

If you do not want to continue receiving this FREE email on Cuba, reply with NO in the subject line.
If you wish to continue receiving the CWND on a regular basis, do nothing.

Cuban Weekly News Digest - "A compilation of news articles about Cuba, distributed since 1992 in order to encourage a balanced understanding of the Cuban situation and to promote investments in the Republic of Cuba"



HAVANA - Agence France Presse - Cuba's ailing leader Fidel Castro has defended naming his brother Raul to stand in for him last year, saying no one in the communist country's national assembly saw it as nepotism. In a letter to the assembly, the 81-year-old strongman also again made an ambiguous suggestion that he could give up the presidency, saying that he had stopped clinging to power. "There was a stage when I thought I knew what had to be done and I wanted the power to do it," he admitted, saying it was due to "an excess of youthfulness and deficit of conscience." "What made me change? Life itself, tempered by the profound thought of (Jose) Marti and the classics of socialism," Castro said, in the letter read by assembly speaker Ricardo Alarcon.

In the letter Castro also referred to criticisms made by Washington that in choosing his brother Raul to steer the country he was being anti-democratic and reserving power to his family. "In the proclamation signed on July 31, 2006, none of you saw it at all as an act of nepotism nor as a usurping of the functions of the assembly," he told the body. The communist leader turned over his responsibilities to Defense Minister Raul Castro "temporarily" in July 2006 to recuperate from surgery. He has not been seen in public since, and there have been no clear reports on the state of his health. The letter was the second time in a month that Castro, who has led Cuba since 1959, made an opaque reference to giving up power.

On December 17, Castro hinted in a letter read on television that he might step aside when he said that he would not cling to office or obstruct the rise of a new generation of leaders. Meanwhile, Alarcon told the assembly that Cuba's coming elections needed to be a "vigorous response" to the United States. "The elections of January 20 must be a demonstration of patriotic unity, the country's vigorous response to those who tried to destroy us for half a century," he said, in a speech published Saturday in local media. The January polls will choose the national assembly, with the number of candidates -- 614 -- equal to the number of seats to be filled. Once the new assembly has been constituted, the deputies will elect the ruling Council of State, with 31 members, which will then choose the president. Fidel Castro was re-nominated for the assembly on December 2, meaning he could resume the presidency. But experts saw his December 17 statement as a suggestion that he might decline the leadership this time.

Havana – DTC - Air Canada Vacations has begun flying to the keys off Villa Clara's northern keys, with the goal of meeting the growing demand during the peak tourist season. The company will fly twice a week to Santa Clara's international airport, carrying 240 passengers from Toronto and Montreal. Air Canada Vacations will fly to Cuba until April 2008, when the peak tourist season closes. The Communications director of Air Canada Vacations, Sophy Khwaya, lauded the excellent conditions at the airport and expressed satisfaction with the beginning of flights to that destination, which is highly demanded in Canada. Villa Clara's keys are characterized by their well-preserved nature. They are a developing destination offering more than 2,000 rooms.

Associated Press – Havana - Trade between Cuba and China grew by 23 percent to more than US\$2 billion (€1.4 billion) in 2007, solidifying China's place as the communist-run island's second-largest economic benefactor behind oil-rich Venezuela. China is Cuba's second-largest trading partner and the top importer of Cuban products, especially nickel and sugar, Cuba's official news agency Prensa Latina reported from Beijing, without giving exact figures. In 2006, trade between the two countries totaled US\$1.8 billion (€1.2 billion) — double that of 2005, China's ambassador to Havana said in March. Chinese consumer goods are increasingly common on the island, and hundreds of Chinese-made buses and trains have helped ease chronic transportation problems, especially on long-distance routes.

The Cuban government has also distributed new Chinese appliances on credit to families, in an effort to reduce the amount of energy consumed by the hulking, decades-old Russian-made refrigerators and stoves once commonplace here. Cuba-China trade figures also include billions of dollars (euros) in favorable credits Beijing has extended Havana in recent years, which has seen the island's debt levels soar. Trade between Venezuela and Cuba has reached US\$7 billion (€4.7 billion) a year, much of it in the form of the 92,000 barrels of oil a day Venezuela provides the island for Cuban doctors providing medical care and other social services.

