Foundations bankroll U.S. organizations that favor lifting embargo against Cuba

BY ANA RADELAT

Activists and academics lobbying for an end to U.S. sanctions against Cuba depend on a handful of private foundations that give millions of dollars in grants every year.

For years, these foundations have bankrolled liberal groups hoping to topple the embargo—or at the very least wear down U.S. sanctions against the Castro regime. These programs inject life into the embargo debate, even if they don’t result in any substantial policy changes.

Lately the focus has been on lifting the ban on U.S. travel to Cuba. But an unresponsive White House and eroded support in Congress for letting all Americans travel freely to Cuba may prompt these foundations to shift priorities.

Andrea Panaritis is executive director of the New York-based Christopher Reynolds Foundation. In March 2001, according to its website, CRF “decided to phase out all other domestic grantmaking and concentrate the resources of the foundation solely on our Cuba effort.”

However, Panaritis said an inability to lift the travel ban might prompt her organization “to take a more flexible approach” with its funding this year. One result: less emphasis on projects seeking an end to the travel ban and more on cultural and academic exchanges.

“We might turn towards funding organizations that travel to Cuba or arrange travel to Cuba [by groups that can already get Treasury Department licenses for such travel],” Panaritis told us, though she stressed that her foundation is still committed to lifting the travel ban.

Anna Kuhn, executive director of the Washington-based Arca Foundation, said her organization’s board will consider several new proposals in June, with an eye on Capitol Hill. “What’s happening in Congress in terms of the travel bill will influence our decisions,” she said.

Kuhn told CubaNews that for years, “Arca has... See Foundations, page 2

Cuba experts say short-term prospects for foreign investment remain gloomy

BY LARRY LUXNER

Forty-five executives braved torrential rains and flooding Mar. 29 to attend a midtown Manhattan conference on the potential for U.S. investment in Cuba — a subject that seems to have been put on the back burner in the wake of President Raúl Castro’s sudden stepped-up aggression against dissidents in Havana.

Sponsored by the New York-based Americas Society/Council of the Americas and broadcast online, the event was moderated by Christopher Sabatini, editor-in-chief of Americas Quarterly.

It featured five panelists: Anna Szterenfeld, editor of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Business Latin America; Juan A.B. Belt, Latin America/Caribbean director at Chemonics International; Maria Werlau of the Free Society Project; economist Rafael Romeu of the IMF and Miami business consultant Teo Babun.

If the EIU’s latest report on Latin America is any indication, prospects for foreign investment definitely aren’t looking up for Cuba.

Out of 82 countries polled by the EIU, which looks at 91 separate variables, the Caribbean island ranked 79th in the world with a score of 4.27 on a 0-10 scale. That was also the worst of the 12 Latin American countries surveyed (the best was Chile, with a score of 7.75). In EIU’s 2010-14 forecast, Cuba scored slightly better at 4.61, meaning that in five years, Venezuela — not Cuba — will rank on the bottom.

“The largest factor influencing Cuba’s poor business environment is the small size of opportunities for investors, given the overwhelming dominance of the state in all economic activities,” Szterenfeld told her audience.

“In some categories, Cuba actually does better than some other Latin American countries, for example, in the labor category, where Cuba ranks 3rd in the region. Unfortunately, we don’t see a whole lot of opportunities in the next five years for an expansion of those areas in which foreign investment will be allowed.”

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supported education work and policy advocacy to promote change in U.S. policy toward Cuba," and a “more normalized relationship.”

She said Arca grantees have eroded public support for the embargo while influencing “elites in the media” including Washington Post columnists Eugene Robinson and George Will — to criticize U.S. policy.

Mavis Anderson, a Cuban expert at Latin America Working Group, said funding from foundations has helped her organization “educate” lawmakers and the public about the flaws in U.S. policy toward Cuba. LAWG, which received a $35,000 Arca grant and $85,000 from CRF last year, has long advocated for an end to the travel ban.

But a recent poll BBC-Harris poll reveals weak public support for change in Cuba policy. In that survey, issued in early March, 40% of respondents said the embargo should stay in place, while 36% said it should go. And 49% of those polled said they wouldn’t go to Cuba if allowed, while only 38% said they would.

Yet there’s a bright spot in the poll for those involved in Cuba policy: 75% of respondents said Cuba is important to the United States.

**EMBARGO FOES AT A DISADVANTAGE**

Anti-embargo advocates receive much less money than the millions of dollars the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department hand out to groups that support the status quo on Cuba.

“That is a real disadvantage for us,” said LAWG’s Anderson. In fact, LAWG and other non-profits seeking an end to the embargo are bound by federal restrictions on their political activities — although their opponents accuse them of violating that by lobbying Congress, and LAWG’s own website boasts of its “relationships on Capitol Hill.”

In addition, embargo-supporting Cuban exiles have created political action committees that have influenced Congress to keep the sanctions intact. There are no equivalent PACs or coordinated campaigns to raise political cash on the other side of the debate.

“We can’t count on the political system for change,” said Ana Valdes, the founder of CubaL, a website and update it continuously with the latest news about Cuba in English and Spanish.

**ANTI-EMBARGO GROUPS RECEIVING FOUNDATION GRANTS IN 2009**

- **Alliance for Responsible Cuba Policy:** $25,000 CRF
- **Center for Democracy in the Americas:** $127,000 CRF, $50,000 Arca
- **Center for International Policy:** $100,000 Ford Foundation, $55,000 CRF
- **Inter-American Dialogue:** $48,200 CRF
- **Latin America Working Group:** $85,000 CRF, $35,000 Arca
- **Lexington Institute:** $70,000 Ford, $50,000 CRF
- **National Security Archive:** $50,000 Ford Foundation, $45,000 CRF, $75,000 Arca
- **New America Foundation:** $100,000 CRF, $50,000 Arca
- **Washington Office on Latin America:** $70,000 CRF, $40,000 Arca

Each sent just $1 to a PAC.

**USAID’s controversial Cuba program to be revamped**

**BY ANA RADELAT**

The Castro regime hates it, liberal groups criticize its goals and Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) has put a hold on its operations. But the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Cuba program — the object of all this controversy — has been frozen since President Obama took office last year.

Established by the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, the USAID Cuba program has given tens of millions of dollars to exile groups, academics and other organizations working to “democratize” Cuba.

But the agency hasn’t released one cent of grant money since Obama moved into the White House, and has issued just one request for proposals from prospective grantees.

That $1.5 million contract, posted Mar. 15, would go to whoever submits the best proposal to deliver humanitarian aid to the families of political prisoners in Cuba.

Yet the program’s current woes guarantee that lone grant won’t be awarded anytime soon. Groups that depend on USAID Cuba money are in big trouble.

“All the programs have been running out,” said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami’s Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies (ICCAS).

Suchlicki’s program, which conducts studies on a Cuban transition to democracy, has received more than $3 million from USAID since ICCAS was founded in 2001. But USAID hasn’t distributed any of its $20 million appropriation for Cuba programs in 2009, or its $20 million appropriation for 2010. It’s unclear if there is unspent money left over from 2008, when former President Bush succeeded in obtaining $40 million for the program.

Suchlicki said he’s had to lay off three staffs, but will continue his work, even without new funding.

“I’m not going to stop, but I’m crippled,” he told CubaNews. “And the sad thing is the Cuban government has achieved its objective: to destroy the USAID Cuba program.”

The Castro regime, which has long accused USAID of violating its sovereignty, has recently escalated its criticism, seemingly oblivious to the program’s near-total lack of activity. One reason for the freeze is that Obama was slow to nominate a USAID director.

Rajiv Shah, a former food safety expert at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was confirmed to the post Christmas Eve. That was three weeks after Alan Gross, a subcontractor seminar was titled “Rapprochement with Cuba, Good for Tampa Bay, Good for Florida, Good for America.”

Fox, a Cuban-American who failed in his 2006 bid to unseat Rep. Kathy Castor in the race for Florida’s 11th Congressional District, said the work funded by foundations is valuable, but that more political work is needed to change U.S. policy.

“There are one million Cuban-Americans who feel like I do,” he said. “Just think if they
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One member of the audience challenged panelists to publicly state the last time they’d personally been to Cuba, and if their organization receives any U.S. government funding. Babún refused to answer the question, saying it was irrelevant. The other panelists ignored the request and focused on economic issues.

Asked if Cuba could recover from its current economic difficulties, the IMF’s Romeu noted that the 5% annual growth Cuba enjoyed from 1995 to 2003 “was just a reactivation of under-utilized capacity and a restarting of businesses that were shut down” during the Special Period in the early 1990s.

“And the growth we’ve seen on the order of 8% annually from 2003 to 2008 is, in our view, unsustainable going forward” in the event relations between Cuba and its chief benefactor, Venezuela, were to change, said Romeu.

