to work together in areas such as trade, the environment, science and technology.

The European Commission, the EU’s executive body, voted in June to lift sanctions that were imposed in 2003 after Cuba imprisoned 75 opponents of the regime. About 55 are believed to still be in jail.

“What appears most important to us is that this dialogue can approach all these issues, including the issues most difficult, but always over a base of mutual respect,” Michel said to Pérez Roque at the Havana signing ceremony. Pérez Roque said Cuba welcomed the agreement because it imposed no conditions on his government, while still opening a path for dialogue “without interference in international affairs, and with mutual respect for political independence.”

The foreign minister added there’s been an “important advance” in EU-Cuba relations but that “there remain things to do and rectify.”

A EU delegation will return to Cuba later this month to determine needs and priorities for next year’s financing.

Cuba has stated it won’t allow EU interference in domestic issues, but has agreed to re-instate official political dialogue that was one of the casualties of the EU sanctions.

The Castro regime considers political prisoners to be mercenaries working at the behest of the United States, which openly supports the dissidents.

Indeed, U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez said this week the American government was not likely to follow the EU down the path of engagement with its long-time foe.

“To the best of our knowledge there are still political prisoners dying in jail and people still don’t have freedoms, so I don’t know why anyone would say that any other strategy appears to be working,” Gutierrez told Reuters. “Nothing has changed.”

Experts debate next refugee crisis

By Vito Echevarria

Will the recent hurricane devastation throughout Cuba unleash a new wave of Florida-bound refugees?

That’s a distinct possibility, according to an article co-authored by retired U.S. Army Col. Lawrence Wilkerson and Patrick Doherty of the New America Foundation, a Washington think tank.

“Faced with a displaced, hungry and frustrated population, Havana could do what it has done in the past: allow a mass migration to head north,” they wrote.

“In 1980, responding to unrest triggered by economic downturn, Havana launched the Mariel boatlift that brought 125,000 Cuban immigrants over a five-month period to South Florida. In 1994, facing another economic catastrophe, the Castro government allowed at least 35,000 Cubans to leave the island — an episode that cost the U.S. Treasury more than $500 million.”

Wilkerson and Doherty cited that scenario as part of efforts to urge the Bush administration to temporarily lift the trade embargo against Cuba, and allow the Castro regime to buy badly needed construction materials from U.S. companies on the open market.

Some Cuban-Americans are expressing the same concerns. In a phone interview with CubaNews, José Basulto — head of the Miami-based group Brothers to the Rescue — blamed the Cuban government for not accepting a modest U.S. aid package.

“The possibility exists [of a new balsero wave],” said Basulto. “As suffering increases and Cuba refuses U.S. aid, a new humanitarian crisis will occur in Cuba.”

Brothers to the Rescue is quite familiar with this issue. Back in the 1990s, the group flew small planes over the Florida Straits in search of balseros lost on the high seas, and in danger of either drowning or being eaten by sharks.

But Basulto’s group stopped conducting rescue missions in 2003, since under Washing-
In their own words ...

“It’s so sad that right off the shores of our great nation that believes in human rights and human dignity exists this dungeon. But someday Cuba will be free. Someday the people who are there will realize the blessing of freedom. And I want to thank the people around this table for working to see that day come.”
— President Bush, in an Oct. 10 meeting with leaders of South Florida’s Cuban-American exile community at Havana Harry’s restaurant in Coral Gables, Fla.

“This was a deceitful strategy used to court international public opinion to lend legitimacy to the new president [Raúl Castro]. We are convinced there is no interest whatsoever in implementing what is set out in the [UN] agreements.”

“It is time to establish a new scientific relationship between Cuba and the United States, and not only to pay attention to common challenges such as health, climate, agriculture and energy.”
— Editorial in the latest issue of Science magazine.

“Raul is convinced that the agricultural sector has to change. Cuba has to produce foodstuffs, because if it doesn’t, it will starve to death. All agrarian reforms have failed. The Soviet system doesn’t work, as we saw in Europe. Now, Raul encourages the small farm owner to acquire larger plots of land. That was impossible with his brother.”
— Bernd Wulffen, former German ambassador to Cuba (2001-05) and author of two books on Cuba, in a recent interview with the German news agency DPA.

“I think we all know that the Cuban-American vote can be vital to whether I win Florida or not. So I do want to say again that we will never waver in our mission to restore freedom and democracy to Cuba.”

“These officials have offended thousands of Cuban citizens who have signed this petition for a referendum, which is also a demand for fundamental rights and which the Cuban government is denying its citizens.”
— Oswaldo Payá, angrily responding to Venezuela’s minister of foreign affairs, Nicolas Maduro, who said Payá’s Varela Project, which seeks democratic change in Cuba, had “little credibility.” Maduro made his comments during a joint press conference in Madrid with his Spanish counterpart, Miguel Ángel Moratinos.

“No there is no more embarrassing reminder of the current isolation of the United States. All our friends and allies in the Caribbean, the Western Hemisphere, Western Europe and Asia oppose us. Our only significant supporter is Israel, which actually follows a contrary policy as its citizens manage Cuba’s largest citrus groves and are major investors in [Cuban] property development.”
— John McAuliff, executive director of the Fund for Reconciliation and Development, commenting on the United Nations’ 185-3 vote to condemn the embargo.

“Cubans who believe this election will bring positive change for our country are fooling themselves. Political campaigns are one thing; political reality is another.”
— Nathaly Vicente, a 23-year-old law student at the University of Havana, commenting to the South Florida Sun-Sentinel on the U.S. presidential election.

“I don’t think many Cubans will be going to work on Nov. 4. They’ll be watching to see what happens. I won’t miss it.”
— Psychiatrist Elsa Gutiérrez, quoted in the same article.

POLITICAL BRIEFS

UN VOTES 185-3 TO CONDEMN U.S. EMBARGO

The UN General Assembly voted overwhelming-ly for the 17th year in a row Oct. 29 to demand an end to the 46-year-old U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, with only three countries (United States, Israel and Palau) voting no, and two countries abstaining (Micronesia and the Marshall Islands). The margin of support for ending the embargo has grown steadily since 1992, when 59 countries voted in favor of the resolution. The figure was 179 in 2004, 182 in 2005 and 184 in 2007.

Noting that the embargo is “older than Barack Obama and my entire generation,” Cuba’s foreign minister, Felipe Pérez Roque, said the next U.S. president “will have to decide whether to concede that the embargo is a failed policy which each time creates greater isolation and discredits his country or whether he continues, with obstinacy and cruelty, to try to wear out the Cuban people with hunger and diseases.”

Ronald Godard, the State Department’s senior adviser for Latin American affairs, countered that “the real reason Cuba’s economy is in terrible condition and that so many Cubans remain mired with hunger and diseases.”

UN VOTES 185-3 TO CONDEMN U.S. EMBARGO

Russia’s offer to advise Cuba on air defense and improve its defense capabilities is a tit-for-tat response to the U.S. proposal to install missile interceptors in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic, said a noted Russian analyst.

According to an Oct. 27 article in the Miami Herald, Alexander Pikaev, a military specialist at the Russian Academy of Sciences, told the newspaper Gazeta that “although [Moscow] will officially deny this interpretation, it is obvious that Russia’s actions are a response to the American anti-missile systems in the Czech Republic and Poland and to NATO’s decision to help Georgia restore its air-defense system.”