Havana – DTC - Cuban experts are working on the introduction of several procedures and biomaterials to improve the quality of healthcare services. In that regard, efforts are being made to develop a product known as Coralina HAP-200, which is used to restore damaged or lost bone tissues. Obtained from a coral called Porites, the material has proved to be highly effective for bone reconstructions, as it is chemically and morphologically similar to bone tissues. More than 10,000 patients have benefited from the new material, which is used in maxillofacial, cranial, endobuccal and dental surgeries, as well as in orthopedics and traumatology, and brain and plastic surgeries. Coralina HAP-200 has been introduced in more than 100 Cuban medical institutions, so the island nation is one of the countries in the world where the entire population has access to a first-class product.

Havana - (Prensa Latina) - For the end of 2007, and with international impact, Cuban tourism authorities proposed a list of cocktails made from Cuban rum Havana Club

Añejo 7 Años. The initiative, with a strong impact on Europe, was sponsored by producers and commercializers of Havana Club by a communiqué. Cuba ended 2007 with the sale of 3 million boxes of Havana Club to 120 countries of the world, with emphasis of the outstanding 7-year old Havana Club Añejo.

Many tourists from all over the world have tasted drinks such as the Mojito or the Daiquiri, the most famous, but now search for other combinations. Enterprise Havana Club International has now proposed a Project to rescue recipes and national sales director Manuel Arias said domestic sales increased in 2007, in a million boxes. The joint venture Havana Club International was created 10 years ago starting from Cuban company Cuba Ron and French commercializing company Pernod Ricard.

Havana – DTC - Cuba's public health system has more than 87,000 health technologists, who have graduated as part of a training program that began five years ago. According to local health authorities, many of them are studying on different educational levels, while more than 500 majored in health technology. Health technologists are majoring in 21 medical specialties, including physical therapy and rehabilitation, traumatology, clinical laboratory and imaging. After completing the first year of studies, students graduate as basic technicians. Later, they take a two-year course to upgrade their knowledge, and major in their specialties after five years. Higher education in the medical field includes majors in Health Technology, Nursing, Medicine and Stomatology.

Matanzas, Cuba - (Prensa Latina) - More than 50 artists from the western Cuban province of Matanzas are successfully performing on stages of the four continents. Juan Francisco Gonzalez, commercial expert of the Rafael Somavilla Center in Matanzas, 62 miles east of Havana, pointed out soloists, duets, trios, quartets, quintets, groups and dancers compose this artistic group. Mexico, Venezuela, Spain, Malaysia, China and Egypt are among those welcoming these musicians who fuse Cuban musical roots and contemporary trends. One of the groups, "Los Munequitos de Matanzas," has 55 years of artistic life and specializes in yoruba traditions of African origin.

Havana - (acn) - Aiming at analyzing important aspects of the social and economic situation of the country, the 10 permanent commissions of the Cuban National Assembly (Parliament) meet on Wednesday and Thursday at the Convention Center in Havana. Officials from the Economy and Planning and the Finances and Prices ministries will brief parliament members on their considerations about the country's performance in 2007 as well as the social and economic guidelines and the bill for the Budget Law for 2008.

These commissions will also check on the work that each of them has carried out since 2003 until today as this is the last ordinary period of sessions of the current Legislature. They will also go through the activities they have been monitoring, the results of studies carried out and their tasks of supervision. For example, the commission in charge of Production Activities will discuss aspects related to the production of proteins of animal

origin, measures against the robbery and slaughter of cattle and the results of the Ministry of the Fishing Industry. Other aspects on which the commissions will focus their attention include local development, control and supervision by the Popular Councils and the mechanisms to solve problems and complaints made by the people.

These permanent commissions help the National Parliament and the Council of State in their work of supervision of state and government bodies and also in the drawing up of bills and accords. They also carry out studies and participate in the verification of the implementation of decisions made by the National Assembly and the Council of State. Next Friday, the Cuban Parliament, in the tenth ordinary period of sessions of the Sixth Legislature, will analyze the 2007 year-end predictions in the economy sector and the country's budgetary implementation. The agenda also includes the social and economic guidelines and the budget for 2008.