“Any altering in the terms of trade opens them up to what they had under the Soviet Union, if not worse,” said the economist. “The ability to deliver a stable environment and all the institutions that depend on stable growth and output is somewhat questionable. You have to anchor your economy around something, and if you’ve anchored it around an external subsidy, then it’s very vulnerable.”

HEAVY INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE LIKELY

Babún said the regime is specifically looking for foreign investment in Cuba’s infrastructure — namely ports, airports, railroads and telecommunications.

“What Cuba is focusing on now is how to get their ports up to a level that they can participate in much larger-scale trade,” he explained. “They need to work on the port of Mariel, where they’re already providing contracts with companies from Venezuela and the Far East. Mariel may become a transshipment port and support for Havana in the future. And they need to modernize the port of Matanzas for receiving oil tankers. Everything related to energy production and distribution is a high priority for Cuba right now.”

Babún added that the island’s rail system is the only one in the Caribbean built to the same specifications as U.S. railroads. “Therefore, if conditions were right, you could ship something from Chicago to Santiago de Cuba and never take it off a rail car,” he said.

Since Cuba opened for oil exploration in 1993, there’s been $2 billion in foreign investment — particularly given the U.S. Geological Survey’s estimate that that Cuba’s offshore economic exclusion zone contains around five billion barrels of petroleum.

In that regard, said Chemonics’ Belt, “Cuba has a more favorable investment climate for oil exploration than many Latin American countries, and obviously much better than Mexico, where you cannot do exploration.”

Cuba was pragmatic about bringing in the private sector, he said. “On the other hand, it’s been done with a total lack of transparency. We still don’t know how much Grupo Domos paid for 49% of the Cuban phone company.”

Indeed, he said, “Cuba’s telecom sector is the most underdeveloped in the Americas. Cuba has significantly fewer cellphones than Haiti, so that would be an area where foreign investment would really count. It’s the easiest sector to bring in investment, so when the bullets were still flying in Afghanistan and Iraq, they were putting up cell towers. Cuba — with its good regulatory framework — could see tremendous investment because there’s tremendous pent-up demand.”

Yet there are “severe restrictions” on what U.S. investors can actually do in the telecom sector, Sabatini cautioned.

“The new regulations are designed with the idea that donations can be made, and that roaming agreements can be established. But even that requires basic infrastructure that is prohibited under current U.S. regulations,” he said. “Even donating cellphones or prepaid cards is in some cases prohibited because of end-user requirements. These laws on the U.S. regulatory side have really fallen short of what the United States can do.”

TOUGH ENVIRONMENT TO DO BUSINESS IN

Even without the embargo, Cuba remains an incredibly difficult place to do business, said panelists, given the island’s lack of transparency, its cumbersome approval process and the negative publicity that could accompany multinationals which do invest there.

“Cuba is persistently ranked as one of the worst business environments in the world,” said Werlau. “This isn’t just the EIU saying it, but also Euromoney, D&B and Institutional Investor. Why? Because the Cuban economy is in shambles and the prospects for recovery are not there, unless there’s significant structural reform, and there’s no political imperative to do that.”

Compounding that, said Werlau, is the fact that Cuba has the 2nd-biggest external debt in the world (exceeded only by Indonesia, with 22 times Cuba’s population). “Cuba has been shut out of international markets since the late ‘80s, and has to resort to very expensive short-term financing, which leads to situations where foreign businesses in Cuba have had all their hard-currency accounts frozen and can’t get their money out.”

Asked what’s likely to happen in the next five years, Babún predicted there’ll be more FDI simply because Cuba is desperate.

“The U.S. is trying very hard to find a middle ground to seek engagement with the Cubans, to perhaps begin a process to assist them,” he said. “That will triumph as the Cubans and Americans begin to find a common denominator, where they both win.”

Babún added that “Cuba will be forced to begin to open the market a little in the small-business sector, whether Fidel likes it or not.”

Werlau said that when it comes to foreign investment, “it’s clear there’s a focus on Chinese, Russian and Venezuelan companies as long as the system prevails. After the fiasco with Pebercan, a Canadian joint venture with Cupet to extract petroleum, that sector has been moved to the Venezuelans. We’ve seen a total retrenching in that area. I’m not hopeful [about U.S. investment] unless there’s a real overhaul of Cuba’s political system.”

And that won’t happen — especially if Washington keeps making such an overhaul a condition of better relations with Havana.

“The Cubans have been very clear all along that they’re absolutely opposed to conditionality,” Szterenfeld concluded. “There’s been no forward movement on normalization. The measures taken by the Obama administration were mostly just rolling back what Bush had implemented. Secondly, the Cubans see them as part of U.S. policy. They are not concessions that will warrant any reciprocal movement on Cuba’s part.”

Larry Luxner, publisher of CubaNews, attended the AS/COA Cuba conference in New York.
Cuba prepares jittery public for possible earthquakes

BY ARMANDO H. PORTELA

For the first time in history, the Castro government is taking steps to deal with the possibility of a major earthquake hitting southeastern Cuba.

This unprecedented official interest is linked to a recent series of minor and medium earthquakes in populated areas of eastern Cuba, and obviously with the still-fresh images of the Jan. 12 quake in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

On Apr. 12 — exactly three months later — Cuba’s National Seismologic Service Network registered a 4.4-magnitude tremor south of La Plata, in the municipality of Guama, in the province of Santiago de Cuba. This marks the 23rd perceptible tremor to occur this year, said experts.

Official measures include designing a response mechanism in case of a big shake. For the first time, everyone except for children has been given instructions on what to do if a major earthquake strikes, how to protect themselves and where to run.

President Raúl Castro — accompanied by a group of top-ranking military, Civil Defense officials and local authorities — spent two days traveling through Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo provinces right after some alarming quakes shook the zone.

“International experience shows that when an earthquake occurs, local authorities are left in shock,” said Castro, explaining that in Cuba’s case it is already known who would be in charge in case of a sudden major disaster.

Although very little was reported following the meetings, authorities likely identified the weakest points of the civil and military infrastructure (buildings, housing, communications, power, water and food reserves, healthcare facilities) and gave instructions on what to do in case of catastrophe.

Following the Jan. 12 quake in Haiti, residents of Santiago de Cuba (423,000 inhabitants), Guantánamo (208,000) and other southeastern Cuban cities were alarmed by unusually high seismic activity.

Frequent tremors — many of them magnitude 4.0 and stronger — were enough to draw the direct attention of Cuba’s top rulers.

Since Haiti’s devastating earthquake, which killed an estimated 230,000 people and left hundreds of thousands more homeless, the earth has shaken at least two dozen times in Santiago and Guantánamo. The most intense of these occurred Mar. 20 southeast of the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay.

That 5.6 tremor injured a teenager and damaged some houses. Neighbors reportedly ran out of their homes screaming, several times during the main tremor and the aftershocks, with many of them sleeping in parks and public open spaces.

By Mar. 22, according to official media, the earthquakes left 316 private houses and 19 buildings with “structural damages” in Santiago de Cuba province alone.

Authorities didn’t take any chances, rushing to the area to check for damage and put into place a response mechanism in case of another big shock.

Dr. Vladimir Moreno-Toirán, head of the Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Sismológicas in Santiago de Cuba, said that this increased seismic activity was unleashed by the January quake in Haiti.

The tremors were concentrated offshore south and southeast of Santiago along the edge of the Bartlett trough, a very active zone that looks like maze of geological faults in the limit between the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates.

This is the first time the Cuban state at least publicly seems to be preparing a response for a natural disaster besides hurricanes, which are all-too-familiar to Cubans. Time will tell whether that response will be adequate.

Bacardi defeats Pernod in battle over rum trademark

A Delaware judge rejected a lawsuit by Pernod Ricard SA to stop rival Bacardi Ltd. from selling Havana Club branded rum in this country, Reuters reported Apr. 7.

Pernod will appeal the ruling, the latest legal twist in a decades-long trademark dispute.

Both companies sell rum under the Havana Club name, Pernod outside the United States and Bacardi within it.

The ruling by U.S. District Judge Sue Robinson in Wilmington was the latest in more than 13 years of U.S. litigation between the companies over which company controls the trademarked name.

In its 2006 lawsuit filed in federal court in Wilmington, Pernod Ricard USA LLC claimed Bacardi USA Inc. had no right to use the Havana Club trademark where it had begun in Florida selling rum under that name.

Pernod, which sold 3.4 million cases of Havana Club during its last fiscal year, also accused Bacardi of false advertising by misleading consumers into believing that its rum is made in Cuba, as Pernod’s is, when in fact it is made in Puerto Rico.

But Robinson concluded that Bacardi rum has a Cuban heritage, having derived from a family recipe first used in that country around 1930, roughly three decades before Fidel Castro took power.

Robinson also found that because Bacardi’s labels “truthfully” show that its rum is “distilled and crafted in Puerto Rico,” its labeling is neither false nor misleading.

