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Obama inherits troubled USAID program that aims for political transition in Cuba

BY ANA RADELAT

The Dec. 5 arrest of an American citizen in Havana who was distributing cellphones and laptops to dissidents has prompted the State Department to draw a cloak around U.S. democracy-building efforts in Cuba.

Information about grantees and the work they do was readily disclosed by the Clinton and Bush administrations and often posted on agency websites. But the State Department is clamming up now about grants issued by it and the U.S. Agency for International Development during President Obama's first year in office — ostensibly to protect other contractors who may be working on the communist-run island.

"At the moment we are not releasing details because we don't want to endanger people in Cuba," State Department spokeswoman Gini Staab told *CubaNews*.

U.S. involvement in democracy-building efforts in Cuba received a boost with approval of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which established a

new USAID Cuba program.

When the first grant dollars were handed out under that program in 1998, most of the money went to groups headed by Cuban exiles. But a series of scandals provoked by mismanagement and embezzlement prompted the State Department — which gives USAID foreign policy guidance — to redirect funds to groups with more experience in fighting U.S. foes.

"We're going to give the money to organizations that can best address needs on the ground," a department spokeswoman told *CubaNews* when the policy shift was implemented last year.

The unidentified U.S. contractor arrested in Havana worked for Bethesda, Md.-based Development Alternatives Inc., one of several new grantees that are new to Cuba, but nonetheless have experience operating in difficult countries.

DAI has sponsored a USAID-funded program in Venezuela and has offices in Europe, Mexico, Pakistan and the Middle East. With one of the

See *USAID*, page 12

Blogger Yoani Sánchez tries to build up resistance campaign, angering officials

BY TRACEY EATON

Yoani, rest in peace. That's how Cuban writer Orlando Luis Pardo began a recent blog post about Yoani Sánchez — the audacious Cuban blogger who rose from obscurity in 2007 to become one of *Time's* 100 Most Influential People just a year later.

Now Sánchez, 34, is trying to turn her popularity online into a civil resistance campaign on the ground. Cuban officials aren't amused and have unleashed the socialist government machinery against the blogger.

The official press had virtually ignored Sánchez for a year and a half. Now suddenly dozens of attack pieces have appeared on pro-government websites.

The Cuban government is clearly taking a more confrontational approach toward Sánchez, said Ted Henken, a sociology professor and Cuba specialist at New York's Baruch College.

"They were content more or less to let her

write, but now that she's beginning to take it to the streets they are changing how they respond to her," he told us. "The government is done with 'Let's just ignore this insignificant insect.'"

It would have been difficult to ignore Sánchez in November, when she got the attention of even President Barack Obama.

The blogger wrote that she tried for months to send a list of seven questions to Obama. Finally, her letter reached him and he replied.

On Nov. 18, Sánchez posted the president's letter on her blog, called Generacion Y. Obama applauded her "courageous" efforts. He said he looks forward to the day when "all Cubans can freely express themselves in public without fear and without reprisals."

And the president signaled that he likely would not visit the island until all Cubans "enjoy the same rights and opportunities as other citizens in the hemisphere."

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Yoani—FROM PAGE 1

Obama also reiterated his stance on U.S. policy toward Cuba. He said Cuba would have to act, presumably adopting some sort of economic or political reforms, for the U.S. to move toward normal relations.

"The United States ... hopes that the Cuban government will respond to the desire of the Cuban people to enjoy the benefits of democracy..." Obama wrote. "Only the Cuban people can bring about positive change in Cuba."

On Nov. 21, three days after Sánchez posted the letter, a mob of government supporters scuffled with her husband, Reinaldo Escobar.

Escobar, a journalist who's about three decades older than Sánchez, wanted to talk to a security agent his wife accused of roughing her up Nov. 6 (see *CubaNews*, November 2009 issue, page 7). So he posted a note on his blog challenging the agent to a "verbal duel."

But a crowd of government supporters showed up instead and surrounded Escobar. Some hit him, pulled his hair and slapped him on the head. A man with a megaphone yelled "Down with the worms!" Others chanted, "Cuba is socialist! This street belongs to Fidel! This country is Fidel's!"

Escobar was helped away, unhurt. But he and his wife fought back in the days that followed, posting on their blogs photos of security agents.

Sánchez called the agents "creatures who watch and harass us. Individuals trained in coercion who could not foresee their conversion into hunters who are hunted, faces trapped on camera, mobile phones, or in the curious retina of a citizen. Accustomed to gathering evidence for this dossier about each of us ... they are surprised that we make an inventory of their gestures, their eyes, a meticulous record of their abuses."

BLOGGERS SEE THIS AS A WARNING

Ernesto Hernández Busto, a Cuban writer who lives in Barcelona, said he believes that Sánchez is emerging as a leader of what "is looking more and more like a civil resistance campaign."

Obama's decision to answer her letter was "a very important event, a key acknowledgment that will force the government to say, 'Yoani is Obama's mercenary,' demonstrating its lack of interest in any kind of serious dialogue," Hernández said.

But Sánchez isn't a "mercenary," he added, calling such an accusation completely false.

"The charge of 'mercenary' is a fallacy spread with malicious intent and it is not at all original. They've used it against all the dissidents throughout the history of the revolution," said Hernández, creator of a blog called *Penúltimos Días*.

"What has happened in recent days is a warning. If bloggers go into the streets and link up with other groups, if the blogger movement creates synergy among other dissidents or creates a generalized state of civil unrest, especially among youth, extreme measures will be taken. I think the message is, 'The street is ours. You can talk to Obama,

but the control here is ours."

Some other analysts disagree and say that the socialist government's critics, including the foreign press, pay entirely too much attention to Sánchez and other bloggers.

"Yoani Sánchez is totally meaningless as far as the political fate of Cuba is concerned," said Nelson Valdes, a Cuba specialist at the University of New Mexico.

"The fact that Obama or someone else in the U.S. government pays attention to Yoani only indicates that U.S. foreign policy is in complete disarray. Apparently there are those who truly believe that Twitter and the Internet change political systems."

HOW INFLUENTIAL IS YOANI SÁNCHEZ?

Sánchez wrote last year that she's trying to help weave the "frayed tapestry" of civil society in Cuba. Toward that end, she has helped organize blogging contests and training sessions for bloggers. She has also started a platform for bloggers called *Voces Cubanas*, which highlights the work of more than a dozen Cuban bloggers.

But Valdes said he doesn't believe the bloggers have a following in Cuba.

Anyone who assumes "that the future of a country could depend on a handful of individuals who are not known within their own society" simply do not know "the real issues of Cuba," he said. "The truly profound issues of

the island" include "the rearrangement of political and economic institutions" and the growing clout of the Communist Party in the provinces, Valdes said.

"Yet foreign journalists and so-called NGOs in the U.S. seem to be paying attention to one person and one person alone," said Valdes. "This is mind-boggling."

Valdes said Cuba survived "waves of sabotage" and CIA attempts to topple the socialist government in the 1960s. "And now, a single woman who might be a creation of Cuban counterintelligence is supposed to be a real challenge to the regime. What it all indicates to me is that the people who report, analyze, interpret and write about Cuba do not have the slightest sense of realism," said Valdes, who directs the Cuba-L Project, a news service and database.

Sánchez published statistics last year showing her blog was getting nine million to 14 million hits per month. Each of her posts draw hundreds and sometimes thousands of comments each.

Her critics say she could not have built such an audience without financial support from the U.S. government or U.S.-financed pro-democracy organizations.

Generacion Y appears in 18 languages. Not even the United Nations, the World Bank or the IMF can boast that many versions, wrote

See *Yoani*, page 4

Reflecting on Yoani: An alternative view

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

The spectacular, meteoric rise of Yoani Sánchez and her blog *Generation Y* have brought world attention to what she has to say about the Cuban situation.

In less than two years, she's won every significant award from respectable institutions in the United States and Europe — except the Nobel Prize, at least for now.

Is it because of her literary excellence? Or the outstanding quality of her work in the field of cyberjournalism? Not at all. On the contrary, it's because her blog systematically attacks every aspect of Cuba's communist system and the authorities who run it.

Considerable international media coverage tends to portray her as a new version of Joan of Arc, an innocent sort of creature, a lone combatant, deprived of opportunities to express her views, with no resources, defenseless, harmless and engaging in single-hand combat against an oppressive power structure. She's even been compared to Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi.

This is not the case at all. Yoani is a well-fabricated media construction, a gross manipulation by the media and cyberspace, and by those who control these tools of power.

Experts in the field insists that Yoani's broadband connection to the Internet (60 times more than what's available to all of Cuba) would cost thousands of dollars. Technologically speaking, it is impossible

for an ordinary Cuban citizen to connect like that given Cuba's current infrastructure.

Another relevant fact: her blog is immediately translated into 18 languages and uploaded right away. This level of connectivity, translation and circulation is unthinkable for average people in wealthy nations or even important media services, let alone those in poor countries.

How does she do it? Only extremely powerful political and financial players could provide such generous backing; and they do it for the sake of a clearly defined agenda.

Yoani's server is located in Germany, associated with Cronos AG Regensburg and the Strato Corp. Moreover, being connected to the domain registry by way of GoDaddy — a company linked to the Pentagon's "cyberwar" campaign — is additional evidence of how well-connected she is.

In politics, one must always follow the money. Unquestionably, Yoani Sánchez is not an innocent, deprived combatant fighting for the sake of truth. She's just the very tip of the iceberg of those seeking to push the Cuban government over the edge and force it to collapse.

Many experts agree that the financial resources made available to her flow from U.S. agencies through Western European channels to avoid detection. More recently, President Obama was persuaded to answer a questionnaire submitted by Yoani.

See *Amuchastegui*, Page 4

CIVIL SOCIETY

Dissidents use digital technology to get the word out

BY VITO ECHEVARRÍA

After Iran staged its presidential elections in June, demonstrations took to the streets to protest what was widely seen as a rigged victory for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The bloody crackdown that ensued — resulting in the shooting death of Neda Agha-Soltan among others — was greeted with worldwide condemnation and captured on digital video for all the world to see.

What made this possible? More and more ordinary Iranians now have access to digital cameras and video-capable smart phones, which they used to record not only Neda's death (whose airing galvanized opposition to Ahmadinejad's regime among Iranian exiles worldwide), but other demonstrations as well.

And despite Iranian efforts at censorship, these dissidents managed to post such events on video-sharing websites.

The Cuban government is now grappling with the same problem. On Nov. 20, the husband of blogger Yoani Sánchez, Reinaldo Escobar, fell victim to a so-called "act of repudiation" which occurred when he challenged the alleged state agents who previously

roughed up his wife to a street corner debate.

A pro-government group later beat up Escobar as well — all recorded on digital video (see story on Yoani, page 1 of this issue). And like Iran's Neda shooting videos, it also found its way onto Youtube.com.

Another incident that made its way onto the web via digital video was footage of a Havana man nicknamed Panfilo (Juan Carlos González Marcos), who, in a drunken and comical rant, cried out about the lack of food in Cuba.

PANFILO BECOMES A HERO

That clip, posted on Youtube.com last April, has been viewed 700,000 times and was shown repeatedly on Spanish-language TV stations here. For that deed, Panfilo has been hailed as a hero by Miami's exile community.

The Castro regime didn't feel the same way, which explained Panfilo's subsequent arrest and sentencing to two years in prison, though he was eventually released.

In the past, Cuban exile groups have set up anti-Castro radio stations broadcasting messages of dissent (including the "La Voz del CID" network of stations in Central and South America in the 1980s and 1990s, and the still-

active U.S. government-run Radio Martí). The Cuban government became adept at jamming such broadcasts.

However, the proliferation of 21st century digital technology is something the regime has failed to get a handle on — especially considering that Cuba's political system was set up by a group of 1950s revolutionaries familiar only with old-school radio communications.