Pikaev is certain that “Russia decided to renew military technical cooperation with Cuba” and that an improved air-defense shield is one of the island’s means of protection against the U.S. “No one ignores the fact that relations between Cuba and the U.S. remain very strained and that Cuba has to protect itself,” Pikaev told Gazeta.

“The fact is that [Cuba’s] air-defense systems long ago became obsolete,” said the military expert. “In other words, Russia will help Cuba to restore its military potential.”

MADRID APPOINTS NEW AMBASSADOR TO HAVANA

Spain’s Council of Ministers on Oct. 17 named Manuel Cacho Quesada ambassador to Cuba, replacing Carlos Alonso Zaldívar, the Miami Herald reported.

Cacho, who will be 57 this month, was the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry, a post he held from May 2005 to Sept. 12, 2008. Previously, he was Spain’s ambassador to Nigeria and Syria and consul in Jerusalem, Israel.

He has also served in diplomatic missions to Zaire, the Philippines, Chile and Great Britain.

No reason was given for the removal of Zaldívar, who has represented Spain in Havana since 2004.

ANALYST: AIR SHIELD IS RESPONSE TO U.S. STRATEGY

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Who’s in, who’s out in Cuba’s latest political reshuffling

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

Key changes have taken place within Cuba’s Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (MINFAR) since Raúl Castro was named president on Feb. 24, 2008, and chose Deputy First Minister and Army Corps Gen. (ACG) Julio Casas Regueiro to succeed him as Cuba’s minister of defense.

Previously, Casas was deputy minister of MINFAR in charge of economic activities and a key player in the promotion of *perfeccionamiento empresarial*.

Casas, 72, a member of the Politburo since 1991 and, since February, a vice-president of the Council of State, was a distinguished guerilla fighter along with his deceased brother, Senen, both under the command of Raúl’s II Eastern Front. Senen had been chief of the General Staff for more than a decade until his passing in the early 1980s.

Six months later, two other major changes took place. First, the chief of the Central Army for 20 years, ACG Joaquin Quinta Solas, 70, was replaced and promoted to deputy minister at MINFAR’s General Staff. Quintas Sola was replaced by Brig. Gen. Rafael Bello Rivero, who was his chief of staff for several years.

Then in early October, the chief of the Western Army, also for almost 20 years, ACG Leopoldo Cintra Frias, 67, was promoted to first deputy minister of MINFAR just a few months after personally being nominated to the Council of State by Fidel Castro.

He was replaced, also, by his recently appointed chief of staff, Division Gen. (DG) Lucio Morales Abad.

Both Quintas Sola and Cintra Frias have a long record of service, first as members of the Rebel Army fighting against Batista, as commanding officers of the newly created FAR, and as distinguished commanders in Angola and Ethiopia — especially Cintra Frias, who was greatly admired by his subordinates.

Different sources had speculated previously about the possibility of ACG Abelardo Colome Ibarra or ACG Alvaro López Miera (both very close to Raúl and with excellent credentials) being the strongest candidates to replace Raúl as minister.

Appointing Cintra Frias as first deputy minister places him as the strongest candidate to replace Casas Regueiro in the short term, again leaving behind Colome Ibarra and López Miera.

Should changes continue, experts point to the likely ouster of ACG Ramón Espinosa Martin, chief of the Eastern Army, and Rear Adm. (RA) Pedro Pérez Betancourt, chief of the Navy (Marina de Guerra Revolucionaria).

Another consideration: for the first time in 50 years, the new commanding officers of the Central and Western armies don’t belong to the historical generation of the Rebel Army. Rather, they represent the post-1959 “milicianos” who made their professional careers through dedication, performance and the completion of risky missions abroad.

Many of them are known as “los africanos” due to their repeated fighting missions in Africa, and the fact that many are black or mestizo, as is the case with Bello Rivero and Morales Abad. These generals have also traveled to China and Vietnam, and therefore have been exposed to those countries’ far-reaching economic changes and reforms.

Havana billboard proclaims: “I’ll be faithful to you!”

VALENCIAGA’S DOWNFALL

Meanwhile, Carlos Valenciaga, Fidel’s personal assistant and member of the Council of State, is definitively out of the political equation. *CubaNews* sources tell us he was ousted from his influential position rather harshly, even by Cuban standards.

Graduated in 1989 with a bachelor’s degree in history and philosophy from Havana’s Higher Pedagogical Institute with excellent credentials as active leader within the UJC and FEU youth movements, Valenciaga was personally chosen by Fidel to join the Grupo de Apoyo support team, created by Fidel in 1963.

When Felipe Pérez Roque was appointed minister of foreign affairs in 1995, Valenciaga took over the latter’s position as personal assistant to Fidel.

His initial years working with the Maximum Leader were considered very commendable in government and Party circles. When Fidel had his accident in Santa Clara, the two people who Fidel depended on most for instructions, and briefings were Pérez Roque and Carlitos (as Valenciaga was affectionately called).

As Valenciaga gained further authority delegated by Fidel, he started to clash with several important figures who perceived him simply as an “errand boy” and a “yes-man.”

Heavy criticism started to pound on Carlitos’s ways from high-ranking Party and government leaders, while, at the same time, his ostentatious personal life began to raise eyebrows. The final straw came in the form of a lavish party thrown by Valenciaga’s wife. The party became major political gossip in Cuba and the South Florida exile community.

For the past 10 years, Cabrisas, 71, had been minister without portfolio in charge of Cuba’s multilateral and major international cooperation agreements — a position that required him to work very closely with Fidel.

Cabrías never earned his university degree because he chose instead to become an intelligence officer. His work as commercial counselor in Canada was praised by Cuban leaders, especially by Celia Sánchez, Fidel’s personal assistant and secretary of the Council of State until her passing in the early 1980s; she was always supportive of Cabrisas.

In 1970, Cabrisas was named ambassador to Japan, and in 1978, he was appointed minister of foreign trade. He became a member of the Central Committee in 1991, during the Party’s IV Congress, but stepped down in 1995. Many saw this change as a sort of decline or final downfall, but quite the contrary was true; Cabrisas became increasingly important. His new position is even more crucial under Cuba’s current circumstances and its desperate search for foreign investment in key areas.

This change may also be perceived by some as a loss of power and influence by Vice President Carlos Lage Davila, though most experts tend to agree that Lage Davila is entirely dedicated to dealing with the domestic economy and its recovery.

Former Cuban intelligence officer Domingo Amuchastegui has lived in Miami since 1994. He writes regularly for CubaNews about politics in Cuba and the South Florida exile community.
Cuba's leptospirosis scare

BY OUR HAVANA CORRESPONDENT

When hurricanes Gustav and Ike hit Cuba with devastating force in late August and early September, Cuban authorities rushed to prevent any epidemic outbreak in the affected areas.

A prompt response to the threat — along with efforts by Cuba’s Ministry of Public Health (MINSA) — have so far averted a major catastrophe.

But the hurricanes tore apart Cuba’s housing infrastructure, and now tens of thousands of people live in crowded shelters. At the same time, the power grid, water-treatment and drainage systems, garbage collection and health-care services were all affected by the hurricanes — leading to the possible and chaotic drop in living standards.