Pernod showed “no evidence that today’s Havana Club rum product differs from the original pre-revolutionary Cuban rum in any significant respect,” Robinson wrote in her 22-page ruling. “As the expression goes, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.”

Vincent Palladino, a partner at New York’s Ropes & Gray LLP which represents Pernod Ricard USA, said “we are very disappointed in the ruling. We believe the judge committed fundamental errors on the law, and in all likelihood we will be appealing.”

A Bacardi spokeswoman told Reuters the company applauds the ruling. “This is yet another court decision supporting Bacardi’s legitimate and rightful ownership of the Havana Club rum trademark and brand,” she wrote.

Bacardi said it bought the rights to the Havana Club trademark and remaining rum assets still owned by the Arechabala family in 1997. The only Havana Club-branded rum sold in the U.S. is Bacardi’s, Robinson said.
JUSTICE BACK CHARTER AIRLINES IN CUBA LAWSUIT

Declaring U.S.-Cuba charter flights a vital national interest, the Justice Department is opposing a Cuban-American woman’s attempt to make air charter companies pay a $27 million judgment she won against Cuba’s communist government, AP reported.

Ana Margarita Martínez was awarded the cash in 2001 after claiming in a lawsuit that she was tricked into marrying a Cuban spy so he could infiltrate Miami’s exile community. In an attempt to satisfy the judgment, her lawyers sought earlier this year to collect fees eight air charter companies pay to Cuban tour companies for permission to land there.

The charter companies asked a federal judge to intervene, and on Apr. 1 the Justice Department filed papers siding with the companies.

“The direct flights they provide are vital for maintaining contacts that are in the national interest,” Ricardo Zuniga, the State Department’s acting coordinator for Cuban affairs, said in an affidavit. “A disruption in licensed air charter service would cause serious harm to U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.”

Martinez has collected $200,000 in frozen Cuban assets in the U.S. but continues to push for the full $27 million. She’s repeatedly said her goal is not to halt travel between the two countries.

According to the Miami Herald, charter companies say direct flights by Cuban-Americans to their homeland skyrocketed 70% in 2009 and are expected to jump another 36% this year.

PARTY SEEKS CHURCH HELP TO FIGHT CORRUPTION

Cuba’s Communist Party is asking the island’s churches and religious groups to help it stamp out the small-time corruption, petty theft and apathy that plague daily life, AP reported Apr. 2.

President Raúl Castro and other top officials met privately with non-Catholic religious leaders, urging them to back the regime’s announced efforts to crack down on graft and inefficiency.

“Together we should broaden what we do so that all of us Cubans become better, more honest, principled workers,” Caridad Diego, the party’s head of religious affairs, told Protestant and Jewish elders as well as top Santeria priests.

CUBAN DIPLOMAT DEFECTS IN MEXICO CITY

A Cuban diplomat who disappeared with her husband from her post at the Cuban embassy in Mexico last month has told relatives they are safe, the Miami Herald reported Apr. 10.

Yusimil Casanas, 25, who worked in the passport section of Cuba’s Mexico City embassy, and her husband Michel Rojas, 32, disappeared Mar. 17 and the embassy car assigned to them was found parked near the U.S. embassy in the Mexican capital, the Herald reported.

Cuban, U.S. and Mexican authorities have all declined to comment on the apparent defection.

The Herald quoted an uncle of Casanas, Esteban Casanas Lostal, who lives in Canada, as saying that the missing diplomat called her mother in Cuba and reported that she and Rojas were “safe in the United States” but that she could not reveal exactly where they were.

In their own words ...

“It is my personal belief that the Castros do not want to see an end to the embargo or normalization with the United States, because they would lose all their excuses for what hasn’t happened in Cuba in the last 50 years ... If you look at any opening to Cuba, you can almost chart how the Castro regime does something to try to stymie it. I find that very sad.”

— Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking Apr. 9 during an event at Kentucky’s University of Louisville.

“We know there’s an excess of hundreds of thousands of workers in the budgeted and enterprise sectors [and] some analysts calculate that the excess of jobs is more than one million. [There are] inflated payrolls, very inflated payrolls, terribly inflated payrolls. The revolution will not forsake anyone. I will fight to create the conditions so that all Cubans have honorable jobs.”

— Raúl Castro, in an Apr. 11 speech to the Cuban Communist Youth in Havana.

“Raul’s stunning revelation contradicts Cuba’s official unemployment rate of 1.6%.

“He does exercises every day. He is more disciplined than ever because now he eats his meals at more reasonable hours. He goes to bed very early and doesn’t work until seven or eight in the morning like he used to.”

— Raúl Castro, discussing his older brother Fidel, who turns 84 in August.

“The situation we face, with the withholdings in banks, has been relieved in recent months, and we can assure you that we’re working permanently to solve this problem.”

— Rodrigo Malmierca, Cuba’s minister of foreign trade, speaking Mar. 22 at the Committee for Cuban-Spanish Business Cooperation in Havana. He addressed concerns over Cuban debts and the freezing of Spanish exporters’ bank accounts.

“My husband and I are free now, we’re on free soil. But we are continuing our fight for freedom in Cuba.”

— Dolla Leal, founder of Ladies in White. She and her husband, ex-political prisoner Nelson Aguiar Ramirez, 64, left Cuba on Apr. 8 and now live in New Jersey.

“Cuba is not the enemy. She may frustrate the American proclivity for democracy promotion, but her behavior is nothing near as nefarious as U.S. allies elsewhere. The time to engage is now. Cubans are increasingly confabbing about reform while we sideline ourselves from the conversation.”


“I join my voice with brave individuals across Cuba and a growing chorus around the world in calling for an end to the repression, for the immediate, unconditional release of all political prisoners in Cuba, and for respect for the basic rights of the Cuban people.”

— President Obama, reacting Mar. 24 to the death of hunger-striker Orlando Zapata and the Castro regime’s violent crackdown against the Ladies in White.

“The general assumption — that if the U.S. administration dropped its restrictions, there’s going to be a mass exodus of all the ships to Cuba — is clearly not going to happen. No one knows what the government of Cuba will do.”

— Collin Murphy, VP for destination and strategic development at Norwegian Cruise Line, speaking at the recent U.S.-Cuba Travel Summit in Cancún.

“For Fidel and Raúl Castro’s government, there is not one single legitimate oppositionist. In their mind-set, any person who opposes Fidel and Raúl Castro is a common criminal ... and as long as the current generation of Castro is around, there won’t be changes of any kind.”

— Dissident journalist Guillermo Farías, now in the sixth week of a hunger strike, in comments Apr. 12 to the Miami Herald’s Andrés Oppenheimer.

“If Cuba were to free its political prisoners, it would have more authority to demand respect for its regime and its way of doing things.”

— Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, normally a sympathizer of the Cuban government, speaking in support of Guillermo Farías.
Las Damas de Blanco — Ladies in White — staged a flurry of protests in March, underscoring just how far the group has come since its quiet start in 2003.

On Mar. 25, Hollywood star Gloria Estefan led a pro-Damas march in Miami. Actor Andy Garcia organized a similar event in Los Angeles three days later. Even President Obama got into the act, issuing a statement in support of Las Damas and others who demand that Cuba free its political prisoners.

“Today, I join my voice with brave individuals across Cuba and a growing chorus around the world in calling for an end to the repression,” declared the president.

Las Damas is a “remarkable organization,” said Ann Louise Bardach, author of the book After Fidel. “What’s there to criticize?” she asked. “They walk silently down Quinta Avenida because their loved ones are in prison.”

Leaders of Las Damas say they’re grateful for all the sudden attention.

“In the beginning, no one knew about us,” Yolanda Huerga, one of about a dozen of the group’s founding members, told CubaNews. “But little by little, Las Damas de Blanco has gotten the world to pay attention to human rights violations in Cuba.”

Huerga, 50, took part in the Miami march along with Josefa López, 42, and tens of thousands of other people.

The two helped start Las Damas after their husbands were jailed in March 2003. The men have since been freed and have settled in Florida, where they and their wives work to free Cuba’s remaining political prisoners.

“In Cuba, we’re rejected,” said López. “But here, we’re cheered. It’s so beautiful. The entire world is seeing the reality. I think the hour of freedom is quite near.”

Las Damas gradually lengthened the march length while you’re marching, while a mob has you surrounded and is shouting at you. But when you’re alone, or walking on the street, people will come up and say, ‘God bless you.’ Or they flash the peace sign. They tell you, ‘The people are with you.’ I experienced that.”

Now in Florida, Huerga is one of the group’s U.S. representatives. She and her son Gabriel, 16, moved to Miami after Vázquez was released from prison in 2004.

She said it was painful for her to see photos of police forcing Las Damas members onto buses during a Mar. 17 protest. The group’s spokeswoman, Laura Pollán, whose husband Hector Maseda is in prison, said her finger was broken while state security agents forced her off the street and onto a bus.