Havana – DTC - The fertilizer plant in the central Cuban province of Cienfuegos will be remodeled in 2008. Company executives noted that the capital remodeling of the plant would be carried out by a Cuban-Venezuelan joint venture. The plant, which was designed to produce 600,000 tons of ammonia and 700,000 tons of urea a year, is part of the collaboration agreements within the framework of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA). The new plant, scheduled for inauguration in 2011, will operate on the premises of a former nitrogenous fertilizer plant that came to a standstill in 1993. The project will take advantage of the old plant's hydraulic and electric networks, as well as the building, although the industrial infrastructure will be renovated completely. Instead of naphtha, the raw material used by the old plant, the new factory will use gas to produce ammonia, which will later be used to produce urea.

Camagüey - (Prensa Latina) - The Ministry of Fishing promotes actions among the population living in the coasts, which are directed to preserve the turtle, a sea specie in danger of extinction that Cuba will soon declare in close season for 10 years, noted AIN. Biologist Idania Lee Gonzalez from the Industrial and Fishing Company (EPICAM) said that the Ministry, along with the National Fishing Inspection Office and the workers are carrying a Sustainable Fishing program in Cocodrilo and Nuevitas areas. Its purpose is to stop poaching and legal capture of turtles, hawksbill, tortoiseshell turtle, and Green which for many years were the only form of sustenance of coastal inhabitants worldwide.

In this way, Cuba joins those countries that under recommendation of International Trade of Wild Threatened Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES), signed by the Antilles nation since 1990, declared closed season of the specie. The specialist states that the Fishing Ministry will forbid turtle's fishing for 10 years starting in 2008 in Nuevitas, in the north of Camaguey province, and in areas of Romano cays and Guajaba, in Cocodrilo zone at the south eastern of the Isle of Youth. The project promotes capturing fishes with hook or nets of 1.97 feet and bigger to avoid capturing young species.

HAVANA - (Xinhua) - The United States is isolated in its anti-Cuba policy, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said. Cuba has diplomatic ties with 186 nations and in 2007 many groups and individuals visited Cuba, including more than 500 high-level delegations, over 20 heads of state and 16 foreign ministers, Roque told the International Relations Committee of the nation's legislature. There were 184 nations backing Cuba's call for the U.S. to lift its unilateral sanctions, he added. He said that despite U.S. opposition Cuba joined the United Nations Human Rights Council with more than two-thirds of the vote.

Snaps.TV - Personality News - Why is Frank Sinatra's ghost in Cuba and why is he hanging out with Jude Law? A source at Cuba's Hotel Nacional de Cuba said, "Jude had no idea that Frank used to stay in the same room. You could see he was really spooked by his sighting. He'd sampled lots of the hotels rum cocktails to celebrate his birthday so he thought it was just a drunken vision. But when we told him of the situation, he came clean about seeing the ghost. He swore he saw Frank crouched at the mini-bar, rummaging through the bottles and snacks." This is always the kind of thing that upsets me off about my friends. They tell me a juicy story but never get the important details. Like what was Frank wearing, what snacks/ booze did he select and did Jude make him pay for what he took? Jude Law was spending his 35th Birthday in Cuba.

Havana – DTC - Cuban experts are designing new methods to expand the use of bamboo to replace timber for furniture and construction projects. Since 2005, a new technology has been implemented. Bamboo is supplied by four workshops in eastern Cuba and one in Villa Clara. In addition, the areas planted with bamboo have increased to 1,000 hectares this year, and part of that area is ready for exploitation. Some 30,000 hectares will be planted as of January, mainly by the ministries of Agriculture and the Sugar Industry, as well as by small farmers and local governments. The project, which will be funded until 2010, includes a strategy to handle and boost bamboo forests and mass reproduction, thus contributing to solving ecological problems caused by deforestation. Bamboo is native to Asia, the Americas, Asia and Oceania and can adjust to climates ranging from tropical to temperate. It grows fast and has many uses due to its strong resistance and great flexibility.

Havana - (Prensa Latina) - The National Assembly of the People's Power of Cuba unanimously approved the State Budget \$47.7 billion pesos, 2.7 percent over 2007, and the economic, social guidelines for the coming year. Running expenses included in the budget amount to \$30.19 billion pesos, 55 percent of which will be allocated to support and consolidate ongoing changes in the fields of education, health, culture and sports. Guidelines predict an eight-percent economic growth in 2008. According to the document, the solution to economic problems must first and foremost rely on plans, the level of which must be in line with really available financial, material and human resources. Deputies also agreed to proclaim 2008 as the 50th Year of the Revolution.