Digital recordings of anti-government rallies will continue, with wider-scale introduction of mobile technology resulting in young Cubans communicating in a way their government may not like.

All one has to do is look up the Cuban-American student group "Raices de Esperanza" (Roots of Hope), which is currently conducting a charity drive at various U.S. universities to collect used cellphones and ship them into Cuba for distribution among young impoverished locals there.

"Raices has declared it is conducting that charity to empower Cuban youth and wants to use the distribution of these cellphones (at least some of which are likely to be equipped with video capability) to develop a stronger civil society in Cuba," Raices founder Felice Gorordo told the *Miami Herald* in August.

"Cubans have already created their own slang and acronyms for texting. We believe that bolstering their connectivity is good for everyone. What they do with the phones is their prerogative. But we want young people speaking to one another. Ultimately, they should be the authors of their own futures."

ARREST OF USAID CONTRACTOR WON'T HELP

Gorordo's group may face an uphill battle carrying out its project. Earlier this month, an American subcontractor for Maryland-based Development Alternatives Inc. was detained in Havana for distributing cell phones, laptop computers and other equipment to various individuals in Cuba (see story, page 1).

Jim Boomgard, the company's CEO, told reporters the unidentified U.S. citizen working for his firm was involved in an USAID program to help "implement activities in support of the rule of law and human rights, political competition, and consensus building, and to strengthen civil society in support of just and democratic governance in Cuba."

The detention is likely to cause tensions between Washington and Havana. Obviously, the Castro regime — which technically lifted restrictions on individual ownership of cell phones, computers and related peripherals — will react with deep suspicion when a U.S. government-connected entity hands out such items to locals for any or no particular reason.

Raúl Castro is starting to realize that in letting Cubans gain access to digital technology, his regime, in effect, has given up its information monopoly — since average citizens can now generate their own media and transmit it to the world, and among themselves. □

New law lets Cuba pay U.S. suppliers directly

Expectations that a Democratic president and a Democratic-controlled Congress would ease anti-Cuba sanctions faded as 2009 drew to a close.

President Obama lifted travel and remittance restrictions for Cuban-Americans and allowed new telecom trade. But the president remained firm in his stance that Washington should do little to change relations without a positive sign from Havana.

Congress also failed to do much to improve bilateral ties.

Support for a bill that would ease all restrictions on U.S. travel to Cuba faltered because of a lack of support. In the end, only a modest piece of embargo-altering legislation was approved by Congress and signed into law by Obama.

Sponsored by Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and supported by many farm-state senators, the measure makes it easier to sell agricultural products to Cuba.

Dorgan's amendment — included in a massive omnibus spending bill approved by Congress in mid-December — reverses a Bush administration policy that prohibited U.S. farmers from shipping products to Cuba unless they were paid first.

Congress authorized the sale of U.S. farm goods to Cuba in 2000. But five years later, Bush issued new rules requiring Cuba to pay for the goods through third-country banks before they left port.

The new law lets state purchasing agency Alimport wire payments directly to the U.S. while the goods are still in transit.

"Why should we say to our farmers, 'the Canadians and Germans can have an advantage, and we lose that opportunity because we require payment before shipping,'" Dorgan said. "That makes no sense to me and I wanted to correct that."

But Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) was outraged a provision to ease the embargo ended up in a massive spending bill that'll fund most of the federal government in 2010.

"The process by which these changes have been forced upon this body is so deeply offensive to me, and so deeply undemocratic," said Menendez, "that I have no intention — no intention — of continuing to vote for omnibus appropriations bills if they are going to jam foreign-policy changes down the throats of members."

Cuba's purchase of U.S. farm goods has been slipping due to the global recession. Cuba bought about \$710 million worth of U.S. agricultural products in 2008, but 2009 spending is expected to be less than that. The farm lobby hopes this latest easing of restrictions will prod Cuba to buy more.

"At long last, we will bring some common-sense to the issue, and make it easier for American farmers to sell their goods in Cuba," said the senator from North Dakota.

— ANA RADELAT

Yoani—FROM PAGE 8

Salim Lamrani, a French author who researches U.S.-Cuba relations.

“Neither the State Department website of the United States nor the CIA has such variety,” he wrote. “It is impossible for Yoani Sánchez to be a simple blogger who denounces the difficulties of a system. Powerful interests are hiding behind the smokescreen that is Generation Y...”

Sánchez has denied getting U.S. government financing. Hernández said if Cuban officials had proof of such support, “they would have shown it on TV.”

“It’s always innuendo. They never show you convincing evidence,” said Henken. “In terms of her being ‘manufactured abroad,’ that’s false. I believe she is self-manufactured and truly independent in terms of links to other governments. However, she certainly has lots of support and a whole network of people ‘work’ for her blog voluntarily.”

On Dec. 3, Sánchez answered her critics — via Twitter.

“I have come to think that those who are always ready to insult, disqualify and attack as a way of life, are quickly neutralized when confronted with sweet words,” began the first of six tweets. “For now, I send them all a complicit wink: I know very well that one’s mask can drop away in a split second, that their true opinions will blossom one day. Someday, Cuban bloggers of all stripes will be able to come together and debate without insults and personal attacks. It’ll be soon.”

Sánchez says the socialist government is “a regime in its last throes.” Her critics say she



TRACEY EATON

Yoani Sánchez hitchhikes along a Havana street.

presents an unbalanced, apocalyptic view of Cuba that isn’t accurate or fair.

But for months, state-run media said nothing about Sánchez, even after she seized a microphone during an arts festival in April 2009 and called for open Internet access. “The time has come to jump over the wall of control,” she told the crowd.

SKEPTICS QUESTION YOANI’S INJURIES

Now though, even *Granma*, the newspaper of Cuba’s Communist Party, is weighing in. A Nov. 28 article said Sánchez is at the center of a “media war” to undermine the government.

Someday, *Granma* said, people will look back on the “Yoani Project” as an example of “media manipulation and interference in the

internal affairs of a sovereign nation.”

Marc Masferrer, a Cuban-American journalist in Florida, worries the media campaign against Sánchez is a prelude to jailing her.

The socialist government is throwing Sánchez in “with other dissidents who it derides and dismisses as agents of foreign interests,” he wrote.

“This is no idle threat...there are others it has similarly accused who currently are languishing in the Castro gulag.”

Government supporters, meantime, are trying to turn Sánchez into a caricature. They call her a “cyber-clown” and a “puppet.”

And they fault her for failing to produce photos of the bruises and swelling around her cheekbone and eyebrow that she said she suffered after her Nov. 6 encounter with state security agents.

After the incident, Sánchez wrote that she struggled with one of the agents in the back of a Chinese sedan, digging her fingernails into his testicles before he shoved her out.

YouTube videos later showed Sánchez on crutches and with a bandage on her back. But three doctors who treated her after the incident told reporters working for state-run media that they saw no obvious injuries.

Sánchez told foreign reporters based in Cuba that some of the worst bruising was on her backside. She said: “I have several marks, especially on the buttocks, but unfortunately, I can’t show them to you.” □

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. He’s interviewed Yoani Sánchez in the past for CubaNews. See his blog at: <http://alongthemalecon.blogspot.com/>.

Amuchastegui—FROM PAGE 2

It’s no secret that the very idea of the questionnaire was an initiative from the State Department office in charge of Cuban affairs and Dan Restrepo, a clear indication of what Obama’s new Cuba policy aims for.

Dismissing hundreds of requests from important journals in Latin America and the Caribbean and granting such a privilege to Yoani suggests two things: The first is how unimportant Latin America and the Caribbean are to the current administration — negating all of its promises at the meetings in Port of Spain and San Pedro de Sula earlier this year.

The second is how crucial the “dissident” card has become for the White House. This course of action will prove disastrous.

On the other hand, Yoani Sánchez is absolutely free to express her ideas freely. She has not been bothered, arrested nor brutalized for

doing this. Most of her criticism can be heard on the bus, waiting in line and elsewhere.

She may go to any public meeting and utter any criticism as she has already done in front of Mariela Castro, in the pages of the magazine *Temas*, or in a certain church in Santiago de Cuba, thanks to her close association with Padre José Conrado Rodríguez (a frequent visitor to the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and to exile groups in Miami, where he travels to regularly). No one in Cuba objects to this or prevents her from doing these things.

But her image-building as an innocent victim, deprived of power resources, isolated and harassed, is totally unacceptable. Unacceptable also is her frequent charge that she is not a cyber-dissident, that she’s not “*una opositora*” (an opponent), that she doesn’t have an agenda, that she has no “*color político*.”

Yet her connections prove beyond any doubt that she is an active member of an opposition project, sponsored and supported by foreign powers. One of her favorite mentors is Carlos Alberto Montaner, a well-known exile figure who always seeks to build “opposition” cases inside Cuba.

More recently, Yoani received a prize “with great honor” (her own words) from Miami’s Consejo por la Libertad de Cuba (Cuban Liberty Council), which represents the ultra-right offspring of the CANF. There is no inno-

cence, at all, in such connections and actions.

When asked about her during his visit to Washington, Carlos Varela — one of the most “heretic” composers and trovadours in Cuba — said something very important about this woman: “Yoani is the one selling more records right now outside of Cuba. But the one who sells more records doesn’t always represent what the people think.” Varela is absolutely right, and time will tell. □

Free penis implants if you qualify

The Castro regime is offering free penis implants, *Juventud Rebelde* reported Nov. 21.

It may not be what Karl Marx had in mind when he imagined a society transformed “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” but the newspaper said the silicon and silver penis implants will become more common.

Men in seven Cuban provinces will qualify for the costly procedure, which urologist Juan Carlos Yip boasted was normally available only in first-world countries.

“It will be carried out in patients whose sexual suffering does not respond positively to traditional treatments,” said Yip.

Men over 40 and those with diabetes or circulation problems will be first in line.

CORRECTION

In a story on PAC handouts on page 3 of our November 2009 issue, we wrongly reported that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) opposes U.S. sanctions against Cuba. We meant Reid opposes the lifting of sanctions. CubaNews regrets the error.

POLITICAL BRIEFS

CUBA, MEXICO ATTEMPT TO PATCH THINGS UP

Cuba and Mexico took steps to improve their ailing relations Dec. 11, when their top diplomats met in Havana and reminisced about their long history of bilateral ties.

The *New York Times* reported that Patricia Espinoza, Mexico's foreign minister, held talks with her Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodríguez, and reminded him that Mexico was the only country in Latin America that didn't break ties with Havana after the 1959 revolution.

"We ought to make sure that our government relations correspond with that history," she said.

Mexican President Felipe Calderón planned to visit Cuba this year, but he called off the trip after Cuba — worried about the swine flu outbreak — suspended direct flights from Mexico.

Fidel Castro accused Calderón of having intentionally put off disclosing the H1N1 epidemic so as not to delay President Obama's visit to Mexico.

Espinoza, who arrived in Havana on Human Rights Day, made no mention of human rights in her public remarks. Officials in Mexico City said Calderón — who is far less antagonistic toward the Castro regime than his predecessor, Vicente Fox — might visit the island early next year.

INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE GETS NEW PRESIDENT

Michael Shifter will replace Peter Hakim as president of Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based think tank, effective Apr. 1, 2010.

"Inter-American Dialogue is needed today more than ever," said Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former president of Brazil and a member of IAD's board. "The selection of Michael Shifter assures that this work will continue in its vital role."

Shifter has worked at IAD since 1994. Before that, he directed the Latin American and Caribbean program at the National Endowment for Democracy. Since 1993, he's been an adjunct professor of Latin American politics at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

Details: Joan Caivano, IAD, Washington. Tel: (202) 463-2563. Email: jcaivano@thedialogue.org.

CONTROVERSIAL BOOK WILL STAY OUT OF SCHOOL

Looks like Miami-Dade schools can keep their ban on a book that depicts smiling children in Cuba, reports the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.