“We are protesting peacefully and we are not going to get on the bus of a government that has kept our family members in prison for seven years,” French news agency AFP quoted Pollán as saying before she was shoved into the bus.

“Board them by force, it’s what they de-
serve. This is a provocation!” yelled Margarita Rodriguez, described as a housewife in a crowd of pro-government demonstrators.

Huerda said she spoke to Pollan afterward, telling her, ‘Laura, that broken finger really is worth it. The government’s beating of women has just buried the Cuban government in the eyes of the world. Nobody can defend that.”

Many bloggers joined in criticizing authorities’ treatment of Las Damas.

Cuban blogger Yoani Sanchez wrote: “I shudder to imagine a Cuba where physical — and legal — attacks against people, for their political affiliation or ideological leanings, continue. What a sad country we will have if the authorities continue to consider it normal to ‘teach a good lesson’ to anyone who contradicts the official viewpoint.”

Among those leading the week of Las Damas demonstrations in March was Reyna Luisa Tamayo. Her son, dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo, died on Feb. 23 after fasting for more than 85 days.

One day after Zapata’s death, Guillermo Fariñas, 48, began his own hunger strike. He vows not to eat until 26 political prisoners reports in need of medical care are freed.

Granma, Cuba’s Communist Party newspaper, criticized foreign news coverage of the protest, saying it was part of a campaign aimed at discrediting the Cuban government.

“Cuba will not accept pressure or blackmail,” screamed a Granma headline in red letters. “Important Western media groups are again calling attention to a prefabricated lie.”

NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE REGIME

Bardach, who has written about Cuba since 1992, said Zapata’s death and the demonstrations that have followed have created new problems for the Cuban government.

“I think it’s been very troubling to the Castro’s,” she said. “They’re very concerned.”

Members of Las Damas say they worry about their loved ones.

“We are the Mariana Grajaleses of these times and we will not tire until our men are out on the streets,” said Noelia Pedraza, whose husband, Ariel Sigler, was jailed in March 2003. Grajales fought for Cuban independence in the 1800s. Her sons were Antonio and Jose Maceo, two heroes in the independence struggle.

Like Grajales, Pedraza said, Las Damas members are also fighting for change. And she rejects accusations that the U.S. government finances the group.

“All that is a lie,” she said CubaNews. “We are fighting for our ideas, for our loved ones, not because they’re paying us. There are days when opposition members don’t even have anything to eat.”

Some dissidents accept medicine, books and cameras from foreign embassies, “but they’ve never given us money,” said Pedraza, adding that hers is a non-violent group. “We are innocent and never use any weapons. We simply and fully express what we feel. As long as I have blood in my veins, I am going to keep fighting for the freedom of all prisoners and for a free and democratic Cuba.”

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. See his blog at http://alongthemalecon.blogspot.com/.

Family of Cuban dissident Ariel Sigler worries that he’ll die in prison

He’s a former heavyweight boxing champion who once weighed more than 250 pounds. But after seven years in a Cuban jail, Ariel Sigler is “a bag of bones and skin,” says his brother, Miguel.

“Ariel is a cadaver,” he said. “Pictures of him are like something you’d see in a German concentration camp.”

Members of Las Damas de Blanco and other Cuban activists have stepped up demands in recent weeks that the socialist government release political prisoners.

They worry Ariel Sigler, 46, may die before he ever sees freedom. He has spent the last 18 months in hospitals, but his health continues to decline, his relatives say.

Miguel Sigler, 48, said he saw proof of that when he saw the latest images of his brother, video taken at Jan. 8 at the January wake.

Sigler estimated that his younger brother had lost more than half his body weight, dropping to around 100 pounds.

“People thought we were exaggerating when we talked about how bad he looked after visiting him in prison,” he told CubaNews.

“No one imagined that what we were saying was true.”

Video clips posted on the Baracuteru Cuban blog and other websites show a rail-thin man with sunken cheekbones in a wheelchair at the January wake.

Miguel Sigler said he barely recognized his once-strapping brother. “That, to me, isn’t Ariel. He’s paralyzed from the waist down and doctors don’t know why. They poke his legs with needles and he doesn’t react.”

After the wake, the video shows, Sigler is loaded onto a stretcher in the back of a vehicle. As it rumbles off into the darkness, his supporters can be heard chanting loudly, “Down with the dictatorship! Down with the Castro brothers! Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!”

Ariel Sigler is the youngest of eight brothers. He grew up in Matanzas province and was soon immersed in opposition politics. Authorities arrested him and his brother Guido in March 2003.

They accused the brothers of accepting money from U.S. authorities as part of a plot to undermine the Cuban government.

Police raided Ariel’s home on Mar. 18, 2003. They seized $2,076 in cash, two Underwood typewriters, two shortwave radios, four passes to enter the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and other ‘counterrevolutionary’ material, a court document shows.

Among the brothers’ alleged crimes: Gathering in a park and shouting: “Down with the dictatorship,” “Down with Fidel” and “Long live human rights.” On Apr. 4, 2003, Ariel was sentenced to 25 years in prison, and Guido, 20 years.

“They did nothing,” said Ariel Sigler’s wife, Noelia Pedraza. “It’s unjust that they’re serving such sentences only for thinking differently and expressing what they feel.”

Police also arrested Miguel Sigler. He received a 26-month sentence on charges of disobedience and resisting authorities. He was freed in January 2005 and later moved to Miami with his family.

He said he continues to push for the release of brothers and credits Ladies in White with helping to raise awareness of the cause.

“The strength of Las Damas de Blanco has moved the entire independence struggle.”

Antonio and Jose Maceo, two heroes in the independence struggle.

“Everyone is well aware of cases like mine, of robust people, physically strong and in excellent health, who because of the monstrous methods of state security have died in prisons, hospitals and psychiatric centers,” Sigler said.

“If I die, I point out the culprit: Cuban State Security, the executioners of innocent people, never use any weapons. We are fighting for our ideas, for our loved ones, not because they’re paying us. There are days when opposition members don’t even have anything to eat.”

Miguel Sigler is concerned about Ariel’s health. He said his brother has a range of problems, from kidney and gallbladder disease to osteoporosis, arthritis, pneumonia, gastritis and more.

Yet Ariel Sigler remains in good spirits and is not considering a hunger strike or suicide as a way out, he said in a letter posted on Marc Masferrer’s blog, Uncommon Sense.

“I have infinite desires to continue to live and recover in order to keep fighting for my country,” Sigler said. “I love life and will fight to keep living.”

Ariel Sigler and his relatives blame Cuban authorities for letting prisoners fall into such poor health.

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“If I die, I point out the culprit: Cuban State Security, the executioner arm of the Castro dictatorship.”

Miguel Sigler said he hopes his brother will be freed from custody and allowed to leave the country to seek medical care elsewhere.

“We don’t want men and women to continue dying simply for expressing their ideas,” he said.

– Tracey Eaton

April 2010 – CubaNews
Cuba’s extensive road network desperately needs fixing

BY ARMANDO H. PORTELA

No matter how outdated and neglected Cuba’s highway system may be, the fact is that the island boasts a road network of 122,998 kms (70,229 miles) — including 18,533 miles of paved roads. And that network stretches to every corner of the island, every city and village, and every port, airport, agricultural, industrial and tourism center.

Only a few isolated towns in the mountainous coffee-producing regions of eastern Cuba, or the remote boggy rice paddies and swamps in the plains, are not accessible by paved roads.

Most of Cuba’s network consists of narrow, zigzagging two-lane roads more reminiscent of paved trails than modern thoroughfares.

Eighty years after its inauguration, the Central Highway (Carretera Central in Spanish) is still the backbone of the network, running along the middle of Cuba from the city of Pinar del Río (140,000 inhabitants) in the west to Santiago de Cuba (423,000 inhabitants) in the east — a distance of 709 miles.

Since the mid-20th century, wider expressways have been built, mainly near Havana — but for six decades of road construction, the progress is relatively modest.

Cuba’s main expressway is the Autopista Nacional, also known as “Ocho Vías” for its eight lanes near Havana — a never-ending project that envisioned linking the nation’s capital to Cuba’s main cities via a four- to eight-lane national highway.

After 30 years, this megaproject — which also included a network of secondary roads to cities, towns and economic hubs along its route — is still incomplete, with less than 400 miles built and only a few accessory roads and overpasses finished.

Cuba’s geography and economy favored the early development of the far-reaching network. The island measures 745 miles along its axis, approximately the same distance as from Miami to Charlotte, N.C., or from New York to Chicago.

At its narrowest point near Havana, it’s only 22 miles wide, and in the widest place it’s 125 miles (with an average width of 65 miles).