HAVANA - (Reuters) - Cuba said its economy grew 7.5 percent in 2007, the fourth year the Communist-run country has reported a big increase in the gross domestic product since being plunged into crisis by the Soviet Union's demise. Economy and Planning Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez told a year-end session of parliament a 10 percent target was not reached due to the heaviest rains since the early 1960s, import delays and other factors. Rodriguez said Cuba's GDP would increase 8 percent in 2008. "The results are significant and above the 5.4 percent norm for the region ... and at the same time demonstrate the gradual consolidation of the economy," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez reported a 24.7 percent rebound in the agricultural sector, 7.8 percent in industrial activity, 7.9 percent in transportation and 11.7 percent in services. Growth was reported as 12.5 percent in 2006, 11.8 percent in 2005 and 5 percent in 2004, based on a unique Cuban formula that outside experts such as the Economist Intelligence Unit and the CIA say may overstate the GDP by 3-4 percentage points. Cuba's GDP plunged 35 percent in the early 1990s and industrial activity 80 percent with the demise of former benefactor the Soviet Union, leaving the country in darkness, crippling public transportation and causing food and other shortages.

A gradual recovery has gained force since 2004 as oil-rich ally Venezuela began payments for massive social service assistance and soft credits from China resulted in billions of dollars in new revenues to restore infrastructure and improve Cubans' often difficult daily lives. Rodriguez said exports increased 24 percent and imports just 2 percent this year, a marked turnaround from recent years when imports soared to twice the 2004 level and exports stagnated. Foreign trade totaled \$12.18 billion in 2006, with exports of \$2.76 billion and imports of \$9.42 billion, the government reported. The trade deficit was offset by more than \$6 billion in revenues from services in 2006, with similar revenues expected for 2007, although Rodriguez did not mention a figure.

"We have a commercial balance of goods which is better than previous years," Foreign Trade Minister Raul de la Nuez recently told Reuters. "Nickel prices are the most important reason our exports are up, followed by pharmaceuticals and medical equipment and tobacco," de la Nuez said. "We have been importing a great deal of equipment and products that did not have to be repeated this year and we are pursuing a policy of substituting imports," de la Nuez said when asked about the slowdown in imports.

Cuba's current account balance of payments was \$240 million in deficit last year, compared with a surplus of \$140 million in 2005, and foreign debt rose by \$2 billion to around \$16 billion, the government said. The current account balance of payments is considered the broadest measure of any country's external transactions. It includes trade, services like tourism, and financial transfers like profit repatriation and interest payments. Rodriguez made no mention of this year's balance of payments or foreign debt, reported as \$16 billion in 2006 by the government.

Havana – DTC - Construction works in the tourist zone of the keys off Villa Clara's northern coast will benefit from an increase in production of high-quality construction materials. A new mill, which will process nearly 40 cubic meters of stone per hour, started up operations in the quarry of El Purio, in that central Cuban province. That way, supply of construction materials and granite will be guaranteed for the works being carried out on the northern keys, where some 120 cubic meters of such material are supplied every day. Another mill will be installed to increase production of construction materials and reduce power consumption, and trucks will be imported for the project. The company also supplies stones, gravel, granite, sand and other materials to local companies and industries.

HAVANA - (Reuters) - Cuban oil and gas output rose only slightly to the equivalent of 4 million tonnes this year despite a significant increase in investment, state-run media reported. Oil output was 2.9 million tonnes, or around 57,000 bpd, assuming 7 barrels per tonne, down slightly from the 2.98 million tonnes reported in 2006. Natural gas production was reported at 1.215 billion cubic meters, up from the 920 million cubic meters reported in 2006. Vice President Carlos Lage, during a tour of oil facilities, praised efforts to maintain output despite the natural depletion of existing wells, and in particular the use of natural gas to generate 15 percent of the country's electricity. Cuba has prioritized energy production and savings in the face of skyrocketing prices and despite its alliance with oil-rich Venezuela. Lage said Cuba produced 47 percent of its fuel needs.