The U.S. Supreme Court on Nov. 16 decided to stay out of the dispute by refusing to hear the ACLU's appeal. That means the ban stands.

"*Vamos a Cuba*" by Alta Schreier and 23 other books from the same travel series were yanked from school library shelves after a parent complained that it failed to tell the whole truth about Cuba by ignoring child labor, deprivations and indoctrination.

The ACLU persuaded a federal judge in Miami to restore the book and its English version, "*A Visit to Cuba*." Defenders argued that the book was a factual depiction of Cuban kids leading normal lives, and the judge accepted that argument.

But the schools won their appeal to the 11th Circuit Court in Atlanta, where a panel of judges decided in a two-to-one decision that the ban did not violate the First Amendment. The highest court has left the status quo in place.

“ In their own words ... ”

"The empire's real intentions are obvious, this time beneath the kindly smile and African-American face of Barack Obama. The empire is mobilizing behind rightist forces in Latin America to strike Venezuela and [other leftist] states."

— **Fidel Castro**, quoted in a Dec. 14 letter read by Castro confidante Hugo Chávez during a gathering of leftist Latin American and Caribbean leaders in Havana.

"For the past 30 years, this couple betrayed America's trust by covertly providing classified national defense information to the Cuban government."

— **David Kris**, assistant attorney general for national security, on the arrest of Kendall Myers, 72, and his wife Gwendolyn, 71. The Washington, D.C., couple has pleaded guilty to spying for Cuba and has agreed to forfeit \$1.7 million in assets.

"As we progress toward a more modern, constructive relationship with Cuba, Radio and TV Martí no longer have any real diplomatic or fiscal purpose."

— **Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WI)**, describing the two U.S. government-run broadcasts as "relics of the Cold War that virtually no one tunes into." Feingold said killing Radio and TV Martí would save taxpayers \$300 million over the next 10 years.

"The Miami-Dade School Board violated the right of schoolchildren to have access to the marketplace of ideas in their school libraries. These books were removed under the guise of 'inaccuracies,' but the real reason is these books ran afoul of the political orthodoxy of a majority of school board members."

— **Howard Simon**, executive director of ACLU of Florida, commenting on the U.S. Supreme Court's Nov. 16 decision not to hear a challenge to a Miami school board's removal of a textbook on Cuba from school libraries (see news brief at left).

"If you desire to come to a warm tropical climate, come to my district."

— **Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL)**, in testimony opposing a lifting of the U.S. travel ban to Cuba. The Havana-born lawmaker scorned visitors who would be "lounging on the beaches of Varadero or partying in the nightclubs till the wee hours."

"We're still a free country and we're free to decide when and how we act and so right now, that is our vote and it might change, I do not know. But we have a very strong relationship with the United States and we don't want to jeopardize that relationship, because it would affect Palau's economic welfare."

— **Sandra Pierantozzi**, Palau's minister of state, on why her tiny country was one of only three (the others were the U.S. and Israel) voting against an Oct. 28 resolution at the UN General Assembly condemning the embargo. A record 187 nations backed the resolution, while two abstained: Micronesia and the Marshall Islands.

"I had a great foreboding about the next day. I worried that some incident would occur. But I never thought Cuban MIGs would fly into international air space and intercept planes that were turning around and leaving."

— **Richard Nuncio**, former Cuba advisor to President Clinton, recalling Cuba's 1996 shutdown of two Brothers to the Rescue planes in a Miami TV interview.

"Cinema was the great communicator and Fidel knew it. We were inspired protagonists and accomplices in the urgency of the revolution."

— **Alfredo Guevara**, founder of the Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematography, which turned 50 this year. Guevara told AP "it's not ideology, it's idealism."

"It is interesting and scandalous that Sen. Bob Menéndez was one of those who received the most money for maintaining this type of policy against Cuba. Evidently, one must question whether his interests respond not to the Cuban community but to an issue of money."

— **Alberto González**, spokesman for the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, commenting on a report showing that the New Jersey Democrat received the most in campaign contributions from a PAC which supports the embargo against Cuba.

"We are bandits. But without us, none of this works."

— **Ismael**, who illegally transports fruit and vegetables into Havana's markets, telling AP "we've got the police more or less paid off."

ECONOMY

Is it *adiós* for 'la libreta' and the dual-currency system?

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

In Havana, word on the street is that two longtime institutions of communist Cuba — the “*libreta*” or ration book and the dual-currency system — are about to be dismantled. Statements made by Cuban diplomats fueled such rumors, but what’s really behind them?

For one thing, Raúl Castro has hinted at getting rid of both for some time. These two controversial measures are part of the agenda of economic reforms that Raúl and several other Cuban officials are discussing and adopting, albeit very slowly.

Neither are being portrayed as magic bullets or isolated initiatives, but rather as components of a broader program that includes changes in land tenure and other reforms.

The 48-year-old “*libreta*” — aimed at ensuring fair distribution of resources in the midst of serious shortages — is now just a shadow of what it was in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

This heavily subsidized program costs the Cuban state \$948 million a year, according to Economy Minister Marino Murillo, speaking Oct. 23 at the University of Havana.

But the items included in the *libreta* have fallen to their lowest levels and shortest cycles ever. It now covers only a few basic needs for 10 to 12 days at a time.

Market forces, legal and illegal, are far

more influential than before. Observers say dismantling the ration book would only be a simple formality.

Peas and potatoes were both recently removed from the ration book. Now they are sold on the open market — the peas at 3.50 Cuban pesos a lb (16¢/lb when rationed) and the potatoes at 1 peso per pound (30-40¢/lb when rationed).

In the Cuban context, however, killing off the *libreta* may unleash serious social and political tension. For low-income families and retired folks — a considerable chunk of Cuba’s population — it would be disastrous.

Every foreign correspondent in Cuba has quoted average people as saying the ration book

should cover more items, not less, and that “*gente pobre*” (poor people) will be left behind if subsidies are discontinued. The authorities still have not said how and when it’ll be done.

The issue of unifying Cuba’s two-currency system is more complex, because it involves not only the domestic sector but also the external sector. The *peso convertible* (CUC) — introduced five years ago to replace the U.S. dollar — is worth 25 times as much as the regular peso, known as *moneda nacional*. Regular pesos, the currency all state workers

and pensioners are paid in, must be converted to CUCs to buy most goods nowadays.

In the past, Argentina, Brazil, Israel and many other countries endured volatile monetary policies. For a long time, China had a two-currency system and did not suppress it until its economy was strong enough.

Will Cuba resort to shock therapy like many Latin American governments did in the 1980s? Will Raúl enact these two draconian measures without mercy? Is his government even in a position to take such social and political risks?

Some suggest that Cuba’s current financial problems — aggravated as never before by the

devastating effects of three recent hurricanes — will force Cuba’s leadership to adopt shock therapy,

But that’s not likely. A more realistic scenario sees Raúl and his advisors putting in place an

overall set of measures aimed at restructuring the economy.

This would include reforms in productivity, marketing, wages and foreign investment — along with a realistic exchange rate and even a return to the IMF down the road.

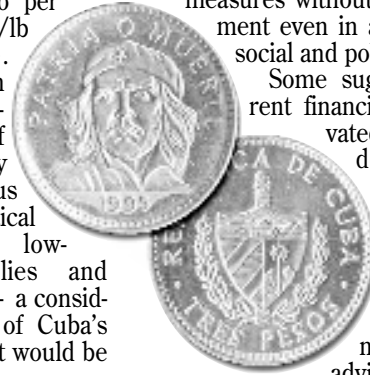
All this will take time, and political events may accelerate or delay the implementation of such policies. But one thing is clear: Cuba cannot remain aloof from the globalization process forever. □

Former Cuban intelligence officer Domingo Amuchastegui has lived in Miami since 1994. He writes regularly for CubaNews about island politics, economic reform, the Cuban Communist Party and the South Florida exile community.

PRODUCTOS	ENTREGA MES DE:	
	ENERO	FEBRERO
Arroz 34	15	15
Granos 11	15	3
Acaite 15	3	
Almidón 15	15	
Composte		
J. Bafic		3
J. Laver	3	
C. Dofal	1	
Sel		
P. Aliman	3	3
Callé 27	3	3
C. Puente		
C. Suave		
Arroz 6	6	
FN 3	3	3
Arroz 3	3	
Arroz 1		
Arroz 1		
Arroz 1		

Cuban ration book: a thing of the past?

ANDY GOLDMAN



Top 10 news stories of 2009, as selected by the *CubaNews* editorial team:

- 1. Global recession's impact on Cuba:** Severe economic slump forces authorities to lower their 2009 GDP growth forecast from 6% to 1.7%; declining food production pushes Cuba to the brink of crisis again. (*July-August 2009, page 1*).
- 2. Obama eases restrictions on family travel, remittances to Cuba:** New laws announced in April and enacted Sept. 3 allow exiles to visit close relatives in Cuba — as frequently and as long as they want. U.S. telecom firms can pursue deals too. (*October 2009, page 1*).
- 3. Raúl Castro's government shakeup:** Changes announced Mar. 2 involve the replacement of Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque, Vice President Carlos Lage Davila and a dozen other ministers. In short, *fidelistas* are out, *raúlistas* are in. (*March 2009, page 4*).
- 4. U.S. brokers Cuba deal at OAS summit:** Cuba is invited to rejoin OAS at meeting in San Pedro Sula. (*July-August 2009, page 8*).
- 5. Charter airlines see booming business:** Despite U.S. ban on general tourism to Cuba which remains in place, charter companies that fly Cuban exiles to the island predict that an end to family restrictions could boost Miami-Cuba traffic by 50%. (*March 2009, page 1*).
- 6. Cuba remains on terrorist blacklist:** On Apr. 30, the State Department announces it will keep Cuba on a list of countries it says support terrorism — along with Iran, Syria and Sudan. Critics say that list “reeks of hypocrisy”. (*October 2009, page 1*).
- 7. Blogger Yoani Sánchez beaten up:** On Nov. 6, Cuban secret police rough up and briefly detain Yoani Sánchez, sparking international condemnation. Her husband is later beaten by street thugs. (*November 2009, page 7*).
- 8. Bilateral migration talks resume:** In New York, U.S., Cuba hold first high-level talks in over six years. (*July-August 2009, page 3*).
- 9. U.S. food exports drop for first time since 2001:** Agricultural commodity shipments to Cuba under TSRA are expected to fall for the first time ever, after peaking at \$710 million in 2008. (*November 2009, page 1*).
- 10. Juanes concert thrills Havana:** Colombian pop star attracts crowd of 1.1 million, angers Miami exiles. (*September 2009, page 14*).

COMMODITIES

Record-high sugar prices unlikely to help Cuba much

BY OUR HAVANA CORRESPONDENT

The global economic crisis drove down prices for nickel — Cuba's most important export commodity — hurting the island severely in 2009.

Despite a comeback in the 2nd quarter, the difference between the top levels reached before the crisis and today remain considerable.

Even if Cuba depends more on tourism, cash remittances from Cuban exiles and Venezuela's economic support, still a significant part of the balance comes from the income derived from nickel — the largest foreign-currency earner — and the production of sugar for the domestic market.

SUGAR

With only 80% of the sugar mills that worked last year scheduled to grind this season, and gloomy prospects for Cuba's agricultural and industrial performance, Cuba will probably miss its chance of cashing in on the

best raw sugar prices in decades.

Prices doubled this year, reaching a 28-year high in September (averaging 58.84¢/kg for the month). This jump was fueled by a shortage of sugar on the world market, as India, the world's biggest consumer, had to speed up imports and Brazil, its top producer, faced an abnormally soggy season in the fields.

Although prices eased after the September peak, they're still double the levels of 2007 and are currently 90% higher than when Cuba started the past harvest one year ago.

As the world supply remains tight, experts believe the chances for prices staying strong through 2010 are significant. Some foresee them bouncing to 30-40¢/lb (66-88¢/kilo) in the next 18-24 months (see chart below).