One of the possible outbreaks the regime tried to curtail was leptospirosis, a zoonotic bacterial infection transmitted to humans when the urine of rats, pigs, dogs and other domestic or feral mammals comes into contact with the human food and water supply.

It’s also transmitted through skin lesions — not an uncommon risk for people living or working in the fields, or in shelters and warehouses, especially in soaked soils and crops.

In its acute human form, leptospirosis is known as Weil’s disease and is potentially lethal though rarely so.

MINSA is particularly concerned because of an increase in the number of leptospirosis cases last year in the provinces of Las Tunas, Holguin and Pinar del Rio — precisely those hit hardest by the hurricanes.

Cuba suffered an outbreak of leptospirosis in the darkest years of the so-called Special Period, when the sudden loss of its Soviet and Eastern European trading partners led to a chaotic drop in living standards. The number of leptospirosis cases peaked in 1994 at 2,828 (including 52 deaths), compared to an average 460 cases per year in 1985-89.

The outbreak occurred in 1991, when 1,141 people became infected — double that of the preceding year. From 1992 to 1996, Cuba reported 9,015 cases and 274 deaths, translating into a death rate of 3.04% among infected people. Males ranging from 15 to 54 years old were most commonly affected.

Despite the poor economic conditions, Cuba’s government managed to halt the spread of the disease with an intense campaign spearheaded by MINSA, including a drive to educate the population about the means of transmission. In 1996, it also

Yet the hurricanes tore apart Cuba’s housing infrastructure, and now tens of thousands of people live in crowded shelters. At the same time, the power grid, water-treatment and drainage systems, garbage collection and health-care services were all affected by the hurricanes — leading to the possible and rapid spread of water-borne infections.

LEPTOSPIROSIS

Year

Infection rate per 100,000 people

2006

Havana: 3.4

Cuba: 24.3

2007

Havana: 12.3

Cuba: 71.9

Source: Boletín Epidemiológico del Instituto Pedro Kouri; Vol. 17, No.49, 2007

Canada’s Cari Med Trading Inc. has filed a complaint with the U.S. government for interfering with its trade with Cuba, reported the Communist daily Juventud Rebelde.

Alberto Rodriguez, Cari Med’s sales and marketing manager, told participants at an Oct. 27 conference on anesthesiology that U.S. authorities “increasingly ask for more things. Licenses granted by the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Treasury to sell products to Cuba are extremely restricted and exhaustive. They ask us for completely absurd details.”

He added: “Among the recent problems we have faced due to the tightening of the U.S. blockade is the semi-collapse of the non-invasive surgery program at the Cardiovascular Center at the William Soler Children’s Hospital. We want people to know that pressure from the blockade has been so hard we’ve had to stop negotiations with this hospital.”

Outraged by the interference, Cari Med reportedly filed a letter of complaint with the U.S. Interests Section in Havana.

“Incredibly, [the head of the U.S. mission in Havana] said that orders come from Washington and that he wasn’t even asked his opinion on the matter,” said Rodriguez.

Yet efforts by Cubanews to locate Cari Med Trading Inc. were unsuccessful. No reference to that company can be found anywhere on the Internet.

Rodriguez told Juventud Rebelde his company cooperates with Medicuba and Insume in Cuba to achieve three main goals: provide Cuban doctors with state-of-the-art technology, provide products at accessible prices, and break the U.S. embargo on medical equipment and devices.

CUBAN DOCTORS OPEN EYE CLINIC IN PERU

A Cuban medical brigade is setting up an ophthalmology center to perform free eye surgeries in Cuzco, Peru.

Olga López said the eye center is part of Operation Miracle (a program run by Cuba and Venezuela aimed at helping low-income people recover their vision) and is taking place in Cuzco, 1,165 kms south of Lima.

The brigade, named after the late Vilma Espín, founding leader of the Cuban Women’s Federation, replaced a medical team that came from Cuba after the earthquake that devastated part of southern Peru in August 2007.

López said the new medical team has been working in city of Pisco for six months now, and has given 80,000 consultations and made 12,000 doctor’s visits to patients in other localities during this period.

The brigade has performed 445 operations and thousands of medical checkups, besides carrying out 38 health campaigns.

Cuban doctors are developing, as a pilot project, the family doctor program in five health posts located in remote and poor areas, by virtue of a cooperation agreement with the Peruvian Ministry of Health, said López.
CANF’s Francisco ‘Pepe’ Hernández talks to CubaNews

BY LARRY LUXNER

R

egardless of who wins the White House on Nov. 4, Francisco “Pepe” Hernández insists that Washington’s policy toward Cuba must change.

Since 1991, Hernández has been president of the Cuban American National Foundation, a Miami-based exile group that has between 20,000 and 25,000 members and operates on a $1.5 million annual budget.

In an interview Oct. 6 with CubaNews, the retired economist and businessman said it’s time to “do away with all these absurd restrictions of the Bush administration” concerning Cuban-American travel and remittances.

“The most important thing we Cubans in exile can do is become agents of change inside Cuba,” he said. “Especially after the devastation of two hurricanes has put the Castro government in a situation where they cannot respond to the needs of the people, someone else must fill that vacuum, and nobody besides the Cuban exile community can do it.

“Therefore, it’s extremely important that we convince the U.S. government this is the time to help [dissident] movements on the island become self-sufficient and gain some independence from the government.”

It’s obvious from our interview that Hernández believes Sen. Barack Obama — keynote speaker at the group’s annual May 20 dinner — will be that agent of change.

“The CANF has never endorsed any candidate, but we invite all candidates and personalities who might have some influence on U.S. policy towards Cuba. This is why we brought Obama here in May,” he said.

“I think Obama seems to have a very clear purpose. He came to me as an honest man who wanted to help. Most of all, he wanted to understand the issues.”

CANF LEADER HARDLY ‘SOFT ON COMMUNISM’

Hernández, 72, is originally from the Havana suburb of Marianao.

“I was a student at the University of Havana, and my father was in the military,” he told us. “About three months after Fidel took power, my father was called to be a witness in a trial of a colleague. He refused to testify against his friend, and he ended up being sentenced to 30 years in prison after a trial that lasted only two and a half hours.

“That same night, after being sentenced, he was taken out of his cell and executed, so it’s not easy,” he said.

Hernández fled Cuba for Miami in 1960 but returned the following year as part of the failed Bay of Pigs mission. He was captured and spent two years in prison.

During his imprisonment, Fidel came to the cell where he and 40 others were being held and lectured the inmates about Marxism. The Kennedy administration eventually paid $100,000 for his release.

Given those die-hard anti-Castro credentials, it seems ludicrous for anyone to label the CANF chief “soft on communism.”

Yet that’s exactly what’s happening in South Florida today, he said.

“There are political interests here who refuse to accept the fact they do not represent all of the community,” he said. “They want to maintain control over our image in Washington. I’m talking about the Diaz-Balart brothers. Unfortunately, they say anybody who digresses just a little bit from their position is soft on Castro — and might even be an agent of Castro. It’s a power play they’ve been playing for some time. I personally have been working not only for Joe Garcia and Raúl Martinez — not as president of the foundation but as an individual in this community who feels this has to change.”