Cuba imports the rest of its fuel from Venezuela in exchange for the services of 31,000 medical personnel and 8,000 other Cubans working in the South American country. Cuba bought and rented 10 Chinese drilling rigs in recent years, Lage said, and drilled 32 wells in 2007 -- mostly in partnership with Canadian company Sherritt International (S.TO) -- compared with 23 wells in 2006. Lage said a record number of seismic studies were carried out on land, just off the coast, and in Cuba's Gulf of Mexico waters where various foreign companies have taken out blocks.

Cuban production is concentrated along the northwest heavy oil belt, an 80-mile (128-km) stretch of coast in Havana and Matanzas provinces which produces all of Cuba's heavy crude with a density rating of 8 API to 18 API and with a high sulfur content. Most new wells are drilled vertically to the shore from two to seven kilometers out to sea. The poor-quality oil is burned in modified power plants and factories. In 2006 Cuba began shipping small amounts of the crude to Malaysia. Canadian companies Sherritt International and Pebercan Inc. (PBC.TO), in conjunction with state-run Cubapetroleo (Cupet), account for 60 percent of the output. Cupet has signed agreements with various companies, including Venezuela's PDVSA, Spanish major Repsol YPF (REP.MC), Norway's Norsk Hydro, ONGC Videsh Ltd (the overseas arm of India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corp) and other state firms from Vietnam and Malaysia to drill in the mile-deep (1.6-km) waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

A consortium made up of Repsol-YPF, ONGC Videsh and Norsk is expected to begin drilling late this year. Cuba's 43,250-square-mile (112,000 sq km) exclusive economic zone in the Gulf of Mexico was parceled into 59 blocks for foreign exploration in 1999. The U.S. Geological Survey has estimated the North Cuba basin could contain some 4.6 billion barrels of oil, with a high-end potential of 9.3 billion barrels, and close to 1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Havana – DTC - The Cuban women's volleyball team will compete in the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, after winning the qualifying tournament held in Monterrey, Mexico. The Cuban players beat the Canadian team 3-0 in the gold-medal game and became the fifth team to qualify for the Beijing Olympics. That way, Cuba won the Olympic qualifier of the North, Central American and Caribbean (NORCECA) zone, and will compete in the Olympic games for the eighth time. Puerto Rico won the bronze medal after defeating the Dominican Republic 3-2 (25-22, 25-23, 23-25, 15-25 and 22-20) in one of the best games of the tournament. Cuba's Yumilka Ruiz was the Most Valuable Player of the tournament, the leading attacker and the second best scorer. Other outstanding players were Puerto Rico's Sarai Alvarez (top scorer) and Debora Seilhamer (best defense and best sweeper).

AP - CIENFUEGOS, Cuba - Supermodel Naomi Campbell, who recently conducted a lengthy magazine interview with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, visited a new housing project his country built for Cuban oil refinery workers. Cuban news agency Prensa Latina said the British-born model chatted with a young married couple who will live in one of 100 small, white cookie-cutter houses recently built near the Camilo Cienfuegos refinery. The refinery was renovated with Venezuelan assistance. Accompanied by Cuban Vice Foreign Minister Alejandro Gonzalez, Campbell posed with the couple after congratulating them on their new home. It was unclear what Campbell was doing in Cuba, but she visited Venezuela in October for an interview with Chavez for an unspecified publication. During that visit she also joined Chavez at a political rally and toured government-funded housing projects. That Friday, Chavez was nearby in Cuba meeting with regional leaders at the Petrocaribe petroleum trade pact.

Havana - (Prensa Latina) - Cuba has been provided with two new planes TU 204-100 E from the Ilyushin Finance Co's Russian company, continuing the modernization process of its fleet for several uses. The Cuban First Vice President of Civil Aeronautics Jose Prieto said that the planes will be used in solidarity missions the island develops in Latin America, among them the Vision Now mission, of ophthalmologic attention. According to the National Information Agency (AIN) the new planes were bought by contract signed between IACC and Alexander Rubtson, general director of Ilyushin Finance Co. The agreement includes a third plane of that type devoted to freight that joins two IL 96 300 previously acquired, aimed at modernizing the country's fleet where dozens of lines operate, including charters or regulars. The new planes are equipped with 200 passengers' seats to cover middle and long distances and most of their operations are automated.