When the sugar harvest was about to start on Dec. 10 in Matanzas province, the official media reported that only 44 mills islandwide would participate in the grinding, compared to 54 last season. This represents only two-

thirds of the existing sugar mills on the island. Seven mills are set to start in December and the rest through January and February. The harvest will likely last until May 2010.

As yet, there are no indications of improvement in agricultural yields this season. *Granma*, the official Communist Party newspaper, reported earlier this month that poor yields — the Achilles heel of the sugar industry — killed off any chance of attaining an acceptable result in 2008-09.

Climate, poor replanting, inadequate care of the plantations and mismanagement are to blame for a 15% drop in yields, from 41 tons of sugarcane per hectare in 2008 (the best since 1992) to 35 tons/hectare in 2009.

There were 252 sugar farms in Cuba yielding below 30 tons/hectare, a cost-killing yield by any account. Deputy Sugar Minister José C. Santos said that 1.6 million out of 10.1 million hectares — about 16% of total harvested area — yielded nothing at all.

By comparison, to break even with costs the fields must yield a minimum of 42 tons per hectare of sugarcane if prices are at 12¢/lb. The current price hike should help the harvest to be more efficient.

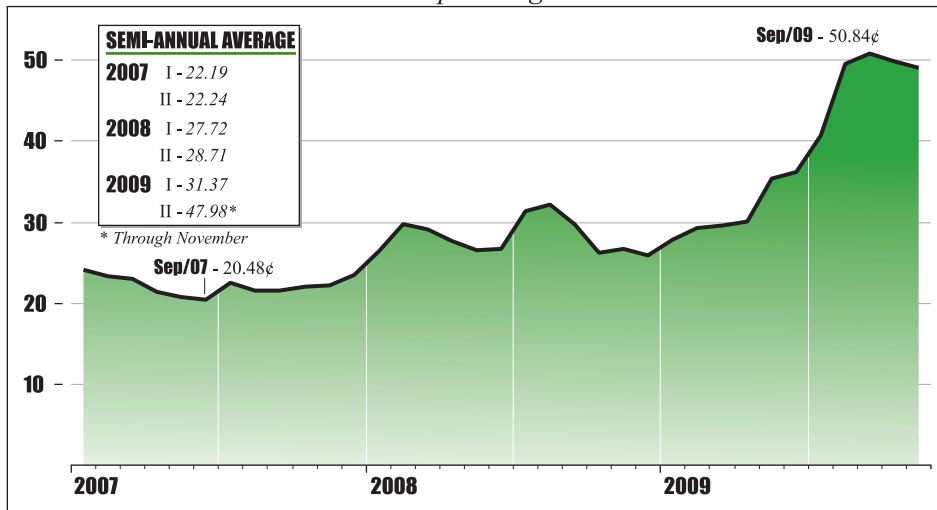
Quoting traders, news agency Reuters said the official estimate for this year's harvest is 1.3 to 1.4 million tons. But based on last year's performance and the prospects for this season, that goal seems excessively optimistic.

Considering a probable output last year of 1.33 million tons (the final tally has not been disclosed yet) and the industry running this time with 10 mills less, *CubaNews* predicts this year's crop will be no more than 1.1 million tons. That would be worth \$528 million at current prices.

And that's exactly what Cuba needs to supply the domestic market (700,000 tons) and to fulfill its trade agreements with China (400,000 tons) — not much wiggle room to cash in on high prices.

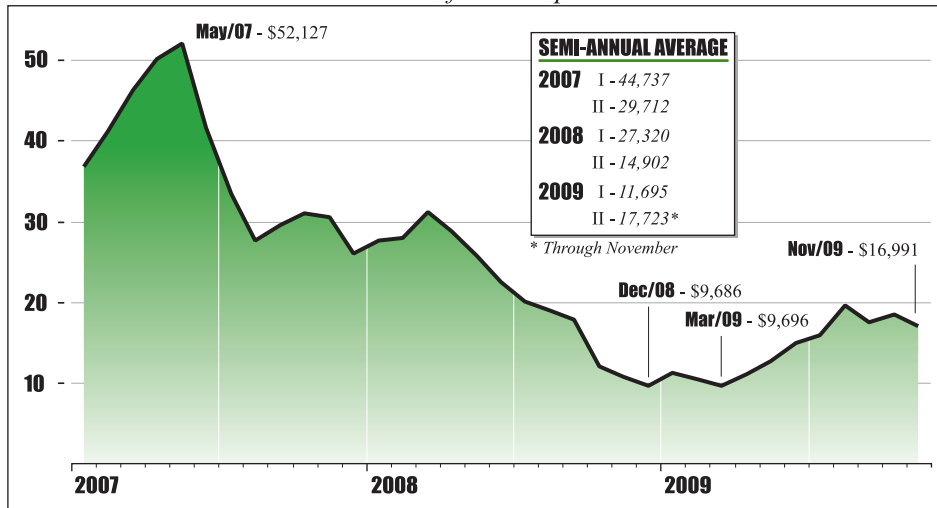
In the past, a hike in world prices prompted Cuba to make an urgent call for grinding at dormant sugar mills. Therefore, if prices stay at this current favorable level, a lot more than 44 mills will be working this season.

RAW SUGAR WORLD PRICE *In cents per kilogram*



Source: The Pink Sheet. Commodity Price Data. The World Bank

WORLD NICKEL PRICE *In thousands of dollars per ton*



NICKEL

Nickel prices have dropped by over two-thirds in the past two years, from a breathtaking monthly average of \$52,127/ton in May 2007 to \$16,991/ton last November.

Yet as the world economy gains momentum, nickel has been making a slow comeback along with other commodities. On Dec. 11, nickel spot prices were at \$16,525/ton in the London Metal Exchange, up a healthy 75% from \$9,460/ton recorded on Dec. 18, 2008.

At prevailing world market prices for 2009 and assuming output of 74,000 tons, Cuba's overall nickel production would be worth \$1.09 billion — down from \$2.75 billion in 2007 and \$1.6 billion last year. □

INFRASTRUCTURE

Havana's José Martí Int'l dwarfs Cuba's other airports

BY OUR HAVANA CORRESPONDENT

Located just nine miles south of downtown Havana, José Martí International Airport (HAV) is the largest and busiest airport in Cuba. It's the main gateway to the island, and the official entry point for most political visitors and events.

HAV was originally known as Rancho Boyeros, or simply Boyeros, after the town where its first terminal was located. The name still sticks among Cubans — and it's also known colloquially as Havana airport.

HAV serves not only the 2.18 million residents of the capital city, but also 1.9 million inhabitants of Pinar del Río, Matanzas and La Habana provinces, since Varadero airport in Matanzas is of limited use for average Cubans (see *CubaNews*, November 2009, page 10).

José Martí International is located barely 100 nautical miles south of Miami International Airport and is Cuba's closest major airport to the U.S. Gulf and East Coast.

Rancho Boyeros airport was opened in 1930 as a domestic and international terminal to

This is the final installment in a series of articles by our Havana correspondent that began with the February 2009 issue of CubaNews and covered major airports such as Holguín, Varadero, Camagüey and Santiago. For a list of what ran when, see box on page 11.

replace the Columbia airport (currently Ciudad Libertad) when the city restricted further growth.

The new airport's first foreign flights were to Miami and Key West, Fla., but in 1936, a non-commercial route to Madrid was opened. Its first domestic links were to the cities of Santiago de Cuba, with stops in Santa Clara, Morón and Camagüey.

José Martí International boasts a 13,123-ft-long, 148-ft-wide NE-SW asphalt and concrete runway capable of accommodating all kinds of passenger aircraft. Unlike other large airports in Cuba — such as those in Camagüey, Holguín, Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba — there are no military facilities within the aerodrome's boundaries.

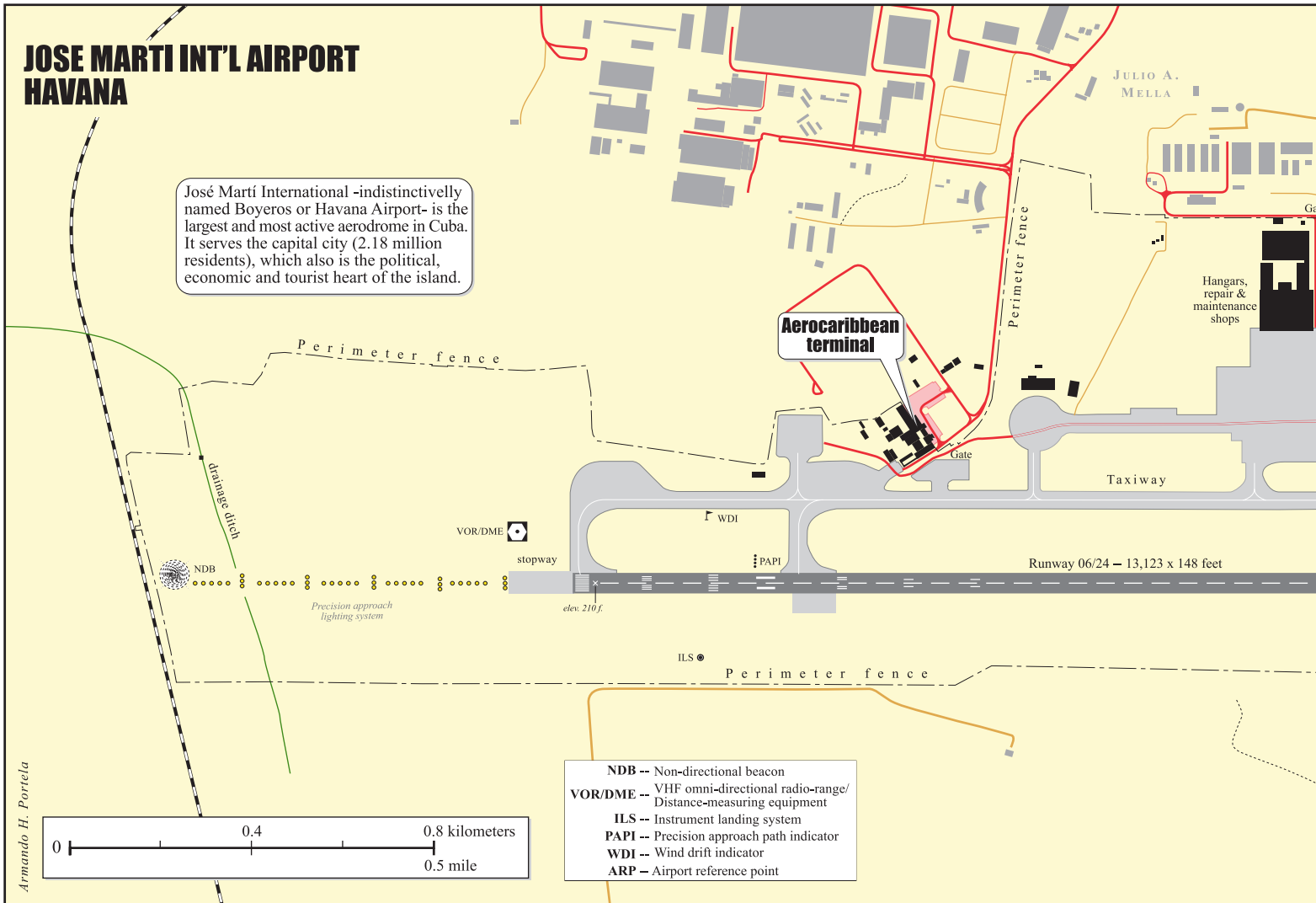
Instead, José Martí is surrounded by several military airstrips and the large San Antonio airbase a few miles southwest, which could be reoriented to some form of civil use in the future as cargo terminals or minor domestic executive airports. These military facilities have easy access to Havana via highways.