Nearly 75% of Cuba’s territory is flat or consists of gently rolling hills, with the remaining 25% hills and forested mountains. Swamps don’t pose an obstacle for transport, while croplands and pasturelands are evenly spread throughout the island.

Lacking large rivers or other natural barriers, Cuba’s locations are easily accessible, and road construction is not a real technical problem. The land-grabbing sugar industry — which for centuries was the backbone of Cuba’s economy — was evenly distributed nationwide, promoting settlements throughout the entire sugarcane growing area.

At one time, 161 sugar mills dotted the island; roads rapidly followed settlements. Cuba’s density of paved roads is today around 43.3 miles per 100 sq miles of territory, putting the island far ahead of many other Latin American nations. When counting only 1,500 feet
Plains and croplands, that density rises to 57.7 miles of paved roads per 100 sq miles.

The road network in Cuba is quite simple. It consists of a main axis running the length of the island, from Cape San Antonio lighthouse at the extreme west to the lighthouse and village of Maisí to the east.

The extension to Cape San Antonio is a recently finished project, while the short stretch to Maisí is not paved yet.

**Expenditures Have Fallen Dramatically**

As with the rail network (see CubaNews, March 2010, page 8), paved roads connect all major urban centers, economic zones and ports either directly or through branches and the main axis — the Carretera Central — closely follows the watershed as a way to minimize the need for bridges.

Roads, however, have not escaped the economic crisis unleashed after the fall of the Communist bloc 20 years ago. Statistics show that by the late 1980s, at the heyday of Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union, the island was spending 61 centavos of every 100 pesos of GDP on road construction and repair. By last year, road expenditures had dropped to only 1 centavo per 100 pesos of GDP.

In real terms, this translates into a drop from 13.7 million pesos in 2006 to only 2.1 million pesos in 2009. At an approximate cost of 100,000 pesos to repave one km of road, it can be roughly estimated that all the work done in 2009 was equivalent to resurfacing 13 miles, or 0.07% of the island's paved road network.

That compares to 172 million pesos on road expenditures in 1985, though it's difficult to specify the kind of peso Cuba is using, since one dollar equals 26 regular pesos, while one convertible peso (CUC) is worth $1.08.

In the 1980s, one peso was worth one dollar for Cuban accounts, and the CUC didn't exist.

Recently, the province of Ciego de Avila made national news after it repaved six miles of the Carretera Central.

In May 2009, the Communist Party newspaper Granma reported that 80% of the 3,823 bridges in Cuba's network of paved roads were in poor shape. The article said Cuba was only capable of repairing 25 bridges a year.

This cannot help but have negative consequences for the road network. Occasional reports in official media talk of a prolonged lack of maintenance that has rendered some secondary roads relatively useless.

On the other hand, there's also been less demand on the road network due to much less traffic — especially after the downsizing of the sugar industry in 2002.

Over the past two decades, the volume of transported cargo has dropped by half — from 75 million tons a year in the late 1980s to 41.6 million tons in 2009. The number of passengers has also fallen, from 578 million bus passengers in 1986 to 124 million in 2006 and only 109 million last year.

To get a more graphic representation of the decreased use of Cuban highways, high-resolution satellite images show empty country roads — everywhere, all the time. Only Hava-
The above map shows approximate travel times around the capital — using the Capitol Building (shown with an asterisk) as the starting point — in ideal circumstances of low traffic and normal speed.

For instance, a trip from Havana’s Parque Central to the city of Matanzas will take around one hour and twenty minutes using the four-lane Vía Blanca Highway, the most direct route. Driving from that same point to the port of Mariel, west of Havana, will take roughly one hour assuming no wrong turns or other delays.

The network of expressways built around Havana since the 1950s includes Vía Blanca (VB) and Vía Monumental (VM) to the east and Vía Azul (CN) to the west, along with those created after the 1970s: National (A1) and Pinar (A4) Expressways, Havana Loop Highway (HR), Managua Highway (MH) and Novia del Mediodía (NM). They have a radial pattern converging in the capital from all cardinal points. This layout expedites traffic to agricultural and tourist zones, to other cities and towns around the capital, to near ports and airports, to the oilfields near Matanzas and to the military garrisons on Havana’s outskirts.

These thoroughfares will need serious improvements, however, to accommodate modern levels of traffic — from widening in some cases to construction of roadside services such as gas stations in others. Two roads, the Managua and Novia del Mediodía expressways, were built in the 1970s to serve the military; both will need to be extended in order to become economically practical.

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**Attorney general named**

Gen. Dario Delgado Cura on Mar. 23 was appointed attorney general of Cuba, replacing Gen. Juan Escalona Reguera, who was released from his post “for reasons of health.”

The Cuban Council of State directed the substitution “at the initiative of its president, Raul Castro, following consultation with the Political Bureau of the Communist Party,” said a TV announcement.

A similar announcement Mar. 8 told of the removal of Gen. Rogelio Acevedo González from his post as president of the Institute of Civil Aeronautics.

Delgado is deputy attorney general and chief military prosecutor, with vast experience in legal and management work. Escalona, 78, will be given other duties in the Council of State’s secretarial staff. The announcement recognized “his meritorious labor” for more than 25 years.


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**Roads — FROM PAGE 9**

ana and its immediate suburbs appear to show any activity.

Anecdotal references concerning the conditions of Cuba’s roads abound. A trip along the best stretches of the network is usually enough to convince travelers of the network’s many ills. These include poor road surfacing, deficient signalization, scarce asphalt painting, bad lighting, lack of protection against wandering cattle, slow agricultural machinery driving in the speed lanes and broken vehicles in the way, not to mention bicycles, oxen carts and bystanders.

And these problems are even more pronounced on narrow and zigzagging secondary roads that for decades have not seen serious repairs. The official media recently complained about the theft of new traffic signals.

In a country lacking nearly everything, people find multiple uses for traffic signals that later crop up in the underground economy, from home repairs to melting for other uses. There are also reports of nighttime assaults on the expressways under the protection of darkness and isolation. Assailants known as “ninjas” hide behind major obstacles in the roadways, or they simply pull some horses or cows onto the road ahead of an oncoming car.

When the vehicle slows down, they assault the driver or throw the cargo of a loaded truck onto the ground, scraping together whatever they can to later sell on the black market.

Locals offer the most valuable advice when it comes to country roads. To the question “is the road ahead passable for this car,” folks will stare at your vehicle, your tires and you before saying “Better don’t try” or “Yes, go ahead, don’t worry.”

In a renewed economy, road construction, maintenance and repair would attract considerable resources and provide job opportunities for workers and engineers.

Just finishing the 250 miles left of the National Expressway would be a boon to the economy — not to mention the potential for roadside services — from gas stations to convenience stores, motels and repair shops — that today simply do not exist.

Havana-born Armando Portela, a contributor to CubaNews since the newsletter’s birth in 1993, has a Ph.D. in geography from the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Portela resides in Miami.
Apocalyptic Cuba scenario at the University of Miami

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

Fidel Castro died, and Havana was rocked by a coup d’etat. Raúl Castro and his grandson Alejandro were shot and killed by coup leader comandante de la revolución Ramiro Valdés, and refugees flooded the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo.

Meanwhile, fighting raged among army factions in Santiago de Cuba, and agencies such as the CIA, the Pentagon and the State Department had no clue what was going on.

As the mock crisis unfolded, a seven-member panel at the University of Miami’s Institute of Cuban and Cuban-American Studies debated what course of action to take. It was all part of a Mar. 29 event, “U.S. Policy Responses to Changes in Cuba: A Simulation.”

Panel members were ICCAS Director Jaime Suchlicki, playing the role of national security advisor; former U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutiérrez as secretary of defense; CIA expert Brian Latell as national intelligence director; James Cason, former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, as secretary of state; UM professor Andy Gomez as the governor of Florida; ICCAS research associate José Azel as secretary of homeland security; and FIU law professor R. Alex Acosta as U.S. attorney-general.

Additional scenarios were thrown in: growing dangers of civil war, another refugee crisis represented by Cubans fleeing the island and thousands of Cuban-Americans in Florida seeking to reach the island with their boats; rumors of military intervention from Venezuela and Nicaragua in support of the coup; thousands of Cubans trying to break into the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay, and demonstrations in the streets of Havana.

MOCK PANEL OFFERS SUGGESTIONS

Among the set of recommendations submitted to the national security advisor for consideration by the president:

- The White House should strongly condemn the coup, reject any possibility of recognizing a government led by Valdés, support local dissidents, and warn against any foreign intervention in support of the coup.
- Alert U.S. armed forces and announce a state of national emergency. Deploy all necessary military means and resources, including Gitmo, to enforce any executive order, and declare a naval blockade in the southern Gulf of Mexico.
- Activate a contingency plan known as Vigilant Sentry along the Florida Straits to prevent any massive boatlift; intercept and return any boats moving in both directions.
- Announce that Cubans trying to enter Gitmo will not be fired upon, but instead will be allowed to arrive in limited numbers, depending on local capabilities, and explaining such limits to the Cubans.
- Stop, by whatever means necessary, any military support coming from Venezuela or Nicaragua, while seeking help from allies by way of a multilateral initiative. If this should fail, then Washington should act alone.