Havana – DTC - The company Malher Production presented the first seven DVDs with a selection of choreographies by Cuban prominent dance Narciso Medina. The choreographies include anthological works such as "Metamorfosis" (Metamorphosis), which is a landmark in Cuban culture. Malher Production, which was founded by Medina himself, has studios to make audiovisual recordings of major Cuban choreographies. As a tribute to Elfrida Malher, one of the founders of modern dance in Cuba, the studios will make DVDs on artistic expressions that might be lost due to their own nature. Malher Production will also carry out a research work at the archives of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), the Radio and Television Institute (ICRT) and other cultural institutions to copy their materials on dance.

The Manila Sunday Times - Doctors in the Philippines are turning themselves into nurses to be able to work abroad immediately, with the United States seen as their preferred destination. Their departure is said to worsen the so-called brain drain in the Philippines. Cuba can help Manila stop the apparent bleeding, Havana's top diplomatic official in the Philippines told The Manila Times during an exclusive roundtable interview. Cuban Ambassador to Manila Jorge Rey Jimenez said his country is practically overflowing with doctors and other medical practitioners, whom Havana could deploy to the Philippines if the government of President Gloria Arroyo would welcome them. Manila, however, has not responded to Cuba's offer to send them over.

"We have lots of doctors and medical practitioners. We have offered [them] to the Philippines, but your government has yet to make its move," Jimenez said. Some local health officials and even non-government organizations supposedly have intimated that Cuban doctors can work with them in several public-health programs and hospitals. Jimenez said he understands the flight of Filipino doctors who want to work overseas as nurses. He added that the Philippine government might consider taking in Cuban doctors to replace those local doctors leaving the country. If Manila does, Jimenez said, the deal need not be strictly medical. The ambassador disclosed that 17,000 Cuban doctors and dentists, for example, provide medical and dental services in Venezuela. Caracas, in exchange, supplies Cuba with 100,000 barrels a day of subsidized oil.

The foreign doctors are said to have helped bring down maternal and child deaths in oil-rich Venezuela to only a fifth of their former level. A fact sheet given by the Cuban Embassy in Manila to The Manila Times showed that doctor to population ratio in Cuba is one for every 158. In the Philippines, the ratio is one for every 10,000 to 26,000 Filipinos. In the United States, it is said to be one for every 150. From 2000 to 2003, the Philippines lost 51,850 nurses. Over 5,000 registered doctors left from 2001 to 2004. At least 6,000 doctors are studying to be nurses. Over 50,000 caregivers have been trained at the government's Technical Skills and Development Authority and accredited schools, with half of them already deployed abroad.

Havana – DTC - The corporation Habanos S.A., which commercializes Cuban cigars, has increased its share on the international market, where it sells Premium cigars. Habanos

S.A. executives pointed out that the company has an exclusive distribution network that includes establishments in more than 120 countries in all five continents. At present, Habanos S.A. distributes a wide range of products, including more than 240 formats of 34 brands, of which Cohíba, Montecristo, Romeo y Julieta, Partagás, Hoyo de Monterrey, Quintero, H'Upmann, Punch, San Cristóbal de La Habana, Trinidad and Cuaba are the best sellers. The firm also runs 96 Casas del Habano in the world and hosts regular events such as the 10th Havana Cigar Festival, scheduled for February. The festival will be attended by experts and cigar aficionados, and will be an excellent opportunity to present the new products for 2008.

VATICAN CITY - (AP) - The Vatican's No. 2 official said he hopes to meet with Raul Castro, Cuba's acting president, when he visits the island early this year, a report said. The trip by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Holy See's secretary of state, will be the highest level visit by a Vatican official to Cuba during Pope Benedict XVI's tenure. It will mark the 10th anniversary of the historic pilgrimage there by the late Pope John Paul II. "I really hope to meet Fidel Castro's brother, Raul, who runs the country today," Bertone was quoted as saying by Italian religious affairs weekly Famiglia Cristiana. The full interview will be published next month. It was not clear whether Bertone planned to visit with the ailing Fidel Castro, who welcomed John Paul in Havana in January 1998.