José Martí International has 32 standing positions for aircraft in five separate terminals. Traffic is assisted by modern aerial navigation equipment, including new radars, precision lighting approach and maneuvering systems, beacons and instrumental landing systems. The airport can operate any plane 24 hours a day.

As Cuba's main airport, HAV offers domestic routes to the largest cities on the island and is Cuba's most important link to the outside world.

During the era of Soviet influence in Cuba, HAV was Cuba's sole connection to its allies in the communist bloc, while all flights to capitalist countries originated there too.

See *Havana*, page 9



Havana — FROM PAGE 8

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Cuba's air links were decentralized. Furthermore, the end of trade with Cuba's traditional Eastern European partners prompted a renewed focus on tourism. Gradually, José Martí lost its supremacy as Cuba's air hub in favor of other airports in Varadero, Cayo Coco, Holguín and Cayo Largo del Sur.

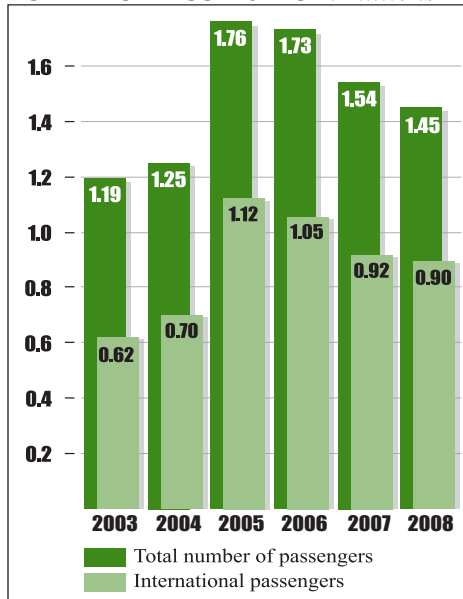
It was the rise of tourism and the jump in Cuban exile visits from South Florida and elsewhere which encouraged the expansion and modernization of the small, outdated facilities at HAV.

In 1988, Terminal 2 was inaugurated for international traffic. Ten years later, Terminal 3 opened, and a cargo terminal and the Aero-Caribbean terminal took shape soon after.

HAV has an operational capacity of 28 movements per hour and 150 a day. It receives an average of 900 flights per week — translating into 90,000 air operations a year, including air-traffic control for jets passing over Cuba.

Most of the movement is international. The airport receives in excess of 1.4 million passengers each year, 900,000 of them foreign visitors. Four Cuban airlines, 29 foreign airlines, 14 charters and 10 regional airlines operate in and out of HAV.

NUMBER OF PASSENGERS *In millions*



Source: Anuario Estadístico de Ciudad de La Habana 2008. O.N.E.

TERMINAL 1

This is the airport's original terminal, serving domestic and international traffic for almost seven decades. It remains today at the southeastern end of the runway as HAV's

domestic terminal, segregated from all international movements. Theoretically, it has the capacity to process 600 passengers per hour, but services are said to be poor and passenger flow difficult. There are nine standing positions for aircraft in front of it.

TERMINAL 2

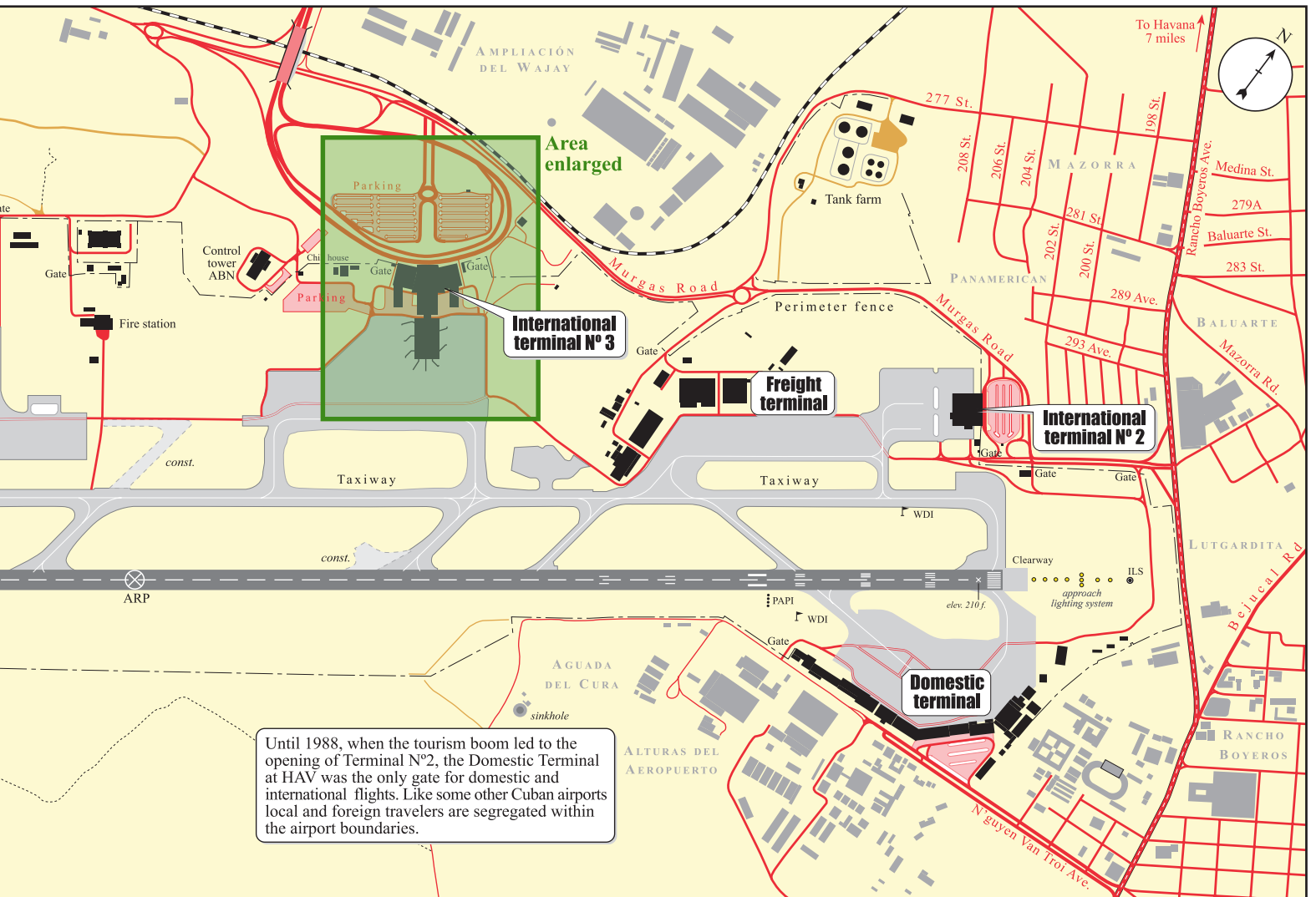
Built in 1988, this terminal currently serves chartered flights from Miami, New York and Los Angeles that bring Cuban exiles to the island. It's a covered steel structure located at the northeastern end of the runway, well separated from all other operations at the airport.

Terminal 2 is supposed to serve 600 passengers per hour — an obvious exaggeration since the terminal is easily jam-packed with the arrival of even a medium-sized plane and the thorough screening of exiles.

Services are generally poor, both for passengers and the general public. Employees can discretely ask for tips to find baggage, or more serious bribes to help bypass customs regulations.

Terminal 2 has three aircraft standing positions close to the terminal building. The terminal was scheduled for expansion and refurbishing in 2009. It provides snack-bar, taxi, car rental and cafeteria services.

See *Havana*, page 10



Havana —FROM PAGE 9

TERMINAL 3

Inaugurated in 1998 by Fidel Castro and then-Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, this is a modern, spacious building constructed by Ottawa-based Intelcan Technosystems — based on a design by Cuban architect Mario Girona.

Terminal 3 serves only international travelers. The two-level, steel-and-glass structure is located north of the middle section of the runway. It is capable of handling 1,500 passengers an hour at its peak. Ticketing and departures are located on the upper level, while the first floor is for arrivals.

Terminal 3 provides good access for cars and 750 parking spaces in front. It has 14 aircraft standing spots, eight of them adjacent to the building and assisted with fingers. It's a full-service terminal, with duty-free shops, travel agencies, restaurants, a cafeteria, a pharmacy, a post offices, banks, Internet access and banks.

FREIGHT TERMINAL

Built in 2002, this is a relatively recent addition to José Martí International Airport's facilities. It consists of several warehouses located north of the runway with six remote standing positions for aircraft. The terminal handles over 25,000 tons of cargo per year but in 2008, volume peaked at 48,800 tons, according to official figures.

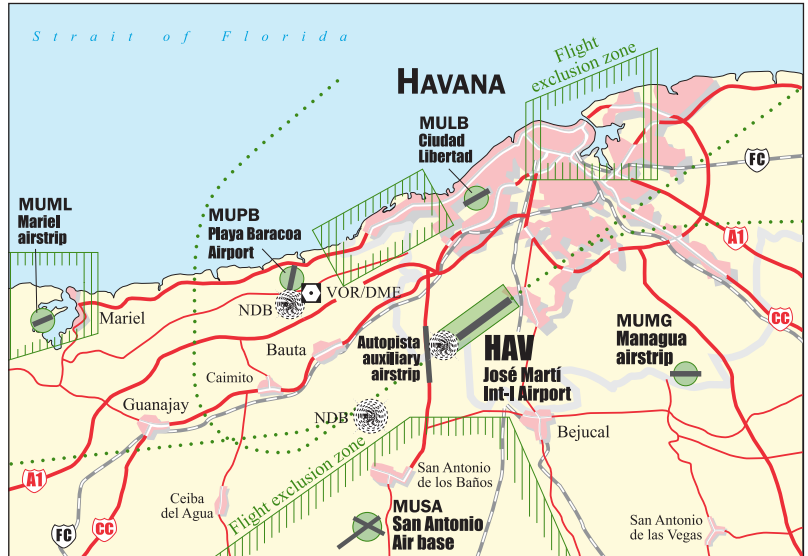
The Logistic Air Freight Enterprise — a venture between Cuba's Aerovaradero SA and Iberia's Cargosur — operates over 70,000 cubic ft of space, including a 600-ton capacity for refrigerated and freezer chambers in a modern warehouse.

AEROCARIBBEAN TERMINAL

Built at the western end of the runway — far away enough to ensure discreet operations — this terminal operates flights for AeroCaribbean, AeroGaviota and AeroTaxi, three airlines controlled by Cuba's Revolutionary Armed Forces and serving local and regional tourism needs.

Reportedly this terminal serves non-commercial flights related to the intense collaboration between Cuba and Venezuela. It also appears that the operations of AeroCaribbean and AeroTaxi have been moved to Terminal 1.

The largest aircraft hangars in Cuba can be found at José Martí. IBECA, a 50-50 joint venture established in 2005 between Cubana de Aviación and Spain's Iberia Airlines, provides technical maintenance and repairs to Airbus, Boeing and other aircraft. □



JOSE MARTI AIR SPACE

Three military airstrips, two executive aerodromes and a military air base surround the capital city. All these could serve as secondary airports to Havana's José Martí if the air traffic ever overwhelms the existing facilities. Alternatively, they could be developed as local aerodromes according to economic needs.

- Mariel airstrip** **MUML** Military airstrip. Asphalt runway 5,900 feet long. Recently converted to an open-air storage for the nearby container terminal.
- Playa Baracoa** **MUPB** Mixed use. Executive airport shared with civilian commuter flights and military operations. It has a concrete and asphalt runway 7,562 feet long. Capable of operating around the clock.
- Ciudad Libertad** **MULB** Executive and military aerodrome. Asphalt runway 6,775 feet long. 24-hours operations capable. From here Gen. Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba shortly after midnight Jan. 1, 1959. This is also where Castro delivered his first mass speech a week later.
- Autopista airstrip** Built in the 1970s on a stretch of a 4-lane highway as an auxiliary runway for military operations. Concrete and asphalt runway 10,400 feet long. No navigation aids.
- San Antonio airbase** **MUSA** Cuba's largest airbase and headquarters of the island's air defense system. Built during World War II to defend the Straits of Florida and the western Caribbean. Two asphalt and concrete runways 11,800 feet long. 24-hours operations capable.
- Managua airstrip** **MUMG** Military airstrip. Asphalt runway 9,334 feet long. It has little use, largely for defense operations.