Martinez, the former mayor of Hialeah, is running for U.S. Congress in Florida’s 21st congressional district, while Garcia, the CANF’s former executive vice-president, is challenging Lincoln’s younger brother, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, in the 25th.

Hernández, who lives in Kendall, will vote for Martinez, though as of press time, he had not decided who he’d support for president.

“I’ve been a Republican all my life, and I know Sen. McCain and have met with him over a dozen times, so it’s not easy,” he said.

PEPE: LOOK FORWARD, FELLOW CUBANS

Like Obama, the two Democratic challengers to the Diaz-Balart brothers say they do not support ending the U.S. trade embargo against Cuba. Rather, they want to roll back all restrictions on exile travel to the island, and lift the cap on remittances.

“The change in policy we are advocating is

precisely to have more communications with the Cuban people, and until the hands of Cuban-Americans in the United States in order to help civil society in Cuba,” he said.

To that end, the CANF raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for emergency relief in the wake of hurricanes Gustav and Ike this summer, thanks to a special Treasury Depart-

Since 1991, Francisco “Pepe” Hernández has been president of the Cuban American National Foundation.
Piñón, a veteran oilman who has held executive positions with Shell, Amoco and BP during his 30-year career, noted that offshore reserves of 20 billion barrels would catapault Cuba — which now produces only 60,000 barrels a day, all from onshore wells — into one of the world’s top 20 oil-exporting nations. Yet a study by the U.S. Geological Survey says Cuba’s offshore filed contains 5 billion barrels of oil and 283 billion cubic meters of natural gas. Those numbers are the mean of recent [offshore] finds in Brazil are only estimated at 15-18 billion barrels, and we know those fields are huge.”

Only one test well has been drilled in Cuban waters, that by a consortium led by Spain’s Repsol-YPF SA and Norway’s Norsk Hydro. Tenreyro said Repsol plans to drill another well in mid-2009 and that if all goes as hoped, Cuban oil could be flowing into the market by 2013.

Another Cuba oil expert, Jonathan Benjamín-Alvarado of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, told Reuters of Cuba’s 20-billion-barrel estimate: “I trust they are legitimate. Whatever those fields are huge.”

One was very surprised, because even the recent [offshore] finds in Brazil are only estimated at 15-18 billion barrels, and we know those fields are huge.”

Oil industry people are now taking Cupet less seriously, when they make unprofessional and unscientific statements like that.”

— JORGE PIÑÓN, ENERGY EXPERT AT UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI’S CENTER FOR HEMISPHERIC POLICY

CubaNews

Almost two million Cubans affected by hurricanes Gustav and Ike will receive vital assistance from the United Nations World Food Programme over the next six months.

Under the newly-approved emergency operation, WFP will provide $5.7 million in food rations, including rice, beans, vegetable oil, canned fish and CSB, a blended food compound of maize and soy fortified with vitamins and minerals.

The agency says its efforts are in support of the Cuban government as it responds to communities needing food assistance in areas that bore the brunt of hurricane damage in late August and early September.

“WFP is playing an important role helping people who suffered great losses in the storms,” said Sonsoles Ruedas, WFP representative in Cuba, in a prepared statement.

In addition to the rations, said Ruedas, WFP will supply temporary food storage warehouses and liquid gas stoves to people who lost cooking facilities in the storms.

“The methodology that Cupet used for its estimate is not an industry-acceptable method,” said Piñón. “In addition, there’s no independent, third-party source. Whatever data they have on which to base that 20 billion barrel estimate is not an industry-acceptable methodology,” said Piñón. “In addition, there’s no independent, third-party source. Whatever data they have on which to base that 20 billion barrel estimate is not an industry-acceptable method.”

Piñón said he understands the Petrobras delay before signing Block 37. After an immediate exploration phase lasting 18 to 24 months, more funds from Petrobras and Cupet could be forthcoming, depending on how much oil is found.

Under the deal — signed in Havana by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Raúl Castro — Petrobras gets seven years to explore, then another 25 years to produce oil and gas from the 1,600-sq-km concession.

“I don’t understand why it took so long to sign this agreement,” Lula told reporters. “There’s a geological study process and I hope the results will be positive and we will search at whatever depth.”

Piñón said he understands the Petrobras deal was delayed at the behest of lawyers worried that it would violate the terms of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. Petrobras, based in Rio de Janeiro, owns a refinery in Houston, among other U.S. holdings.

“Block 37 is a very long, skinny block going from Varadero to Havana,” Piñón told CubaNews. “It’s not close to the U.S. demarcation line, so it’s politically safe. And it’s not going to be a geologically difficult area in which to drill exploratory wells.”

Veteran Cuba-watcher Phil Peters of the Lexington Institute in Arlington, Va., said the fact Repsol will return to Cuba next year for more exploratory drilling is a promising sign, not to mention the latest Petrobras contract.

CASH-FLOW PROBLEM SCARES INVESTORS

Yet success in tapping Cuba’s oil potential depends on a variety of factors outside the country’s control.

“A lot of those blocks are leased, but that doesn’t mean any of those companies is ready or able to bring in a rig and start drilling,” said Peters. “In addition, deepwater rigs are scarce right now, so that’s another factor slowing things down.”

Furthermore, Cuba could have difficulty attracting investment in its oil sector, given its shaky cash-flow situation.

In early October, Canada’s Sherritt International Corp., which produces most of Cuba’s 60,000 barrels a day from onshore wells in a joint venture with Cupet, announced it was owed $392.8 million by the Cuban government. According to the company’s third-quarter report, that debt “represents an exposed credit risk” and could jeopardize Sherritt’s drilling plans for 2009.

Back in July, the Toronto-based mining and energy conglomerate said it would abandon plans to drill in Cuba’s Gulf of Mexico EEZ, and would restructure its oil business toward land-based operations.

In addition to oil, Sherritt — the largest foreign investor in Cuba — also operates the Pedro Soto Alba nickel refinery in Moa, in a 50-50 venture with state-owned Cubaniquel (see page 10 of this issue). That in large part explains why Sherritt is now owed money by the Castro regime.

“What’s happening now is that the price of nickel has dropped 60% in the last 12 months,” Piñón told us. “So Cuba doesn’t have enough cash in nickel to offset the purchase of Sherritt equity, and that’s where the $393 million comes from.”

He added: “For the first time, Sherritt says this is a credit risk. They also say, for the first time, that in the 4th quarter they have the option of exporting the oil they drill if Cuba doesn’t get the money to pay Sherritt.”

Sherritt isn’t the only Canadian company Cuba is indebted to. By year’s end, Cupet will owe $118.9 million to Montreal-based Pebercan, having only paid $2 million so far.

“Cuba doesn’t have any cash,” said Piñón. “They bought huge amounts of grain and foodstuffs this year, thinking nickel prices would keep on increasing. But nickel dropped and food prices went up. Cuba’s problem today is cash flow, pure and simple.”

This article contains information from Inter Press Service, Reuters and other news sources.
Ike slashes nickel output as prices take a nosedive

BY OUR HAVANA CORRESPONDENT

The price bonanza enjoyed by Cuba's nickel industry in the past two years seems to be coming to an end, as the world economic slowdown and financial panic sends a chill throughout the global commodities markets.