Participants agreed that if developments in Cuba should get worse, the president must keep all his options open, including the deployment of troops should Cuba turn into a killing field.

Gómez, playing the governor of Florida, stressed his state, and especially Greater Miami, should not be forced to bear the economic and social burden of another massive Cuban influx, even if extreme measures were required to prevent that from happening.

The technique of building scenarios is usually based on the soundness, probability, tangibility and proximity (in time and space) of the different scenarios being considered.

But this was not the case in Miami. When asked by someone in the audience about the role of Cuba’s armed forces in the event of chaos, Latell acknowledged that — with the exception of the much controversial Ochoa affair more than 20 years ago — there are no precedents or symptoms that suggest the possibility of a military coup in Cuba.

Former Cuban intelligence officer Domingo Amuchastegui has lived in Miami since 1994. He writes regularly for CubaNews about politics, economic reform and Cuba’s Communist Party.

USDAID — FROM PAGE 3

for a USAID grantees — Maryland-based Development Alternatives Inc. — was arrested in Havana. DAI said Gross was distributing USAID grants and other money funneling in Miami as well as its writers in Cuba.

Cuban authorities have accused Gross of working for U.S. intelligence, but haven’t charged him with any crime, and they’ve rejected Washington’s demands to release him (see March 2010 issue of CubaNews, page 1).

Gross’ contract was paid by USAID grants that DAI received during the Bush administration. His detention prompted the State Department to make sure no other Americans working for U.S. intelligence, but haven’t failed to achieve their objectives because they were thwarted by the Castro regime or stymied by a U.S. ban on the use of USAID money to pay people in Cuba.

Kerry, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, says the program’s checkered past, and effectiveness, merits review.

In a statement emailed to CubaNews, Kerry spokesman Fred Jones said the senator’s hold on USAID will last until Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “undertakes a review of these programs and while the committee investigates whether they’re effectively accomplishing our shared goal.”

“We all want democratic change in Cuba. The question is whether American taxpayers are getting progress towards that goal,” said Jones, adding that Kerry has given the State Department and USAID “a list of questions on the policies, purposes, costs, benefits and modalities of the programs.”

Hugo Landa, director of CubaNet, said the USAID grants have made a difference and that reactivation of the Cuba program cannot come too soon.

A website that provides a forum for Cuba’s independent journalists and dissidents, CubaNet has had trouble paying its modest rent in Miami as well as its writers in Cuba. It’s likely to run out of money by the end of summer, Landa said.

As a result, CubaNet, which depends largely on USAID grants and other money funneled via the National Endowment for Democracy (which isn’t subject to the ban on paying people in Cuba), may have to shut down — just as its audience in Cuba is growing.

“If we have to pull the plug on CubaNet, even for a few months, we’re going to lose those readers,” Landa said. “For us, it would be terrible.”

BY DOMINGO AMUCHASTEGUI

We are exploring how the programs can better respond to the Obama administration’s priorities, including reaching out to a broader segment of the population and addressing the needs of ordinary Cubans,” a USAID official told us on condition of anonymity.

More personnel changes are underway at USAID that may indicate what direction its Cuba program will take.

Kimberly Rosen, the program’s acting director, is likely to be replaced soon by a career State Department officer. That will probably give the Cuba program, which is under control of the State Department, more flexibility. And Lynne Weil, former press secretary to Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA) at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, is USAID’s new spokeswoman. Berman has been critical to the national security advisor for consideration by the president:

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Radical lawyer Leonard Weinglass on the Cuban Five

BY VITO ECHEVERRÍA

One weekend last month, thousands of leftists converged on New York’s Pace University to exchange ideas and debate issues ranging from Iran’s democracy movement and President Obama’s handling of the war in Afghanistan to climate change, the so-called U.S. “invasion” of quake-ravaged Haiti and the future of American capitalism.

The three-day Left Forum featured speakers like Rev. Jesse Jackson and anti-establishment professor Noam Chomsky. With hardcore radicals — including college kids in Che Guevara T-shirts and young white Rastafarians handing out communist newspapers — the forum’s political bent was never in doubt.

No wonder Leonard Weinglass felt right at home in this crowd.

The veteran civil-rights lawyer — speaking at a seminar entitled “Terrorism Against Cuba and the Case of the Cuban Five” — is no stranger to radical causes. His clients over the years include actress Jane Fonda, her ex-husband Tom Hayden, Angela Davis, the Weather Underground, black radical and death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Bill and Emily Harris, the kidnappers of Patty Hearst.

His New York talk focused on the violence perpetrated by anti-Castro elements both inside and outside of Cuba, as well as efforts by South Florida-based Cuban counterintelligence agents to spy on those elements and the groups they’re affiliated with.

Weinglass, 74, was there because he’s representing Antonio Guerrero, who’s currently serving a 22-year jail sentence at a Colorado federal prison called the Alcatraz of the Rockies. Guerrero’s crime: conspiracy to commit espionage, conspiracy to act as an unregistered foreign agent, and general conspiracy.

Weinglass, who tends to be guarded with journalists, didn’t hesitate to explain how he got involved with the case when interviewed briefly by CubaNews after his speech.

“It’s my honor and it’s a privilege to be able to stand with the five,” he said. “I knew of the case. When Antonio’s lawyer fell ill and could not continue, I was contacted by the family’s attorney in Havana, who asked me if I would join the defense and appeal. Of course, I immediately said yes.”

Weinglass gave CubaNews his take on how Guerrero and his fellow defendants originally got caught up in America’s legal process.

“Attorney General Janet Reno was intending to run for the U.S. Senate in Florida. However, these 400,000 Cuban-American voters in Miami were furious over the handling of the Elián González case by the Justice Department. So she had to make up for that loss of confidence by the indictments in September 1998 of five Cubans for a charge of conspiracy to commit espionage.”

He said “it was the first time in U.S. history a conspiracy charge was leveled which carried a life sentence against five individuals without a single page of classified documents, as the prosecutor admitted in his opening.”

Weinglass compared the harsh sentencing of his client — whose case he said involved no U.S. military secrets — to that of Robert Hanssen, the churchgoing American spy who, it turned out, had revealed the identities of CIA agents to the Soviet Union for money.

He also compared Guerrero’s conviction to the three-and-a-half-year sentence given to Khaled Dumeisi, a Chicago-based Palestinian newspaper publisher who in 2004 was convicted of serving as an unregistered agent of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. When the FBI arrested him, Dumeisi was apparently spying on anti-Saddam elements in the United States on behalf of Iraq’s intelligence services.

With the U.S. Supreme Court refusing to hear the appeal Weinglass has already filed, the Cuban Five’s next legal battle will involve a “collateral appeal” — the introduction of new evidence, and a new legal theory that hasn’t previously been litigated.

Weinglass said he’ll center the appeal on the extreme media bias his client was sub-

Weinglass takes aim at Brothers to the Rescue founder José Basulto

Attorney Leonard Weinglass, attempting to justify why convicted Cuban spy Rene Gonzalez infiltrated Miami-based Brothers to the Rescue, angrily criticized Bay of Pigs veteran José Basulto, founder of the exile group whose two planes were shot down by the Cuban Air Force in February 1996.

“As you know, the Neutrality Act prohibits U.S. citizens from launching an attack against another country, particularly one we’re at peace with,” notes Weinglass.

“An individual named José Basulto comes into federal district court in Miami, under oath, and acknowledges that [in 1962] he fired a cannon 16 times at a civilian hotel on the shore in Cuba, striking the hotel each and every time, and that was testimony given by an American under oath in a federal courtroom about a military attack against a country that we’re at peace with. There is absolutely no request that that result in an indictment of the Neutrality Act. No media raised it. No lawyers raised it. And Basulto walks out.”

That August 1962 attack on the Rosita Hornedo Hotel in Havana’s Miramar district was launched by the militant anti-Castro youth group DRE [Revolutionary Student Directorate], which included Basulto and others who had snuck into Cuba by small boat from South Florida.

There were no reports of deaths from that incident. In a subsequent interview with American journalist Jefferson Morley, Basulto admitted that he bought the cannon at a Miami pawnshop for that incursion. One of DRE’s members was Jorge Más Canosa, who would later launch the pro-embargo Cuban American National Foundation.

One exile website claims the guests staying at the hotel during that incident were Eastern European advisers, and that DRE militants present in Cuba passed along information on Soviet missile installations there, which eventually led to the Cuban Missile Crisis showdown between President Kennedy and the Soviets only a few months later.