LARRY LUXNER

Highway sign points the way to José Martí International Airport and the Aerocaribbean terminal. Above, Canadian-built Terminal 3 serves international traffic.

TOURISM

Lifting of Cuba travel ban worries Caribbean islands

BY VITO ECHEVARRÍA

Cuba, which is usually not much more than an afterthought at the annual Miami Conference on the Caribbean, this year got more than its share of attention.

The Nov. 30-Dec. 2 event, organized by the nonprofit Caribbean Central American Action, held a special forum on Cuba. Miami attorney Tim Ashby, who was there, said the possible lifting of the U.S. travel ban against Cuba was on the minds of many attendees.

“Cuba is going to be more relevant because of impact on the rest of the Caribbean,” said Ashby. “Particularly for the smaller states of the Caribbean Basin, there’s no real certainty about the impact a more open Cuban economy would have on foreign investment flows.”

CubaNews recently met up with Robert Sajo, a Canadian high-tech guru who established the e-commerce portal Cubaweb.cu for the Castro regime back in the late 1990s. Sajo now lives in Santo Domingo.

“Dominican travel agencies that previously served Cuban-Americans who circumvented the U.S. travel restrictions by flying through the Dominican Republic, are already seeing a major drop in business, with the lifting of the travel ban for them,” Sajo told us. “Imagine how the all-inclusive Dominican resorts and similar operations in nearby islands like the Bahamas and Jamaica will be impacted once

the travel ban is lifted for all Americans.”

Sajo also said Dominican companies which shipped care packages to Cuba on behalf of exiles have also suffered in business as well.

Tourism officials in the Bahamas are already leery of Cuba’s emergence as the future destination of choice for American travelers.

“I believe we have to increase the value of our product and create a product that tourists want,” said Charles Klonaris, chairman of the Nassau Tourism Development Board, in a recent interview with the *Bahamas Journal*.

U.S. OPENING TO CUBA A ‘MIXED BAG’

He was also responding to a 2008 International Monetary Fund report titled “Vacation Over: Implications for the Caribbean of Opening US-Cuba Tourism” which predicted a free-fall in U.S. tourist arrivals to his country once average Americans are allowed to visit Cuba.

Klonaris also said Nassau would have to be revamped to rival history-rich Havana.

“The renaissance of the city of Nassau is crucial if we are to maintain ourselves as a premier destination,” he noted. “You cannot have Atlantis and a few other major resorts without a real proper and interesting and exciting city. Historic Nassau is a part of the whole picture and it is important that Bahamians understand this so it becomes an enjoyable experience.”

Ironically, the Bahamas and other islands were actually helped by the Bush administration’s restrictions on exile travel — limits that endured from 2004 until earlier this year.

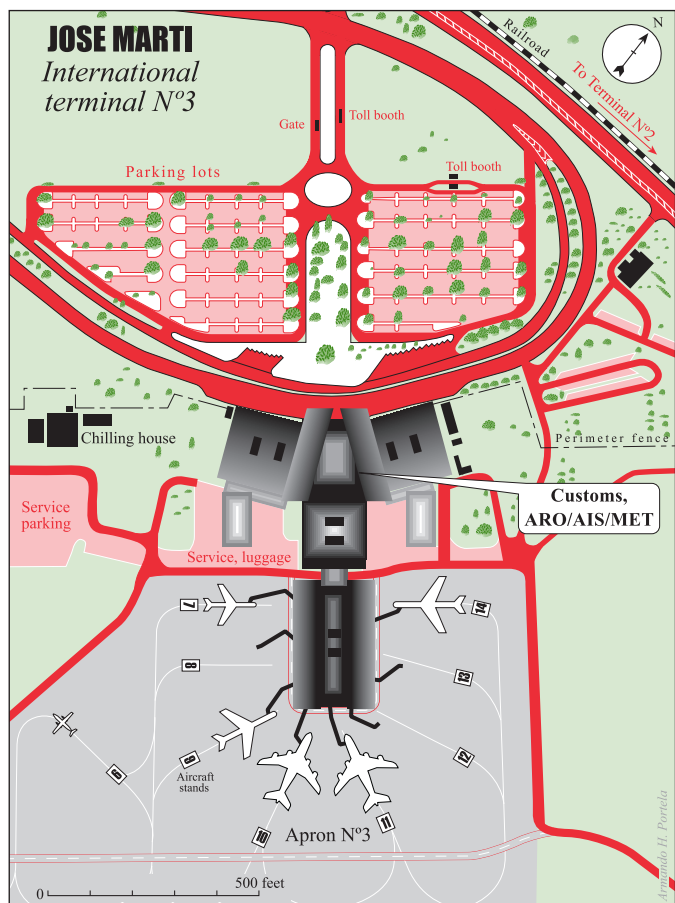
Cuban-Americans often traveled to Cuba via third countries like Mexico or the Bahamas — a route used by up to 10,000 people a year. In Grand Cayman, the plane to Havana would only leave after the one from Miami arrived, because it came in filled with Cubans.

Rafael Romeu, author of that IMF report, told *CubaNews* that Cuba’s opening could be a mixed bag for neighboring islands.

“These islands would gain from redirected Canadians and Europeans who now vacation in Cuba,” Romeu explained. “Hence, heavily U.S.-dependent destinations that do not have the ability to capture redirected Canadians and Europeans displaced by U.S. tourists will lose. Some of the most vulnerable include Turks & Caicos Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, Cancún and perhaps Jamaica.”

On the other hand, the luxury tourism appears unconcerned about Cuba.

“Of course, Americans will probably want to discover Cuba if the ban is lifted, but the U.S. is not the Dominican Republic’s primary market — just a fraction of it,” said Paola Rainieri, PR director for Puntacona Resort & Club. “Competition just makes everyone work harder. In the end, things always balance out.” □



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- November 2009: Juan Gualberto Gómez Int'l, Varadero (VRA)
- December 2009: José Martí International, Havana (HAV)

DISTANCES TO HAVANA

In nautical miles and hours:minutes

UNITED STATES & CANADA		
KEY WEST	100	0:28
MIAMI	204	0:42
HOUSTON	811	2:01
WASHINGTON D.C.	988	2:24
NEW YORK	1144	2:44
TORONTO	1246	2:58
OTTAWA	1378	3:15
MONTREAL	1412	3:19
LOS ANGELES	2001	4:36
MEXICO AND THE CARIBBEAN		
VARADERO (CUB)	54	0:22
KINGSTON (JAM)	437	1:12
SANTO DOMINGO (DR)	766	1:55
MEXICO CITY (MEX)	957	2:20
SAN JUAN (PR)	961	2:20
CARACAS (VEN)	1154	2:45
EUROPE		
MADRID (SPA)	4036	9:01
LONDON (U.K)	4047	9:03
PARIS (FRA)	4188	9:21
FRANKFURT (GER)	4400	9:49
MILAN (ITA)	4484	10:00
ROME (ITA)	4703	10:28
MOSCOW (RUS)	5180	11:31

Air travel time at 460 knots speed with 15 min. bias time. Source: AirRouting.com

USAID — FROM PAGE 1

largest USAID grants — a \$40 million, multi-year allocation — DAI clearly benefitted from President Bush's decision to increase funding for the USAID Cuba program and similar programs in the State Department.

Funding for the USAID Cuba program peaked in 2008 at \$45 million, and dropped to \$20 million after Obama assumed office in 2009. Its 2010 budget is also \$20 million.

Kimberly Rosen, director of USAID Cuba, said her office awarded about 15 grants this year. But she would not disclose information about those programs without approval from the State Department.

While the budget for Helms-Burton Cuba grants has shrunk, the State Department has increased its spending on Cuba.

Its Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which got \$74 million this year, has stepped up its involvement in Cuba, funding dozens of programs through the International Republican Institute, the National Endowment for Democracy and other groups.

NED's Cuba program alone grew from just \$750,000 in 2001 to \$1.5 million in 2009. It funds several exile organizations, independent groups in Cuba and Argentina's CADAL (Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de America Latina) which is an NED subsidiary.

"Cuba is a very important part of our Latin American portfolio," said Miriam Kornblith, director of NED's Latin American programs.

CRS: OTI'S ACTIVITIES 'OVERTLY POLITICAL'

Another State Department affiliate has also recently ramped up its activities in Cuba. The Office of Transition Initiatives has spent more than \$9.3 million to "support youth-led media initiatives" on the island since 2007, said a recent Congressional Research Service report, noting that OTI's goals are neither developmental nor humanitarian.

"OTI's activities are overtly political, based on the idea that in the midst of political crisis and instability abroad there are local agents of change whose efforts, when supported by timely and creative U.S. assistance, can tip the balance toward peaceful and democratic outcomes that advance U.S. foreign policy objectives," said CRS.

Cuba has always condemned the activities of USAID and State Department grantees and has detained Americans in the past who were distributing materials for grant recipients. Those detainees were eventually released.

But the fate of the unidentified DAI contractor is unknown.

Cuban protests about such programs have intensified in the last few months. A recent Radio Havana story said USAID is "making higher than ever investments in subversion" and its Cuba program is "on the frontline of irregular warfare" against the island.

While exile groups used most of their grant money to give humanitarian aid to dissidents, distribute books and shortwave radios and publish stories written by independent journalists, some new grantees are running more high-tech projects. Like DAI, many are trying

to connect ordinary Cubans to the Internet.

Among the IRI's projects are "information technology initiatives to develop their internal capacity to organize and to articulate and advance a common agenda."

Freedom House has a grant to help activists and civil-society groups expand Internet access and boost their social networking.

"In Cuba, Washington's pro-annexationist investment has increased and intensified via new technologies," charged Radio Havana.

Soon after Raúl Castro took over from his ailing brother Fidel Castro in 2008, curbs on ordinary Cubans using cellphones and computers were eliminated. But satellite phones and walkie-talkies are banned in Cuba and access to the Internet is severely restricted.

State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said it's crucial to give Cuban dissident groups "capability to network and to communicate."

NEW CHILL IN BILATERAL RELATIONS?

But the new U.S. initiatives provoked a sharp reaction with the arrest of the DAI contractor. That's likely to put a new chill on ties between Washington and Havana.

Dan Erikson, a Cuba analyst at Inter-American Dialogue, said the arrest proves Cuba won't make concessions to the United States just to improve ties — a condition sought by Obama to ease sanctions. "But it's not clear whether the Cuban government is behaving as it always has done, or if this is a new strategy to cool relations," Erikson said.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), an ardent supporter of such USAID democracy programs, said Havana's behavior is nothing new.

"Keeping the Cuban people in the dark, tak-

ing political prisoners, and targeting Americans are all parts of the regime's MO," she said in a written statement to *CubaNews*. "Maybe this will serve as a wake-up-call to those who think the Castro brothers are anything other than tyrannical thugs."

WASTEFUL SPENDING OF TAX DOLLARS

Marred by mismanagement and fraud, the USAID Cuba program has long been a source of criticism and controversy. Last year, Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA) temporarily froze program funds in response to the embezzlement of \$500,000 from the Center for a Free Cuba by former Bush White House official Felipe Sixto. Berman chairs the House Foreign Relations Committee.