Today's nickel sells only for one-fourth of the price recorded in the spring and summer of 2007, when it peaked above $50,000 per ton amid fears of a permanent shortage, and strong world demand.

Prices are currently less than a half of the early 2008 levels, and the outlook for the foreseeable future appears gloomy. The prospect of a deep global economic crisis has led to sharp drop in demand. Fears of pandemic inflation are also eased by softer commodity prices, and central banks certainly shouldn’t be too concerned by the current trend.

For Cuba, however, the drop in nickel prices is unwelcome, since nickel is by far the island's leading source of hard currency. The export value for all Cuban nickel in 2006 reached $1.35 billion and more than doubled to $2.76 billion in 2007, according to the prevalent world market price — eclipsing tourism and dwarfing sugar exports, which came to only $100 million for 2007.

But this year, nickel earnings will be sharply lower, not just because of the drop in prices but also as a result of a slowdown in the wake of Hurricane Ike.

The industry is still operating at below capacity nearly two months after taking a direct hit from Ike, according to a Reuters report Oct. 22 that quotes local media in eastern Holguín province.

"Last week the three nickel plants in the region worked at 81% of their plan," said Holguín's state-run Radio Angula. Local TV, meanwhile, reported that the two most important plants in Moa were operating "practically at capacity" while a third plant in Nicaro was still under repair.

WORLD NICKEL SPOT PRICES In dollars per ton

RAW SUGAR WORLD PRICES IN 2008 (#11) In cents per pound
Leptospirosis — FROM PAGE 7

embarked on a massive vaccination of 200,000 people living in high-risk areas.

In the mid to late 1990s, Havana’s Carlos J. Finlay Institute developed a new vaccine (vax-Spiral) with an immunization effectiveness of 78% that was successfully tested in humans and has been in use ever since. Recently, the government of Argentina bought over 50,000 doses of vax-Spiral to curtail an outbreak in that country’s northern provinces.

According to official reports, in 2007 almost one million people in Holguín province (nearly everyone) received a homeopathic product developed by the Finlay Institute to prevent both leptospirosis and hepatitis A.

In Cuba, the highest prevalence of leptospirosis consistently occurs in the eastern provinces of Holguín and Las Tunas, which in 2007 reported 256 and 383 cases respectively (169 and 27 cases in 2006).

The western province of Pinar del Río also shows a high prevalence of the disease, with 90 cases reported in 2007.

Although Cuban health authorities don’t offer any explanation for this, it happens these provinces have a higher ratio of rural settlements due to their prominence in sugarcane, rice and tobacco production.

The prevention effort seems to be bearing fruit, as only 172 cases were reported nationwide through early October.

‘Peak Oil’ praises Cuba as model to follow

A low-budget documentary produced by an Ohio-based nonprofit group aims to teach Americans how to make do with scarce petroleum supplies.

“The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil,” was put together by the Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions, a nonprofit group that promotes low-energy alternatives to the current U.S. fossil fuel-based, industrialized way of living.

Although oil prices have receded dramatically since the $147-a-barrel record reached earlier this summer, market experts increasingly talk about “peak oil” — the point when maximum rate of global petroleum extraction is reached, after which the rate of production begins to decline.

The term is used by environmentalists as a wake-up call for industrialized countries to search for alternative sources of energy before oil runs out.

During the Cold War, Cuba enjoyed supplies of cheap oil from Russia. When Moscow abandoned communism in the 1990s and discontinued fuel shipments to Cuba, the island’s economy went into a tailspin.

With significant reductions in oil supplies, and food imports cut by 80%, Cuba was compelled to find an alternative means to fuel its economy and provide for its people.

Filmmaker Faith Morgan made two trips to Cuba in 2003 to analyze the island’s transition to a low-energy society, and went back the year after to start shooting.

The result: a 53-minute film, co-written and co-produced by Eugene Murphy, executive director of Community Solutions. With subtitles available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Norwegian and Mandarin, the documentary details Cuba’s emergency transition to local organic agriculture, renewable energy and large-scale mass transit — ranging from bicycles to camellas.

“The film has since been released and shown in over 40 film festivals, and gotten eight awards, one of which was at DC Independent Film Festival last year,” she said in an email to CubaNews. “It has reached 35 countries and is in both DVD and VHS formats.”

Among those appearing in this documentary are Mario Coyula, a Cuban architecture professor and community development specialist; Bruno Enríquez, co-founder and director of Cuba Solar, a state entity which by 2006 had equipped 2,354 primary schools with solar photovoltaic panels, and Roberto Pérez, an expert with Cuba’s Antonia Niñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity.

Also featured is Miguel Salcines, administrator of a small farm in the Havana suburb of Alamar, one of the most successful organopónicos in Cuba.

Details: Arthur Morgan Institute for Community Solutions, PO Box 243, Yellow Springs, OH 45387-0243. Tel: (937) 767-2161. URL: www.powerofcommunity.org/cm/index.php.

— VITO ECHEVARRÍA
REGIME DELAYS DEADLINE FOR SALARY REFORM

Implementation of reforms launched by Raúl Castro to energize Cuba’s sluggish economy is going more slowly than hoped, Com­munist Party daily Granma admitted Oct. 28.

The newspaper said the period has been extended for companies to adopt the “pay for performance” system — a dramatic departure from the rigid egalitarianism imposed by Raúl’s brother, Fidel.

The new date postpones by another four and a half months the period set for companies to apply this payment system that Raúl Castro has been pushing since 2007.

Deputy Labor Minister Carlos Mateu told Granma that all the companies have their new compensation regime approved for January 2009, and that in February there’ll be a national inspection of the “redesigned systems.”

Performance-linked pay is one of the characteristic features of the perfeccionamiento empresarial model that Raúl — then serving as defense minister — established 20 years ago in entities managed by the armed forces.

Currently around 800 companies are managed with this business model, 32% of the total. But the system is currently not performing at its best, Granma said.

Mateu said that “only very discreet results have been obtained as yet” in a recent review of 679 companies using the system.

CHINA SENDS HUGE VEHICLE SHIPMENT

Cuba has received a new lot of 2,500 trucks, vans and buses from China — marking the largest single shipment of any type to arrive in Havana in 20 years.

The energy-efficient vehicles will replace gas-guzzling trucks and buses in the agricultural, domestic trade, sugar and food industries, according to Prensa Latina.

This shipment is an addition to the 1,000 Chinese passenger buses already providing inter-provincial service.

BRAZIL TO AID CUBA WITH MINING DATABASE

The Brazilian Geological Service has agreed to help Cuba, the world’s No. 3 nickel producer, compile data to develop the island’s mining industry, Bloomberg News reported Oct. 16.

Work on a databank will start in January, said Ricardo Jonusan, spokesman for the Geological Service in Brasilia. He said the project will organize existing data and involve new research. The signing of the accord in Havana follows increased investments in Cuban nickel output.

“Cuba is modernizing,” Jonusan said. “The databank aims to make data available to society at large and facilitate investor interest.”

SPAIN AGREES TO RESTRUCTURE CUBAN DEBT

Spain has accepted Cuba’s request to restructure its commercial debt, estimated at $1.5 billion, during Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque’s recent visit to Madrid.

It was also announced Spain would give Cuba 24.5 million euro in aid for the recon­struction of zones ravaged by hurricanes Ike and Gustav in September.