Weinglass also used Basulto’s past activities to explain the Castro regime’s treatment of Brothers to the Rescue as a terrorist group, noting that the group flew over Havana numerous times to drop anti-Cuban government leaflets.

“Unfortunately, four people died,” said the lawyer, referring to the pilots of two of the three Cessna-337 Skymasters shot down over Cuba in the 1996 incident.

“But when you hear the facts, Cuba was exercising its right to protect its airspace against people who over the previous 20 months violated its airspace 25 times, by a group intent on changing that government. What would happen if someone came to Washington, and overflow 25 times to foment revolution here? Wouldn’t the U.S. defend its airspace in a similar situation?”

Basulto, who won a $1.75 million federal judgment in 2005 against the Castro regime, couldn’t be reached for comment for this story.

– VITO ECHEVARRÍA
April 2010  CubaNews

WEINGGLASS LAUNCHED LETTER-WRITING BLITZ

Heidi Boghosian is executive director of the National Lawyers Guild, which has filed amicus briefs on behalf of the Cuban Five. She's known Weinglass for 10 years.

"Most lawyers in their field only try significant radical political cases once or twice in their career, Len has done it hundreds of times, often for little or no financial remuneration. He inspires those of us who share a tradition of using the courtroom to expose injustice."

— HEIDI BOGHOSIAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL LAWYERS GUILD

from Yale Law School around the same time Fidel Castro was about to pull off his revolution in Cuba. He launched his career as a JAG attorney in the U.S. Air Force in the early 1960s, but was swept up in the radical activism and student protests of that era.

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"Most lawyers in their field only try significant radical political cases once or twice in their career," Boghosian told CubaNews in an email. "Len has done it hundreds of times, often for little or no financial remuneration. He inspires those of us who share a tradition of using the courtroom as a forum to expose injustice and lawless acts of government."

Weinglass worked often with the late radical lawyer William Kunstler, as well as former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. On behalf of the Cuban Five, he's done more than represent them in court; he also speaks in public frequently, trying to humanize the five convicted spies in the court of public opinion.

One result of this campaign is the current letter-writing effort by 10 Nobel Prize winners — including Nadine Gordimer, Günter Grass, Rigoberto Menchú and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel — urging President Obama to release the Cuban Five at once.

Regardng the media bias argument, Weinglass is zeroing in on a 2006 scandal involving Cuban-American journalists who were simultaneously working for Miami's El Nuevo Herald newspaper — an affiliate of the Miami Herald Publishing Company — and the U.S. Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which runs Radio and TV Marti.

"The people who were writing these articles were being paid by the federal government to write propaganda against Cuba," said Weinglass, pointing out that journalists in general are underpaid for their efforts.

"During the day, they were working for the Miami Herald. At night, they were writing for the U.S. propaganda agency. Am I talking about their being given coffee money, a few dollars here, a few dollars there? No! There was a man named [Pablo] Alfonso, who was paid $253,000 over a period of eight years."

What attracted Weinglass to the Cuban Five case was his ability to uncover flaws within American legal institutions.

Attorney: Raúl Castro open to prisoner swap

During his recent speech in New York, attorney Leonard Weinglass discussed the Alan Gross case and its relevance to the current incarceration of the so-called "Cuban Five."

"The Cubans have made one thing very clear: Both Raúl Castro and other spokesmen for Cuba are willing to exchange the groups that are labeled 'political prisoners' in Cuba for the five," he said, estimating that some 75 such prisoners exist. "Raúl Castro made that comment at the Vatican. He repeated that comment several times."

Although Weinglass was talking about political prisoners, he said Gross could also be among those swapped for the Cuban Five if Washington was interested in such a deal.

He also said that Orlando Zapata, who recently starved himself to death after an 85-day hunger strike, "would have been freed together with the other dissidents in a [prisoner] exchange with the Cuban Five."

"In Cuba, dissent is allowed with one exception: if you receive aid from a foreign country, particularly the U.S., it becomes in their view part of the attack on Cuba. There are many political dissidents in Cuba who are not in prison, but they don't visit the U.S. Interests Section and don't receive U.S. aid."

Weinglass also complained about the media's treatment of the Cuban Five, saying that Orlando Bosch, the suspected mastermind behind the bombing of a Cubana Airlines jet in 1976, was a terrorist and should not be given permanent U.S. residency.

"There was a vacancy two years ago in the Florida Supreme Court, and it was up to Jeb Bush to appoint a new Supreme Court justice," said Weinglass. "And who did he appoint? The grandson of former dictator Batista [Raoul G. Cantero III]. And so you see the full circle coming around, how our own institutions are corrupted in this war against the Cuban government."

New York-based Vito Echevarría writes regularly for CubaNews on art, culture and business.
The number of tourists coming to Cuba during the first two months of 2010 fell 3.4% from last year due to a decline in visitors from Canada, says a Cuban government website. But a jump in arrivals by Cuban-Americans after the Obama administration lifted restrictions on their visits home likely helped offset the drop in Canadians. Tourism and related businesses brought more than $2 billion to the Caribbean nation in 2009, or about 20% of its foreign-exchange income.

The National Statistics office reported on its website that 513,000 tourists arrived in January and February. That was down from 531,000 during the same period in 2009. Canadian arrivals dropped to 243,800, from 270,400 in 2009.

Tourism industry experts outside Cuba said a pricing spat with a major Canadian tour operator contributed to the decline. Other destinations like the Dominican Republic and the Mexican resort of Cancun also are drawing away tourists with increased packages.

Arrivals from the U.S. and some other countries under the category of “other” rose 11.6% to 99,500 for the two-month period, the statistics office said. Most of that increase is Cuban-Americans because operators of U.S.-Cuba charter flights say their business is booming due to a flood of Cuban-Americans going to their homeland.

Last year, President Obama did away with restrictions that had limited them to one visit every three years, and many were taking advantage of the change in regulations. Slightly more than 2.4 million tourists visited Cuba last year, a 3.5% increase over 2008. Despite the increase, tourism income declined 11.1% as visitors spent less in the midst of the global economic recession.

The Cuban government is no longer holding onto foreign companies’ funds to stanch a drain of cash, six Chilean executives doing business in Cuba told Chilean Foreign Minister Alfredo Moreno Charme.

The Miami Herald, quoting Chile’s Terra news service, reported Apr. 8 that the businesspeople told Moreno that the problem affecting their compatriot Max Marambio is unique to Marambio and doesn’t affect them.

“The case of the companies owned by Chilean entrepreneur Max Marambio is a one-of-a-kind situation that is being investigated by the Courts of Justice in Cuba,” the letter said. “It will be up to them to deal with violations of existing regulations that [Marambio’s ventures] may have committed, problems that none of the other Chilean companies in Cuba has.”

The financial squeeze afflicting Cuba “was provoked by the greater expenses and investments made following the devastating damage caused by the hurricanes in 2008, the global financial crisis, the criminal blockade imposed by the United States of America for almost 50 years, and the commitments assumed by [Cuba] in substantially improving the quality of life of its citizens,” said the letter, sent to the Cuban Chamber of Commerce.

One of the executives, Angel Domper of TJP Internacional, told Terra that “in 2009, yes, there was a problem extracting hard currency that affected all the foreign companies established in [Cuba]. However, beginning in October 2009, new commercial ventures have had no problem paying, collecting or sending money overseas.”

Guillermo Jorquera of Merinter Ltda. said the freeze in funds “was no small problem, true, but today it has virtually been solved.”

In October 2004, CubaNews reported on the success of Alimentos Rio Zaza, a venture between the Cuban government and Mambio’s International Network Group (ING). In addition to the “Tropical Island” line of fruit-juice drinks, Rio Zaza also produces other items for the Cuban market, including milk, ketchup and tomato sauce under the brand names La Nina, Mambo and Doña Tina.

According to the Santiago newspaper La Tercera, Rio Zaza alone reported 2004 sales of $50 million, up from $30 million in 2003. Besides the food business, Mambio’s is also a big player in Cuba’s tourism sector, controlling the Havana-based travel agencies Sol y Son and Cosmo Service. These entities, run as 50-50 ventures with the Cuban state, operate in 28 countries and together are the 2nd-biggest companies of their kind in Cuba, outranked only by government-run Havanatur.

Cuba recorded a slight rise in the number of foreign investment projects last year, the first rise since authorities began winnowing out foreign ventures they deemed ineffective or corrupt in 2003, according to a government report seen Mar. 15 by Reuters.

The Foreign Trade & Investment Ministry said Cuba was involved in 218 joint ventures, compared to 211 in 2008; it had 69 hotels under foreign management, up from 63 in 2008.

The increase was the first reported since 2002. After that Communist authorities began closing many of the 404 ventures and 313 co-operative production deals in existence, mainly with Western partners, alleging they did little for the economy and were often corrupt.

The report said there were currently just 14 cooperative production agreements, where an investor receives part of the profit or products produced, but holds no shares.