A Government Accountability Office investigation of the Cuba program in 2006 revealed poor recordkeeping and misspent funds. The GAO discovered that money aimed at sparking dissent in Cuba was spent instead on a gasoline-powered chain saw, Nintendo Gameboys, Sony PlayStations, a mountain bike, leather coats, cashmere sweaters, crab meat and Godiva chocolates.

Critics of the program say spending U.S. taxpayer money on dissidents is wasteful and counterproductive because it provokes the Cuban government into tightening control.

Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive said USAID programs have been "completely ineffective" in bring democratic reforms to Cuba.

"It's beyond a political boondoggle," Kornbluh told *CubaNews*. "Their purpose is to mollify conservatives in Miami rather than truly advance democracy in Cuba." □

VOA to utilize Radio Martí's Miami studios

Facing a group of presidents loudly critical of Washington, the U.S. government's Voice of America broadcast is expanding its audience in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, VOA officials told Juan Tamayo of *El Nuevo Herald*.

VOA's Spanish-language division also will step up its use of Radio/TV Martí's production facilities in Miami because of budget pressures on both broadcasters, the officials said Nov. 21.

The VOA effort to grow its Latin American audience comes as the Obama administration tries to counter the attacks on U.S. policies by several presidents in the region: Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

"Our focus is on the Andean region because of the upheavals going on there," said Spanish division director Alberto Mascaro. "Our second priority is Central America, especially Nicaragua and Honduras."

VOA, which only broadcasts internationally, transmits via shortwave radio, local FM affiliates and satellite TV as well as online. Funded by U.S. taxpayers, it must adhere to observe standards of "accuracy, bal-

ance, comprehensiveness, and objectivity."

Mascaro said the increased use of Radio TV Martí's Miami studios is the result of budget pressures on both broadcasters.

"In a time of tight budgets, we see a need to maximize resources, and the OCB has a great infrastructure," said Mascaro, a Cuban-American who was chief of staff at the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), in charge of the Martí operations. He was hired by VOA in August.

Radio/TV Martí now has about 170 employees and a 2009 budget of \$34.8 million, but its 2010 budget is under attack by congressional critics who argue that Cuban government jamming blocks virtually all TV Martí reception on the island.

In August, Radio/TV Martí began shedding 35 employees amid expectations that Congress would cut \$4.2 million from its proposed 2010 budget. But a recent proposal in the Senate would cut \$15 million, in effect killing TV Martí.

Mascaro's hiring by VOA and plans to use Martí production facilities have fueled rumors that the Miami stations will soon be folded into VOA, perhaps with the Spanish unit moving from Washington to Miami. □

CONFERENCES

U.S., Cuban hurricane experts hold talks in New Orleans

We spend more time getting ready for football season than we do for hurricane season," said Lt. Gen Russel Honoré (Ret.), former commander of Task Force Katrina.

Honoré chaired a panel at a Nov. 23 conference in New Orleans organized by the Center for International Policy to encourage U.S.-Cuban cooperation on hurricanes.

The event featured top hurricane specialists from both countries and pointed out the difference in the level of preparedness. In the past 10 years, for example, Cuba has lost only 30 lives to hurricanes, while the United States lost 1,500 to Hurricane Katrina alone.

Cooperation on the science and forecasting side, at least, is strong: Lixion Avila, of the Miami Hurricane Center, and José Rubiera, of the Cuban Meteorological Center — speakers at the first panel — have long cooperated in the tracking of hurricanes and sharing vital information about their intensity and likely landfalls. The success of their efforts and the professional relationship they have developed point up what can be accomplished when the two sides work together.

Honoré chaired the second panel, which included U.S. hurricane specialists, all of whom had visited Cuba. All had favorable views of Cuba's system for protecting the population against hurricanes and believed that better cooperation and exchange of information between the United States and Cuba is crucial.

"We learned valuable lessons in Cuba," said

Lt. Col Jerry Sneed, director of emergency preparedness of Orleans Parish. "Its civil defense knows communities backwards and forwards. We must continue to talk and learn from them."

Ivor Van Heerden, the former LSU hurricane scientist who predicted Katrina and dis-



LARRY LUXNER

Katrina's legacy: Destroyed home in New Orleans.

covered why the levees failed, said: "We need more hurricane data from the Cubans. We should give them Doppler radar; it would help us. Also higher-speed Internet connections to transfer ideas and do joint research projects. Our scientists need to be able to travel freely."

Van Heerden said he left his native South Africa because of the lack of freedoms there. And now, in the United States, he said, he lacks the freedom to travel to Cuba.

Dagoberto Rodríguez, Cuba's vice-minister of foreign relations, was to have co-chaired this second panel, but he didn't get a U.S. visa to attend. His position was nonetheless distributed in a pamphlet to participants.

In July, Rodríguez told Honoré's delegation when it visited Cuba that his government would cooperate fully with the United States in efforts against hurricanes. After Katrina struck the U.S. Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005, Cuba immediately offered to send up 1,300 fully equipped doctors and 36 tons of medicines to assist in relief efforts. The Bush administration declined the offer.

The third panel was shared by Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, director of Cuba's Center for Disaster Medicine, and Alexander Isakov, founding director of Emory University's Office of Critical Event Preparedness and Response.

The two experts noted that both the U.S. and Cuba — in response to the growing threat from hurricanes — are developing new methods of emergency medical treatment and disaster management, almost in tandem.

Recently, Ridel's institute held a conference on the subject which was attended by experts from 24 nations including the United States.

Dr. Ky Luu, executive director of Tulane University's newly formed Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy, stressed the importance of the new approach to disaster management and of U.S.-Cuban cooperation.

The New Orleans meeting ended with vows on all sides to build on the discussions.

Details: Wayne Smith, Center for International Policy, 1717 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite #801, Washington, DC 20036-2000. Tel: (202) 232-3317. Fax: (202) 232-3440. Email: cip@ciponline.org. URL: www.ciponline.org.

Food security is focus of new UNDP programs in Cuba

BY PATRICIA GROGG / INTER PRESS SERVICE

Three new international cooperation agreements channeled through the United Nations system in Cuba are aimed at strengthening food security, especially in the poorest parts of the country.

"Thanks to the joint work of the international community, the UN and the Cuban government, we have been able to provide more assistance in such important areas as food," the United Nations resident coordinator in Cuba, Susan McDade, told IPS.

"Four years ago it would have been difficult to imagine this kind of collaboration," said McDade, a Canadian citizen.

The three agreements total \$35 million and involve projects throughout the country, but with an emphasis on the easternmost provinces that cover one-third of Cuba.

That part of the country includes the cities of Las Tunas (662 km east of Havana), Holguín (743 km), Granma (744 km), Santiago de Cuba (861 km) and Guantánamo (905 km).

The consensus is that it must be given top priority in development aid plans.

Many of the Millennium Development Goals adopted at the UN General Assembly in

2000 have been achieved in Cuba, while others are on the way to being met, said McDade.

But some eastern provinces and municipalities aren't making much progress, she said.

Some problems in eastern Cuba are caused by the lack of a habit of eating vegetables rich in micronutrients and iron, shortages in protein, especially among the lowest-income sectors, and a higher teen pregnancy rate.

Studies show no "chronic hunger" in Cuba, although there are certain levels of anemia and scarcity of micronutrients in some segments of the population, especially kids under two, young mothers, nursing mothers and people with chronic health problems.

The eight MDGs set a 2015 deadline for halving extreme poverty and hunger rates from 1990 levels, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and maternal health, reducing child mortality, combating HIV/AIDS and malaria and ensuring environmental sustainability.

The first program, for \$8.5 million, is to fight anemia among disadvantaged groups. This will directly benefit the 24 poorest municipalities in Cuba's five eastern provinces and the western province of Pinar del Río.

That initiative will help Pinar del Río daily entity expand production in order to make an iron-fortified porridge which includes milk, to be given to children between the ages of six months and five years, pregnant women, and other people facing a risk of anemia.

The second project, for \$7 million, aims to boost decentralize agriculture "in line with the government's new policy of promoting economic activities that contribute to import substitution," said McDade, who said small farmers will be given tools, credits and facilities for repairing tractors, among other services.

The third agreement involves \$20 million in aid from the European Commission, channeled through the UNDP, with the aim of diversifying agriculture. The plan is to strengthen local food production capacity, while improving farm management and the availability of local produce in 27 selected municipalities. In addition, efforts will be made to improve the quality and quantity of skilled farmers in another 10 municipalities.

Details: Susan McDade, Resident Representative, UNDP/Cuba, PO Box 1608, New York, NY 10163. Tel: +53 7 204-1492. Fax: +53 7 304-1516. Email: susan.mcdade@undp.org.

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The Latell Report: Writing Fidel Castro's autobiography

The Latell Report is a publication of the University of Miami's Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies (ICCAS) and no government funding has been used in its publication. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ICCAS, CubaNews or the U.S. Agency for International Development.

BY BRIAN LATELL

How much could Fidel Castro demand if he were to author a truly revealing autobiography? An offer might easily exceed the millions of dollars that prominent American political figures have earned for penning their memoirs.

Even during his earliest years in power, interest in Castro's story was intense and publishers have continued to dream of somehow enticing him into a book deal.

Carlos Franqui, the first editor of the official organ *Revolución*, recalls a contract that apparently was actually signed. He says that in the early 1960s Fidel received \$20,000 from the Italian publisher Feltrinelli to write his autobiography.

Franqui was slated to ghost it, and began recording Fidel's recollections. By 1966 it was Franqui's sole responsibility. But he told an American reporter at the time that Castro had lost interest in the project. Slim volumes published by Franqui after he went into exile were the only product of the aborted collaboration. They were highly critical of Castro.

In 1985, Castro decided to try again, this time certain he could control the outcome.

"*Fidel and Religion*," by the Brazilian friar Betto, was the result of many hours of interviews with Castro, who was reported by one of his American biographers to have received \$1 million for the effort.

Most recently Fidel collaborated with Ignacio Ramonet to produce a spoken autobiography, "*Fidel Castro, My Life*." It isn't known if he was remunerated, but the book has sold well in English and Spanish.

Countless other volumes in the first person have also come forth, interviews and conversations with Castro and entirely forgettable collections of his speeches. Yet all are no more than extended monologues that rarely transcend the mundane or reveal Castro's innermost thoughts, emotions or sensibilities, least of all the dark side of his character permanently hidden like the far side of the moon.

But now, finally, there is a substantial volume in which Castro can be read to bare himself in an unprecedented fashion. It is the "*Autobiography of Fidel Castro*," by noted Cuban author and intellectual Norberto Fuentes (W.W. Norton, 2010.)

Like Franqui, Fuentes was a revolutionary insider. He knew Fidel well, traveled with him, memorizing his mannerisms and locations. Fuentes was trusted by the regime's elite and lived in a prestigious Havana building populated by ranking generals and civilian officials.

He was close to the ill-fated de la Guardia brothers — one executed on trumped-up charges along with Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa, the other imprisoned. It was the dread of those Stalinist purges of the summer of 1989 that drove Fuentes into exile, aided by the interventions of award-winning American authors.

Fuentes's Fidel is, of course, fictional, but only in the most literal sense. Speaking in the first person throughout this substantial volume of more than 550 pages (about a fourth the size of the two volumes in the original Spanish), he rings remarkably true.

Fidel here is alternately calculating, profane, narcissistic, bloodthirsty, evasive and unforgiving. He is never sentimental or sad.

Characteristically, he drones on self-indulgently about all kinds of subjects of interest to him, from the mechanics of the guillotine to his own physical endowment. Fuentes has him "going from person to person, pouring words in their ears."

This Fidel considers himself so persuasive and inspirational that, meeting with a man on the eve of his execution, the poor soul is made to believe that the altruistic Fidel is doing him justice. Elsewhere, Fidel notes that a group of admiring Cuban peasants are "mad at me for not leading them to their deaths."

He was referring to Moncada, his first assault on the old regime, when so many other Fidel recruits died in suicidal sequence.