Spanish daily online La Razón said Roque had asked in talks with Spain’s president, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, to refinance part of Cuba’s bilateral debt as well as for credit financing to face the hurricane devastation.

Roque also extended an invitation from President Raúl Castro to Zapatero to visit Cuba sometime soon.

If the trip takes place, Zapatero would be the first Spanish head of government to visit the island since 1999, when conservative President José María Aznar was there for an Ibero-American summit.

The only official visit was by socialist head of government Felipe González in 1986. Since it first came to power in 2004, Zapatero’s socialist government has promoted a policy of constructive engagement towards Cuba.

Spanish Foreign Minister Jorge Moratinos announced Oct. 14 that in addition to the aid package, a Cuban delegation would visit Spain the following week to meet with officials of the Ministry of the Economy and finalize an agreement on the debt issue.

Moratinos also said Spain will extend a new line of credit worth 50-100 million euros to cover Cuba’s most pressing needs.

CUBA 24.5 MILLION EURO IN AID FOR RECONSTRUCTION

Chinese passenger buses already providing gas-guzzling trucks and buses in the agricultural, domestic trade, sugar and food industries, according to Prensa Latina.

This shipment is an addition to the 1,000 Chinese passenger buses already providing inter-provincial service.

Spain’s Freixenet, a bottler of sparkling wines, has announced the opening of a subsidiary in Havana, after more than 20 years doing business with Cuba.

Luis Ortega Mateo, director of Freixenet for Central America and the Caribbean, told Prensa Latina his company is the largest manufac­turer of sparkling wines of cava origin in the world. It has subsidiaries in 180 countries, with wineries in the United States, France, Australia, Mexico and Argentina.

Neither Freixenet’s New York sales agent nor Freixenet USA headquarters in Sonoma, Calif., offered CubaNews any details about the new Havana office when reached by phone.

SHRIMP PROCESSOR PREDICTS RISING EXPORTS

Three years after cultivating a new and more efficient shrimp species, Camaroneras del Litoral Sur (Calisur) in Granma province is increasing production bound for domestic and export markets.

Company vice-director Pedro Luis Lavi, told Cuban media that the 2005 introduction of the Litopenaeus vannabei shrimp species, known for rapid growing capacity and strong resistance, had helped his entity increase output to 1.5 tons per hectare.

The enterprise expects to collect 200 tons of shrimp monthly until the end of the year, a figure that, if reached, will allow meeting the 1,025-ton production plan, worth $8.2 million.

The vice-director said 2009 export earnings will surpass $8 million, with 80% of production devoted to the European export market.

Locally cultivated frozen shrimp is sold at Cuban markets in pesos; the commodity is also sold in tourist facilities for hard currency.

The islandwide network of fish and seafood commercial centers also offers other farmed species like tilapia, carp, snapper and grouper.

Located in the southern Río Cauto munici­pality and responsible for 50% of Cuba’s culti­vated shrimp exports, Calisur employs 802 workers and oversees 100 ponds covering roughly 1,000 hectares, where they raise lar­vae brought from spawning centers in Cienfuegos province and nearby Manzanillo.

CUBANA TO AID CUBA WITH MINING DATABASE

Work on a databank will start in January, said Ricardo Jonusan, spokesman for the Geological Service in Brasilia. He said the project for the Venezuela-Cuba joint venture, explained that as part of setting up the large capacity tank, the external portion that surrounds the unit has already been constructed.

In December, metal plates and other supplies and accessories for the complete renovation of the storage facilities should arrive. The construction of four smaller tanks will allow the daily transport of nearly 5,000 cubic meters of crude from other areas. These investments are essential because the plant needs increased storage capacity.

COMCAST'S NEW 'BARGAIN' PHONE RATES

Comcast/South Florida is now offering a reduced rate for calls to Cuba. For the first time, select Comcast customers can dial land-line phones in Cuba for 79 cents a minute.

“We know that for many of our Comcast Digital Voice customers, the high cost of communicating with relatives and friends in Cuba is a constant challenge,” said Comcast’s regional senior vice-president, Filemon López.

“This is a competitively priced per-minute to all of our Comcast Digital Voice customers.”

Unfortunately, that low rate is only offered to those who sign up for $29.95-a-month “Digital Voice” or $39.95-a-month “Comcast Unlimited” — on top of cable or high-speed Internet service.

Sounds like 79 cents a minute may not be much of a bargain after all.

U.S. parcles to Cuba up 327%

The number of packages sent by U.S. mail from South Florida to Cuba is at its greatest volume since President Bush prohibited the shipment of non-essential items to the island in 2004, reports El Nuevo Herald.

A U.S. Postal Service spokeswoman said the post office shipped 33,926 Cuba-bound packages from South Florida between December 2006 and June 2007.

That number increased to 110,859 from December 2007 to June 2008, representing an additional $2 million in USPS revenues.

The post office charges $29 to ship up to 4 lbs of goods. With the exception of food items, each person can send one package per month to immediate family members. A package’s value cannot exceed $400.
Cuban-American playwright Eduardo Machado came to the United States in 1961 as one of thousands of “Pedro Pan” children expelled out of Cuba to avoid the prospect of being sent to Russia for communist indoctrination.

While some of these kids, being torn away from their parents, arrived in America emotionally distressed, Machado’s painful migration centered around his stomach — a stomach which until that moment was accustomed to a culinary fiesta of Cuban dishes ranging from sour orange-flavored Cuban fried chicken with the black-bean-and-white-rice dish known as moros y cristianos to shrimp and spicy tomato sauce, and Basque-influenced meals like roast lamb with rosemary.

From Machado’s brief but palate-numbing stay in Hialeah, Fla., in 1961 — where he was forced to live on cold Velveeta cheese sandwiches and the canned mystery meat known as Spam — to southern California suburbs where the closest thing to strong Cuban coffee was Italian espresso, he found himself constantly searching for an answer to the following question: How do you make a meal taste like a place?

Machado’s newly released autobiography, “Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile’s Hunger for Home,” co-authored by Michael Domitrovich, dedicates its 357 pages to coming up with an answer to that question.

Machado contacted CubaNews via email to give us insight on what motivated him to write his account of exile in the United States.

“Well, I think I see life through food,” he explained. “When we went to Los Angeles and had no contact with anyone or anything Cuban for a while, I connected my longing for Cuba with my longing for Cuban food. So it seemed natural. All my plays about Cuba have a lot of eating in them. My plays about Americans have a lot of drinking in them. Also, Michael and I wanted people to be able to feel my life equally when they read the book and when they tried the food.”

**MIAMI CUISINE**

In later visits to South Florida — including a road trip that he and his reunited family took from California to Miami — Machado found that despite the growing Cuban community in Miami-Dade County, there’s a real difference between Cuban cuisine in Miami and back home in Cojimar.

The Cuban eatery that dotted the Miami landscape back then weren’t the fancy restaurants that later popped up in glossy magazines like Ocean Drive, but mom-and-pop greasy spoons with copper-tubed, polished chrome Cuban coffee machines, Cuban sandwich presses and glass cases with heating lamps that kept warm croquetas and empanadas — eateries reminiscent of the Mambi chain in East Harlem, Washington Heights and other Latin enclaves in New York.