The increase in foreign investments came despite a severe financial crisis. But local economists said it’s too early to say if the change was the result of specific government policy.

Foreign Trade & Investment Minister Rodrigo Malmierca told the National Assembly in December that 46 of the investment accords with foreign companies were abroad, many of them in Venezuela, China and Angola.

Cuba has pharmaceutical ventures in Iran, India, China and Brazil, construction firms in Angola and Vietnam and a hotel in China. It’s also involved in many projects in Venezuela, whose President Hugo Chavez is a top ally.

Inside Cuba, Malmierca said joint ventures were predominantly with investors from Venezuela, Canada, Spain and Italy, in sectors like tourism, oil exploration, telecom and mining.

Details of many ventures weren’t disclosed, but official media reported during 2009 deals for two hotel projects with Qatar, a fishing J-V and four oil exploration deals with Russia, an electronics assembly plant with China, and a paper venture with a Spanish firm.

Florida lawmaker tries to limit exports to Cuba

Continuing his perennial campaign against the Castro regime, Miami Republican Rep. David Rivera wants to prohibit the Sunshine State from distributing a “virtual stamp of approval” on goods being exported from Florida to Cuba, reports the St. Petersburg Times.

The “certificate of free sale” is a written document guaranteeing that a product that claims to be manufactured in Florida really is made there and isn’t bootlegged.

Rivera argues that such goods with certificates shouldn’t head to Cuba, or any other country that the State Department accuses of sponsoring terrorism — a list that also includes Syria, Iran and Sudan.

The bill has cleared two Florida committees with no debate, including the House Government Operations Committee.

“This is a priority for me,” said Rivera, a candidate for Congress. “If there is one certificate of export distributed, it’s too many.”

In 2009, state data show, there were two.

Both went to Arnold’s Food Distributors Corp. in Tampa, which sent ham croquettes, Italian bread crumbs, salad dressing and vegetarian tamales to Cuba. The Florida Department of Agriculture issues about 1,300 such certificates each year.

“There’s not a lot of trade going on there, as you can imagine,” said spokesman Terence McElory of the state’s agriculture department, in an interview with the Times.

While the policy impact of Rivera’s proposal is a little hazy, the politics seem clear: Rivera is seeking support for his congressional run in a heavily Cuban-American district. He is vying to replace Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL), who hopes to swap his seat for the one being vacated by his retiring brother, Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart. The brothers have consistently taken a hard line against Cuba.

In Tallahassee, Rivera has done the same. In 2008, he spearheaded a bill that imposed sky-high fees for travel agents booking flights to Cuba.

That bill became law, but later was swatted down by a state court. “I’ve always made sure to represent the views of my constituents on issues that affect their lives,” Rivera said.
State entity to replace Sugar Ministry

Cuba's sugar ministry will close in the coming months and be replaced by a state-run corporation, Reuters reported Apr. 7 — marking the most important reorganization of the once-thriving sugar industry since it was drastically downsized in 2002.

Plans to create the new sugar corporation and revitalize the industry by, among other things, allowing foreign investment and closing inefficient sugar mills are nearing final approval by President Raul Castro, said the sources, who know the industry well and asked not to be identified.

The ministry’s upcoming demise appears to be the last chapter in the dramatic decline of the sugar industry in Cuba, where sugar was once king but now accounts for less than 5% of foreign-exchange earnings.

This latest move is similar to other agricultural reforms under Castro, who replaced older brother Fidel Castro in 2008 and is trying to increase food output by loosening the Marxist government’s control over farming.

REVAMPPING COULD REVERSE DECLINE

Cuba’s fall from once being the world’s biggest sugar exporter, producing 8 million tons of raw sugar annually, began with the collapse of its former benefactor, the USSR, in 1991. Since then, the sector has declined relentlessly and output is expected to be only 1.2 million tons this harvest.

But with the upcoming reorganization, “in the medium-term they hope to increase production to 2.8 million tons using fewer mills,” a Cuban source with intimate knowledge of the sugar industry told Reuters. “Yields per hectare are currently around 3 tons/ha and the goal is to bring them up to at least 6 tons/ha,” he added. That compares to the international standard of 8 tons/ha.

Similar corporations to the one planned for sugar operate with foreign partners in nickel (Cubaminer) and oil and gas (Cubapetroleo) under the Basic Industry Ministry. It was not clear if the new sugar sector company would fall under the agriculture ministry or some other government authority.

“The new structure will give decision makers in the industry more autonomy and allow them to keep a percentage of revenues for re-investment,” said a Cuban economist, asking not to be identified.

SUGARCANE HARVESTED CROPLANDS AND AGRICULTURAL YIELDS (1980-2006)

The measure — subject to adjustment and local conditions — sets a monthly fee per person based on 15% of the average revenue generated by haircutting and styling in each area.

They will be able to charge whatever the market will bear and expect to make good money for Cuba, where the average monthly wage is 420 pesos, or the equivalent of $20.

In Santiago de Cuba the monthly fee is 1,008 pesos and 1,292 in the city of Holguín.

“The market will soon be at a record high because of the country’s tourism boom,” Yordanka, 25, a hair stylist in Holguín.

“Many workers were moved to other employment and many rural sugar towns were left stagnant, their closed mills marking the skyline.

More than 200,000 of the industry’s 400,000 workers were moved to other employment and many rural sugar towns were left stagnant, their closed mills marking the skyline.

In a painful 2002 downsizing of what was once the island’s flagship sector, Cuba shut down and dismantled 71 of 156 mills, all 71 built well before the revolution, and relegated 60% of sugar plantation land to other uses.

Cuba is turning over hundreds of state-run barber shops and beauty salons to employees in what appears to be a start of a long-expected revamping of state retail services by President Raúl Castro, Reuters reported Apr. 12.

The measure marks the first time state-run, retail-level establishments have been handed over to workers since nationalization in 1968.

Barbers and hairdressers in telephone interviews from a number of cities during the weekend said they would now rent the space where they work and pay taxes instead of receiving a monthly wage.

Those employees who do not wish to rent are being offered other jobs or retirement.

Cuba and North Korea are the world’s only remaining Soviet-style command economies in which the state controls over 90% of economic activity. Other communist countries such as China and Vietnam have long since liberalized retail trade, services and small business.

The Cuba Tourist Board in Toronto promises a general announcement with more details shortly. According to the Cuban government, about 20% of visitors now arrive without medical coverage.

Bruce Cappon, a broker who runs First Rate Insurance Inc. in Toronto, hoped Cuba would offer his older clients coverage they could not find or afford in Canada because of pre-existing medical conditions.

“After Cuba would offer a lid on runaway capitalist prices, by doing a mass pooling of risk,” he says. “But I was shocked to discover highly selective exclusions, worse than in this country.”

TOURISTS URGED TO GET MEDICAL INSURANCE

Effective May 1, all visitors to Cuba will have to present proof of medical coverage; otherwise they’ll be obligated to buy a dubious insurance policy upon arrival.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

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

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: rafernana@uci.edu.

Apr. 21: “Cuban Public Health-Care Cooperation With Haiti,” University of California, 1608 Rhode Island Ave., NW, Washington DC. “Cuba and the U.S. often disagree, but here there should be no cause for disagreement. On the contrary, there would seem to be no reason the two could not work toward toward a common goal: to reduce the suffering of the Haitian people and to build a sustainable health system.” Speakers: conference host Wayne Smith; Jorge Bolanós, chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington; MEDICC officials Peter Bourne, Gail Ree and Conner Gorry; Dr. Luther Castillo and Kathleen Hower, executive director of Global Links. Details: Center for International Policy, 1717 Massachusetts Ave. NW, #801, Washington DC 20036. Tel: (202) 232-3317. Email: cubaintern@ciponline.org.

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.

Apr. 29: “Top Seven Myths of U.S. Defense Policy Toward the Americas,” Casa Bacardi, 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. Agenda includes two panels on Cuba; conference will be attended by CubaNews. Cost: $1,150 (includes round-trip airfare from Cancun, Mexico to Havana; hotel (double occupancy), breakfast and dinner, internal transportation, visas and translation services. Details: Center for International Policy, 1717 Massachusetts Ave. NW, #801, Washington DC 20036. Tel: (202) 232-3317. Email: cubaintern@ciponline.org.

Jun. 10-13: CubaCon 2010, Provincetown, Mass. Dance party, art auction, Cuban movies, culture day and more. “We are proud and very fortunate to bring such a long and diverse list of Cuba experts together for this rare Cuban art and culture conference,” says organizer Rob Sequin. “I expect attendee networking to be a value life experience where attendees will make life-long friends.” Cost: $150. Details: Rob Sequin, PO Box 1525, South Dennis, MA 02660. Tel: (508) 744-6790. Email: rob@havanajournal.com. URL: http://CubaCon.com.

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