This Fidel surprises, however, by admitting to conspiracies and hatreds that the real one would never openly share.

From his first appearance in these pages, Che Guevara is a flouncing rival, who Fidel from early on plots to be rid of. After the Argentine managed to survive his foolhardy guerrilla caper in the Congo, Fidel is delighted to have him try again, even more hopelessly in Bolivia.

Students of the Cuban Revolution readily remember one of its most traumatic early turning points: the explosion in Havana harbor of a munitions ship, la Coubre, with considerable loss of life. Fidel immediately blamed the United States and used the calamity to win support for his increasingly radical policies. It has been revolutionary gospel ever since that the ship was the target of a CIA plot.

But Fuentes's Fidel admits that it was all his doing. "It's simply about my being the great architect of destruction."

This autobiographical Fidel is also occasionally fallible. He tells us the explosion occurred in October 1959. It was actually five months later. Apparently, his photographic memory is not quite what he, and so many of his biographers, have always thought.

But this exposition of Fidel, with all his flaws, neurotic insecurities, and tantrums of the soul is an extraordinary accomplishment.

Fuentes's autobiography is Faulknerian in the extravagance of its language and leaps of imagination. At times it is also reminiscent of the soaring, magical prose of Fidel's friend Gabriel Garcia Márquez.

The translation by Anna Kushner — who, judging by the eloquent renditions into English of Cuban slang, must be Cuban-American — is perfectly turned. □

Brian Latell, distinguished Cuba analyst and author of the book, "After Fidel: The Inside Story of Castro's Regime and Cuba's Next Leader," is a senior research associate at ICCAS.

Latell served in the 1990s as the CIA's National Intelligence Officer for Latin America and taught at Georgetown University for 25 years.

He thanks University of Miami student researcher Lolita Sosa for her valuable assistance.

Cuba, Venezuela sign \$3 billion in deals

Cuba and Venezuela signed cooperation deals worth nearly \$3 billion on Dec. 12, underscoring President Hugo Chávez's role as Cuba's closest political and commercial ally, reported Reuters.

"We've signed 264 contracts worth a total of \$2.951 billion," Chávez said in a televised speech, adding that another 20 similar agreements would be signed this month.

Venezuela, an OPEC member, has become a vital source of energy for Cuba in recent years. It ships 98,000 barrels of crude oil a day to the cash-strapped Caribbean island on favorable financing terms.

The cooperation deals relate to health, fishing, education and sports projects. The two allies will also form at least seven joint state-run companies in the sugar, aluminum,

transport and farming industries.

Cuba, which is heavily dependent on imports of fuel and food, pays part of its Venezuelan oil bill with the services of 40,000 doctors and other professionals.

Chávez has joined Cuba in promoting leftist revolution as an alternative to U.S. free-market trade proposals. Both nations are at the heart of the ALBA alliance, which urges cooperation among leftist governments.

Trade between Cuba and Venezuela reached \$5.28 billion last year, compared with \$945 million in 2003, according to Cuban government statistics.

The two countries also cooperate closely in the military sphere; together, they have pursued multimillion-dollar defense deals with Russia, China and Iran.

POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Cuba's international profile rising

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

Cuba's international clout appears to be on the rise, following the Oct. 28 vote in the UN General Assembly in which a record 187 members voted in favor of a resolution condemning the U.S. embargo of Cuba (only three countries voted against the resolution: the United States, Israel and Palau).

On Jan. 1, Spain will assume the presidency of the European Union for six months, leveraging its position to push for a review of EU's Common Policy (1993) *vis-a-vis* Cuba.

But it's not only Spain. Britain's Catherine

events where Great Britain's inclinations can be clearly tested. First, at the diplomatic level, two major U.K. allies have undertaken several initiatives for closer relations with Havana.

In November, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith paid an official visit to Cuba — the first since 1995.

Smith noted that Cuba "contributes to development assistance in our region, providing medical assistance and training to Pacific island countries and East Timor." A pending issue in bilateral relations is Australia's keen interest in Cuba's nickel market.

Canada, meanwhile, also sent its minister



LARRY LUXNER

Oilmen at a Canadian rig in Varadero. Cuba is now Canada's 4th-largest trading partner in the Americas.

Ashton has quickly risen from relative obscurity to become the EU's new foreign minister — a post she assumed when the Lisbon Treaty took effect Dec. 1.

During a visit to Madrid, Ashton said the 27-member EU should "review its policy toward Cuba just as the United States is doing." Spain's foreign minister, Miguel Moratinos, said there was "total and absolute" agreement on this.

This review is aimed at creating a new EU-Cuba framework for cooperation, which will include the much-debated issues of human rights and democracy, as it was disclosed after a late November meeting between Cuba's foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez, and the EU "troika" in Brussels.

Simultaneously, the EU's commissioner for development and humanitarian aid, Karel De Gucht, spent several days in Cuba hammering out controversies and areas for cooperation, followed by the decision by Austria — a close ally of Germany — to restore cooperation and assistance with Havana.

Austria's decision (a close ally of Germany) to restore cooperation and assistance with the Cuban government. It was also obvious that opposition to such a new framework — especially from former communist countries like Poland and the Czech Republic — have cooled down since their acceptance of the Lisbon Treaty.

Lady Ashton's open support for Zapatero and Moratino's views on how to engage Cuba also coincided with three different sets of

of state for foreign affairs, Peter Kent, to Havana. Last year, bilateral trade came to \$1.7 billion, making the island Canada's 4th-largest trading partner in the Americas.

During Kent's visit, he met with top Cuban officials, Canadian investors and representatives of civil society — including visits to Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the University of Havana and Cuba's small Jewish community.

The third significant event — which took place in an atmosphere of extreme discretion — was the visit of a large group of British investors to Havana, also in late November.

The group of 20 or so U.K. energy companies was led by Brian Wilson, the former British energy minister, and held a closed-door seminar with Yadira García, Cuba's minister of basic industries,

Wilson, noting that British investors have an interest in Cuba's oil and gas sector, said "the Cubans have not yet had major finds in their sector off the Gulf of Mexico, but exploration is ongoing and there is significant international interest."

He added that Cuba "signed a big agreement with Russia for further exploration. It remains a fair bet that, at some point, there will be offshore discoveries..."

Other developments that enhanced Cuba's international standing included visits in November and early December by the prime ministers of Singapore, the presidents of Tanzania, Uganda and Seychelles, and the new vice-president of El Salvador. □

AGRICULTURE BRIEFS

CUBAN GOVERNMENT PUSHES URBAN FARMING

The Castro regime plans to expand land under cultivation by 600,000 hectares (1.48 million acres) through a program of "suburban agriculture." Program director Adolfo Rodríguez said Nov. 25 the new farms will produce fruit, dairy products and some meat.

Locating farms near cities will reduce the time needed to bring food to market and promote the substitution of draught animals for vehicles in agricultural tasks, the official said.

"This form of agriculture has to develop based on the interests and needs of each territory, so production flows in the shortest possible time, shattering all bureaucracy, preconceptions and obstacles," said Rodríguez.

Raúl Castro, who took the reins in July 2006 after older brother Fidel was stricken with a severe illness, has repeatedly complained about Cuba's poor farm productivity, noting that half of Cuba's arable land sits unused.

Raúl said earlier this year that his "maximum priority" is boosting domestic farm production, given rising world prices and Cuba's reliance on imports for over 80% of the food consumed by its 11.2 million residents.

The Castro regime has already reduced the amount of food that Cubans receive at subsidized prices via their ration cards.

VIRGINIA FARM EXPORTS TO CUBA UP 10%

State officials say Virginia's agricultural exports to Cuba are expected to rise by more than 10% this year.

Apples, poultry, soybeans and other items were worth about \$45 million in the first nine months of 2009, says Virginia's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. That's up from \$40.7 million in exports in all of 2008.

Agriculture Commissioner Todd Haymore, who recently visited Cuba as part of a delegation, says the island's food imports from the United States would drop around 37% in 2009.

NAWG PUSHES FOR EASING OF CUBA FOOD REGS

The National Association of Wheat Growers is urging members to contact Congress about the importance of passing a bill to ease trade restrictions with Cuba.

Co-sponsored by Collin Peterson (D-MN), chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, and Rep. Jerry Moran (R-KS), the bill:

- provides a direct payment provision for Cuban buyers, eliminating the need to go through banks in other countries to conduct agricultural trades.

- revises the current "payment of cash in advance" regulation by requiring agricultural exports to Cuba meet the same payment requirements as exports to other countries.

- allows U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba, reducing the bureaucratic red tape currently required for farmers to sell to the island.

Details: Karl Scronce, NAWG, 415 Second St. NE, #300, Washington, DC 20002. Tel: (202) 547-7800. Fax: (202) 546-2638. Email: karl.scronce@gmail.com. URL: www.wheatworld.org.

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.

Dec. 18: "Cuba and New Technologies," Washington. Breakfast discussion will examine impact of cellphones, Internet, blogging, video and other technologies on Cuban society, as well as U.S. policies with respect to telecommunications. Co-sponsored by Inter-American Dialogue and Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute. *Details: Inter-American Dialogue, 1211 Connecticut Ave. NW, #510, Washington, DC 20036. Tel: (202) 463-2578. Fax: (202) 822-9553. Email: derikson@thediologue.org. URL: www.thediologue.org.*

Jan. 28: AACCLA's Annual "Outlook on the Americas" Luncheon, Biltmore Hotel, Coral Gables, Fla. "As the first major hemispheric business event of 2010, this provides an opportunity for an open dialogue on the economic and political issues that will have the greatest impact on hemispheric trade and investment in the coming year." Cost: \$75. *Details: Allison Parmiter, Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America, 1615 H Street NW, Washington, DC 20062-2000. Tel: (202) 463-5573. Email: aparmiter@uschamber.com.*

Feb. 11-13: "Cuba 2010: An Island in a Global World," Florida International University, Miami. Sponsored by the Cuban Research Institute at FIU's Latin American and Caribbean Center, this event "will focus on the current political, economic, cultural and social dynamics on the island and the Cuban diaspora in the light of a changing world." *Details: Uva de Aragón, Associate Director, Cuban Research Institute, Florida Int'l University, DM 363, University Park, Miami, FL 33199. Tel: (305) 348-1991. Fax: (305) 348-3593. Email: aragonu@fiu.edu.*

Apr. 16-17: "Cuban Counterpoints," University of California at Berkeley. A UC-wide, interdisciplinary graduate student conference and workshop. Faculty from a range of disciplines (literature, sociology, ethnomusicology, anthropology, medicine, biology, education and more) will be on hand. "In keeping with the event's hybrid character, we encourage submissions of abstracts and/or proposals in a various range of formats and styles." *Details: Raúl Fernández, Chair, UC-Cuba Multi-Campus Research Program, School of Social Sciences, 3151 Social Science Plaza, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697. Email: rafernan@uci.edu.*

Apr. 24-May 6: US/Cuba Labor Exchange trip to Cuba. Visits to hospitals, schools and worker centers. Trip marks both the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and the 70th anniversary of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC). Cost: \$1,650 (includes round-trip airfare from Cancún, Mexico to Havana; hotel (double occupancy), breakfast and dinner, internal transportation, visas and translation services. *Details: US/Cuba Labor Exchange, PO Box 39188, Redford, MI 48239. Tel/Fax: (313) 575-4933. Email: laborexchange@aol.com.*

May 4-6: 14th Caribbean Hotel & Tourism Investment Conference (CHTIC 2010), Puerto Rico Convention Center, San Juan. Event brings together hoteliers, tourism officials, developers, bankers and others interested in Caribbean tourism to discuss and plan investment strategies. *Details: Linda Green, CHTA, 2655 Le Jeune Road, Suite #910, Coral Gables, FL 33134. Tel: (305) 443-3040. Fax: (305) 443-3005. URL: www.caribbeanhotelandtourism.com.*

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