Machado also recounts his food-rich childhood as a reflection of his family’s upper-class standing in Cojimar before the revolution.

“The Serrano ham and cheese came more from my grandmother Manuela — my mother’s mother — her father was a Basque immigrant in Cuba,” he notes. “He influenced a lot of the food we ate at my mother’s parents’ house, and we know that the Catalans and Basques have incredible food.

Machado has spent his time putting together various theater productions, including “In the Eye of the Hurricane” — a play about the loss of his grandparent’s bus company to Fidel’s revolutionaries. That, along with coaching famed Italian-American actor Al Pacino on perfecting his Marielito Cuban persona for the 1983 gangster film “Scarface,” teaching at New York’s Columbia University, and dabbing in independent filmmaking.

**GETTING CUBAN FOOD JUST RIGHT**

Machado’s film background gave him a chance to visit Havana in 1999 as part of that city’s annual film festival. Not even the Elián González fiasco, raging in both Miami and Havana at the time, distracted him.

“I went back to Cuba to find myself, to take a positive step in finding who I was,” he said.

From that and later trips, Machado couldn’t help but compare pre-Castro Cuban cuisine from what became of it afterwards, such as what now passes for paella there.

“Cuban food in Cuba has gone through decades of not having the right ingredients to prepare it all the time,” he says. “I think it has become more basic and has lost some of the French influence. It isn’t less subtle, but it is more rural.”

Along with certain Havana paladares in neighborhoods like Vedado, Machado was impressed with the well-regarded restaurant El Aljibe, whose chicken-based cuisine was what he called “amplified, but still teetering on the edge of restraint.”

These days, Machado has stopped trying to find Cuban dishes reminiscent of his childhood. “No, you cannot make another place taste like a place,” he said. “Look at all the cigar companies trying to get Dominican cigars to taste like Cuban ones. No matter how good they are, they never really taste like the Cuban ones. The same with French champagne. I think you just learn how to love the different taste and you have to stop comparing. You accept the present.”

**BONE UP ON CUBA’S FOREIGN INVESTMENT LAWS**

**Cuba: The Regulation of Foreign Investment** provides 928 pages of original legislative texts and summaries in English and Spanish with side-by-side presentation. The book (price: £250 in the United Kingdom, $495 in the U.S. and Canada, 325 euro in Europe and CUC 457 in Cuba) is published by Berger Young & Associates Ltd. in collaboration with the Cuban law firm of Consultores y Abogados Internacionales (Conabi), on the basis of relevant Cuban legislation that was in effect as of June 30, 2008.

Its promoters call the book “a unique and essential reference tool for foreign investors and businesses in Cuba, their legal and investment advisors, government and non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, students and others with an interest in Cuban law.”

This comprehensive reference book can also be purchased online at www.amazon.co.uk and in selected bookstores. It is also available through CubaNews by special arrangement. If you’d like to buy a copy, please email us at larry@cubanews.com.

Details: Sebastián Berger, Director, Ceiba Investments Ltd., Edificio Barcelona, Ofic. #401, Miramar Trade Center, 5ta Ave. e/76 y 78, Habana. Tel: +53 7 204-7934. Fax: +53 7 204-7935. Email: sbeger@ceibainvestment.com. URL: www.bergeryoung.com.
Harlistas keep their prized machines humming along

BY TRACEY EATON

Sergio Morales says his wife, Miriam, isn’t the jealous type. And that’s a good thing because there’s another “woman” in his life: His beloved 1946 Harley-Davidson. He has kept the battered red motorcycle running for more than three decades with little more than sweat, ingenuity and homemade spare parts.

“I take pride in keeping her alive,” he said.

Morales, 58, is the dean of Cuba’s intrepid motorcycle mechanics. And he and other Harley riders go to great lengths to maintain their vintage machines despite the decades-long U.S. ban on trade with the socialist regime.

The Harley devotees fabricate their own parts or scavenge pieces from other motorcycles, cars, tractors, lawn mowers and even anti-tank guns.

“We do whatever it takes to keep our Harleys on the road,” said Morales, cracking open a can of Bucanero beer.

Morales, a wiry man with salt-and-pepper hair and a deep voice, speaks of Harleys with the reverence usually reserved for such endangered creatures as tigers and black rhinos. These Cuban hogs, he explains, have also teetered on the brink of extinction.

Before Fidel Castro took power in 1959, as many as 6,000 Harley-Davidson motorcycles rumbled across the island, he said. But now, as Cuba’s Revolution approaches its 50th anniversary, that number has dwindled to only about 100.

The V-twin motorcycles could have been wiped out entirely, he said, if not for the efforts of the island’s mechanics.

“Harleys were in danger of disappearing,” Morales said. “We are the generation that took the few remaining Harleys and put them to work. And they have paid us back for our sacrifices.”

STAYING OUT OF POLITICS

As he and other aficionados see it, Harleys in Cuba aren’t just hunks of metal. Cubans rely on them for their survival. They use them to get to work, pick up groceries and take their children to school. They ride them to weddings, they take them camping.

“In the world of Harleys outside Cuba, many people ride Harleys to rallies, parties or motorcycle exhibits,” Morales said. But here “they are part of the family.”

Morales and other Harley riders in Cuba call themselves harlistas. Their ranks include Ernesto Guevara, son of the late revolutionary known as Che. The harlistas try to stay out of politics, but sometimes that’s impossible.

In 2005, the harlistas received an official notice telling them they couldn’t take part in Havana’s annual carnival parade because their motorcycles “represented an American symbol,” French news service AFP reported.

The harlistas say they aren’t counterrevolutionaries. They aren’t trying to make a statement. Nor are they bandits or criminals. They just like to ride their hogs. And foreigners who have met them say they’re impressed.

“I have been around motorcycles and motorcyclists for over 40 years and the Cuban motorcyclists are authentic bikers,” said Richard Snowden, 61, who has led motorcycle tours in Cuba.

On weekends in Havana, the harlistas often gather near the 78-year-old Hotel Nacional, which has a sweeping view of the Atlantic Ocean. Or they cruise along the Malecón seawall as Cubans flash thumbs-up signs.

“Some outsiders might find it strange that Harley-Davidson, once dubbed ‘America’s Greatest Freedom Machine,’ has such a loyal following in socialist Cuba. But Morales said it’s only natural.

Harley-Davidson has a long tradition on the island. The best-known dealership was Casa Breto in Centro Habana, according to Philippe Diederich, author of “Communism and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.”

Cuban police and soldiers rode Harleys before the revolution. So did telephone and electric company workers. The Breto dealership closed in the early 1960s, cutting off the supply of motorcycles and parts, Diederich wrote. And Harleys began to fade away.

NO ONE KNOWS WHERE THE HARLEYS WENT

As one tale goes, Castro revolutionaries wanted to rid the country of Harleys, linked to both American “Yankees” and the Batista government they overthrew. So they dumped hundreds of Harleys into a big hole and buried them.

At least that’s what the legend says. Morales said no one really knows what happened.

“We weren’t there when the Harleys disappeared,” he told CubaNews. “We can’t say if they were buried, if they were burned. But we can say that many people who could have salvaged the Harleys didn’t save them because it was easier to abandon them. It was easier than trying to keep them alive.”