The trip will take place in February, Bertone said, according to the report, although the exact date has not been announced. The cardinal said he will attend the inauguration in the central city of Santa Clara of a monument dedicated to John Paul and marking his visit's anniversary, the report said. Many predicted that John Paul's pilgrimage would trigger changes in the Communist-run state. The pope urged Castro to increase freedom on the Caribbean island for both the Church and society, and denounced U.S. efforts to isolate Cuba. But in the decade that has passed, Cuba's Catholic Church has made only some gains. Catholic leaders can speak or write in state media at times, but religious schools remain closed as they have been since the early 1960s when hundreds of foreign priests were expelled.

Havana – DTC - The group Septeto Habanero, founded in June 1920, has made major contributions to preserving Cuban traditional music. According to experts, during its eight-decade career, the group has made 85 records. Septeto Habanero, which is attached to the Ignacio Piñeiro Provincial Musical Center, has performed in more than 32 countries and has represented Cuba in international festivals, including the Son and Flamenco Festival in Seville (Spain) in 1995, the Music Festival in France in 2000 and the 18th Jazz Teatro Libre Festival in Bogota, Colombia. Pedro Ibáñez, who directed the septet for many years, noted the fact that the 20th century began with son (a Cuban musical genre) and predicted that the same will happen in the 21st century. The musician, who passed away in August, devoted most of his life to developing that musical genre and keeping its essence alive.

HAVANA - Pensacola News Journal - After 21 years of marriage, Pedro Llera and his wife Maura decided to call it quits. Their divorce took 20 minutes, but Llera compares what came next to "more than a year of open war in the house." Sleeping in the same bed and sharing a single room with their 14-year-old daughter, they battled in Cuba's courts over who should stay in their second-floor, two-bedroom apartment in Havana's spiffy Vedado district.

Estranged Cuban couples sometimes remain under the same roof for years or even lifetimes, learning that while divorce on the island is easy, housing is not. The phenomenon is a testament not only to the communist-run island's severe housing shortage, but also to Cubans' ability to stay friendly - or at least civil - under the most awkward of circumstances. "In a developed country, you get divorced and someone goes to a hotel and then to a new house," said Llera, a 60-year-old mechanic. "Here we had to keep living like a couple." By law, Cubans cannot sell their homes and because the state controls almost all property, moves must be approved. Housing is so scarce, however, that often there is nowhere to go.

The government has long estimated an island-wide shortage of half a million homes. In 2006, officials reported construction of 110,000 houses, one of the largest single-year totals since Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution. But similar home-building initiatives this year were slowed by the rising costs of materials and Tropical Storm Noel's severe flooding of eastern Cuba. Another Havana resident, 45-year-old Mirta, decided to divorce her husband of 18 years in 1997. The couple hired a lawyer and signed papers amicably.

But neither one could move out. A decade later, they still share the same two-bedroom apartment off the famed Malecon seaside promenade with their sons, now 18 and 20. "We use the same kitchen, same bathroom. We have separate bedrooms, but the electricity, the telephone, the refrigerator - there's only one," Mirta said. "If you're going to get dressed, you have to hide in the bathroom or in the bedroom. There's no privacy." She said she and her ex-husband clash over utility bills and race home from work for first use of the stove at dinner time. "He's had other women but he always comes home to the same house," said Mirta, who asked that her full name and profession not be published because she did not want to be identified publicly as complaining about Cuba's housing crunch. "You want to be independent and open the door to your room, but with other women there, it is very uncomfortable."

The shortage is exacerbated by failed marriages. In 2006, the latest figures available, Cuba reported 56,377 marriages and 35,837 divorces. That's a yearly divorce rate of nearly 64 percent, though it does not account for those married and divorced multiple times. Breakups are so common that Cubans joke that anyone whose parents stay together needs a lifetime of therapy. "On some days there aren't weddings without at least one person who has been divorced," said civil registrar Patria Olano, who officiates up to 15 weddings a day at a "Marriage Palace," or government-run wedding hall, in Old Havana. "It's happy anyway because it's always a new beginning."