In the 1960s and ’70s, many Cubans started riding newer, lighter motorcycles imported from the former Soviet Union, Germany and other countries.

One popular motorcycle was the German-made MZ, short for Motorradwerk Zschopau.

Cuba is a virtual open-air museum for vintage American motorcycles. These classic Harley-Davidson bikes are parked along the street near Sergio Morales’ garage in the Havana neighborhood of Luyano.
Mechanic Sergio Morales has spent 36 years keeping Harley motorcycles running. 37 mm anti-tank guns. That doesn’t mean the tires fit — they did whatever it took to make them fit. Harlistas have also had trouble finding pistons, rings, brakes, sprockets, rims, leather seats and everything else. But they have kept their machines going, even if it means resorting to Czech brake pads or clutches from lawn mowers.

“That’s how we’ve survived, inventing, creating, looking for alternatives so that the Harleys don’t stop running,” Morales said.

The harlistas say the struggle to maintain their motorcycles has drawn them together.

“One day, a cyclist was stuck with a broken chain on the way to Santa Clara in central Cuba. “No one had a chain and no one had a link,” said Morales. “So we walked over to a fence, cut a piece of barbed wire, made a link and we made it to Santa Clara.”

Morales sipped his beer and lit a cigarette. Riders who have shiny, modern motorcycles that never break down might not understand.

“When we’re out on the highway, we enjoy the mechanical part, the challenge of keeping our motorcycles going,” Morales said. “Motorcycles give us a kind of friendship we might not find anywhere else. I don’t think writers, philosophers, laborers or lawyers have the tight friendship we have. The friendship between us is clean. It’s genuine.’

And no, his wife, Miriam, doesn’t stand in the way. She readily climbs aboard his ’46 Harley, a three-wheeled Servi-Car.

“She doesn’t get jealous because my children were practically born on a Harley,” Morales said. “I’ve been with Harley for 36 years and I won’t abandon it ever.”

Tracey Eaton, a former Cuba correspondent for the Dallas Morning News, was based in Havana from 2000 to 2005 and now teaches journalism in St. Augustine, Fla. To visit his blog, go to http://alongthemalecon.blogspot.com/.

INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS

CUBA OPENS NEW EMBASSY IN SAUDI ARABIA

Cuba foresees stronger relations with Saudi Arabia — the world’s top oil exporter — following the recent opening of its embassy in Riyadh, said Laureano Rodriguez Castro, Cuba’s new ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

“The establishment of the mission in Riyadh will step up cooperation between the two countries. This new Cuban mission is our 3rd station in the Gulf after Kuwait and Qatar,” said Rodriguez in an Oct. 29 press briefing carried by the Middle East News Agency.

Rodriguez, who served as Cuba’s top diplomat in Kuwait from 2004 to 2007, noted that “even before the mission was established, Cuba supported the kingdom on all international issues. We severed diplomatic relations with Israel in support of the Palestinians.”

Thanking King Abdullah and senior government officials for helping establish Cuba’s embassy in Riyadh, Rodriguez said he hoped the gesture would be reciprocated with a mission in Cuba. The Saudi mission in Mexico currently looks after Cuban interests.

Noting that “Cuba is ideal for a Saudi family holiday,” the ambassador said the Cuban Embassy issues visas within 24 hours to Saudis and expatriates residing in the kingdom.

GRENADA TO ERECT SHRINE TO DEAD CUBANS

A monument will be built in St. George’s, Grenada, in memory of 24 Cuban construction workers who were killed during the 1983 U.S. invasion of that tiny Caribbean island.

Peter David, Grenada’s minister of foreign affairs, said his government is in the process of finding a suitable location for the memorial.

“We cannot forget the Cubans who died in the invasion,” David said. “They were making a contribution towards the development of this country and it’s time we recognize their contribution with an appropriate monument.”

At the time of the U.S. Marine invasion 25 years ago, hundreds of Cubans were in Grenada constructing a new international airport as well as other projects.

ALGERIA, EQUATORIAL GUINEA OFFER RELIEF

Two oil-rich African countries, Algeria and Equatorial Guinea, have donated $2 million each to Cuba in the wake of this summer’s hurricane devastation.

Emilio Caballero Rodriguez, Cuba’s ambassador in Algiers, thanked the Algerian government for its assistance at an Oct. 29 press conference, during which he also announced that Cuba would build seven ophthalmology hospitals throughout the vast North African nation.

Meanwhile, a statement from the government of tiny Equatorial Guinea called its gift “an initiative of solidarity with Cuba, which has suffered enormous material damage.”

The declaration notes that “our offer is based on a sincere and fruitful friendship with Cuba, which has supported Equatorial Guinea at different moments in its history, particularly in healthcare and the training of doctors.”
CALENDAR OF EVENTS

If your organization is sponsoring an upcoming event, please let our readers know! Fax details to CubaNews at (301) 949-0065 or send e-mail to larry@cubanews.com.

Nov. 3-8: 26th Havana International Fair (FIHAV), Pabexpo Convention Center, Havana. Annual exhibition features companies from many countries involved in food, commodities, telecom, construction, machinery, equipment and vehicle sales. Details: Iván Hernández, Commercial Director, or Caridad Sago Rivera, Commercial Manager, Havanatur. Tel: +53 7 204-2254. Fax: +53 7 204-1636. Email: ivanhdez@havanatur.cu or sago@havanatur.cu.

Nov. 6: Emilia Bernal Foundation and National Association of Cuban-American Educators presents the Emilia Bernal Literary Prize to Zóe Valdés. Presentation by Carlos Alberto Montaner. Details: Casa Bacardi, Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies, 1531 Brescia Ave., Coral Gables, FL 33124. Tel: (305) 284-2822. URL: www.miami.edu/iccas.

Nov. 11: “Child Health in Cuba,” London. “This seminar will examine the Cuban system of child healthcare and explain how both developing and developed countries can learn from it.” Keynote speaker: Imti Choonara, University of Nottingham. No charge. Details: Stephen Wilkinson, International Institute for the Study of Cuba, London Metropolitan University, 166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB. Tel: +44 20 7133-2405. Email: admin@lccas.org.


Nov. 14-16: “Daughter of a Cuban Revolutionary,” Miami Dade College. “In a solo theatrical tour de force, performer Marissa Chibas tells an astonishing tale centered on three towering figures in her life: her father, Raúl Chibas, who co-wrote the manifesto for the Cuban revolution with Fidel Castro; her uncle, Eddy Chibas, who was frontrunner for the Cuban presidency in 1951 before committing suicide, and her mother, Dalia Chibas, Miss Cuba runner-up in 1959.” Tickets: $5-15. Details: Miami Dade College, 300 NE 2nd Avenue, Suite #1423, Miami, FL 33132-2204. Tel: (305) 237-3010. Fax: (305) 237-7559. Email: cajaffairs@mdc.edu.


Dec. 27-Jan. 3: 50th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution Tour. “Celebrate five decades of resilience, progress, allegiance to peace and social equality with the people of Cuba. Witness the stellar achievements of the Cuban revolution first hand.” Cost: $1,699, excluding airfare. Details: Cuba Education Tours, 708-207 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 1H7. Tel: (604) 874-9048. Fax: (604) 874-9041. Email: info@cubafriends.ca. URL: www.cubafriendship.org.

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