Couples pay US\$1.05 (euro0.71) for the 5-minute legal transaction, sealed with a kiss. Olano reads a dense paragraph of regulations, then asks: "Are you sure you still want to get married?" Couples sometimes simply nod. A sign nearby reads "To get married, dress correctly. No shorts, tank tops or flip flops, please." On a recent Friday, Pedro Angel Leon wore a sport coat to tie the knot with his girlfriend of nearly two years, Barbara Mendez. It was his third marriage, her second. "The first marriage is for photos and parties," said Leon, a 52-year-old volleyball referee. "This time everything is more calm." Leon moved in with his new bride and her parents before the wedding. "Finding a house is the hardest thing," he said.

Divorces are handled by notary publics and cost about the same as getting married. By law, there is no alimony unless either husband or wife is unemployed, and the communist system usually lends itself to austere lifestyles devoid of expensive possessions to fight over. Cuba was for decades officially atheist and divorce does not carry the stigma it does in other countries. Many divorcees head back to their parents' homes, but problems arise if their former rooms have since been occupied by siblings' spouses and offspring. Some divorced couples keep living together but throw up extra walls of plywood: One side is his, the other hers and only the children move back and forth freely.

Given ownership restrictions, a thriving black market exists for home-swapping. Every day, men and women gather along a Havana boulevard, offering trades. Some bring cardboard signs reading 1 x 2, meaning they want to swap one large apartment for two smaller ones - often because of divorce. "Marriages end like everything else," said a man named Luis, who was hoping to trade his small apartment for a larger one. "But the house where you live, that stays with you." Llera, the mechanic, claimed his home belonged to his 83-year-old father, who occupied the second bedroom. But his former wife said she had lived there long enough to stay put.

A court ruled in Llera's favor but the decision was overturned on appeal. As the legal battle dragged on, Llera demanded that his ex-wife sleep on the living room couch, and even called the police to make her comply. A higher court eventually sided with him and his ex-wife moved in with relatives, leaving most of her clothes behind in protest. The failed marriage was Llera's second, and though he now lives with another woman, he doesn't plan to propose matrimony. "It was such an ugly split," he said. "I don't want it to happen again."

Havana – DTC - Cuban moviemaker Humberto Solás, who directed "Miel para Oshun"(2001) and "Barrio Cuba" (2005), will start shooting his next film, entitled "Guanajay", next year. Solás, who also directed "Lucía", will receive financial support from the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) and the Ministry of Culture. Both "Miel para Oshun" and "Barrio Cuba" have won several awards at international film festivals. Solás, who received the National Cinema Award, is one of the promoters of low-income cinema, also called poor cinema. Carlos Lechuga wrote the

script of "Guanajay", which is a present-day Havana story. The shooting of "Guanajay" will begin in the second semester of 2008, as part of a schedule that also includes the shooting or release of other Cuban films.

Havana – DTC - Cayo Largo del Sur, one of Cuba's major tourist destinations, received the first flight by Livingston Airline, which is exclusively run by the group Ventaglio. The Milan-Cayo Largo-Varadero weekly route contributes to positioning the Cuban tourist destination as a constantly-renovated and improved product. Coincidentally, the Hotel Group Gran Caribe opened the 2007-2008 peak tourist season, during which the Caribbean island is expected to receive more than one million visitors. Cayo Largo del Sur's infrastructure is in place to meet the growing demand during the peak season. Moreover, the quality of services has been improved as well. As part of local authorities' strategy, such sites as the Pirate's Square, the Chelonian Farm, the House of Havana Cigar and the marina, which has excellent conditions of accommodation, have been restored. Experts noted that the tour operator Eden Viaggi would start up direct flights to that destination.

~~~~~

**In 1999, OFAC (The Office of Foreign Assets Control of the United States Department of the Treasury in Washington, D.C.) confirmed that it had previously issued an opinion in 1994 which stated that a U.S. company or individual could make a secondary market investment in a "third-country company" that had commercial dealings with the Republic of Cuba as long as that investment in the "third-country company" was not a controlling interest and the "third-country company" did not derive a majority of it's revenues from operations in Cuba. (Therefore, under that criteria, U.S. citizens and companies can invest in a private or public Canadian company doing business with Cuba)**

~~~~~

James
Cuban Weekly News Digest

<http://www.cubaninvestments.com>