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Cuba News in Brief

by LADB Staff

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President George W. Bush's recent stiffening of sanctions against Cuba has incensed many Cuban-Americans and raised the possibility that he could lose critical votes in the November election. The State Department has again put Cuba on its list of countries that do not make a significant effort to comply with US standards in combating the practice of human trafficking.

The 2003-2004 sugar harvest, the second since the government lowered sugar's priority among economic sectors, has not met expectations, although it showed a modest improvement over the previous harvest. Backlash develops against Bush's new travel rules. In May, Bush announced a new set of sanctions aimed at cutting the flow of dollars to Cuba (see NotiCen, 2004-05-27). The sanctions, product of the president's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, were explicitly designed to "hasten" the downfall of President Fidel Castro and the destruction of the socialist system in Cuba.

Among the report's recommendations was a new set of restrictions on how members of the Cuban-exile community may travel to the island to visit relatives. The rules, which went into effect June 30, reduce trips from one per year to one every three years. The rules were made retroactive so that travelers already in Cuba could not go again for three years. The rules also cut allowable travel expenses by two-thirds and set penalties for violations at up to US\$4,000. One of the most onerous rules is the Bush administration's definition of what constitutes a family for the purpose of sending gifts. Only grandparents, grandchildren, parents, siblings, and spouses may receive money and gift parcels.

Adding to the rules already announced in May, the Federal Register published a second set of fastidiously detailed restrictions that limit recipients of monthly gift parcels to households in Cuba rather than individuals and restrict the amount of baggage that travelers may take to the island. Parcels containing nonfood items are limited to one per month per household instead of the previous rule of one per month per relative. Parcels may include food, medicine, medical supplies, vitamins, and radio receivers. Excluded are personal items like soap, fishing rods, and underwear. The sanctions were generally assumed to be an attempt to garner Cuban-American votes for Bush in the November election. If that was the case, the strategy seems to be backfiring.

With the June 30 deadline approaching, hundreds of Cuban-Americans scrambled to get seats on the regular charter flights. Chaos erupted at the Miami International Airport when the State Department forced cancellation of several outbound flights for which passengers already had reservations. Some moderate Cuban-American organizations, including the Antonio Maceo Brigade and the Cuban American Commission for Family Rights, opposed the new rules and predicted Bush would lose votes as a result. Street protests against the rules took place in May and June.

In Cuba, some dissident leaders also objected, including Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo and Oswaldo Paya, who is lionized in US government and editorial circles. Cuban American National Foundation

(CANF) executive director Joe Garcia did not fully endorse the sanctions even though the organization had great input into the commission's report. "I don't know if we are standing on strong moral ground here. Someone who has been as pro-family as President Bush should not be affecting family relationships between exiles and Cubans on the islands," he said. "I hope the administration will realize this is much trickier than they first realized and that they got bad advice." A group in the House of Representatives announced plans to block the new sanctions.

Even some who support the restrictions on travel to Cuba by non-Cubans have decided that the new rules go too far. One of them, Rep. Jim Davis (D-FL), introduced a bill to cancel the new rules leaving the old ones in place. The Miami Herald, a consistent supporter of the hard-line on Cuba, said in an editorial that the rules were "hurtful and counterproductive." While insisting that Castro was the cause of all misery in Cuba, the editorial predicted that moderates could drop their allegiance to Bush in the next election.

State Department says Cuba fails to combat human trafficking

In mid-June, the Department of State released its annual report on human trafficking in some 140 countries during 2003. In 2000, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which requires the State Department to conduct an annual survey to determine how well countries address the problems of child labor, slavery, prostitution, and other forms of trafficking in humans. The report categorizes countries by the level of commitment to US standards in combating the traffic.

Tier 1 lists those who fully comply with the act's minimum standards; Tier 2 lists those who do not comply but are making progress toward meeting those standards; and Tier 3 lists countries that neither comply nor make "significant efforts to do so." Cuba and nine other countries are in Tier 3. Other Latin American countries in Tier 3 are Ecuador and Venezuela. Cuba was not listed in 2002 but has been on the list the other three years (see NotiCen, 2003-07-17). The report on Cuba does not specifically charge the Cuban government with direct involvement in human trafficking for sexual exploitation but says it does little to address the problem.

The report further claims that prostitution in the tourism industry makes money for the Cuban state. It also accuses the government of using forced child labor in agriculture. Where the report acknowledges Cuban efforts to curtail trafficking, it argues that the government does not adequately publicize results. Addressing a protest rally in front of the US Interests Section in Havana, Castro read a letter to Bush calling the report an act of "arrogance" and Cuba's inclusion on the list "cynical." Castro then launched into a lengthy comparison of social development intended to show that Cuba was equal or superior to the US in areas of health, education, and protection of children.

Introducing the State Department report, Secretary of State Colin Powell tried to associate prostitution and other forms of trafficking with terrorism. He called human trafficking a "global threat" and tenuously suggested that it provided money to finance other crimes, "including, very likely terrorist violence."

In answer to a reporter's question about evidence to support the terrorism claim, John Miller, Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, said, "I have no specific

documentation that I can give you....It would not surprise me at all if there are links between trafficking and terrorism, but I have no specific evidence that I would put forth at this time."

Sugar production rises, barely

The 2003-2004 sugar harvest came in at 2.5 million metric tons, a modest 324,000 MT improvement over the previous harvest but not enough to satisfy the expectations of sugar-industry officials. This is the second harvest conducted under the new strategy launched by the Sugar Ministry (MINAZ) in June 2002. Sugar Minister Gen. Ulises Rosales del Toro announced at the end of the 2001-2002 season that Cuba would sharply curtail sugar production, taking 71 of the nation's 156 mills out of production. The new strategy is designed to bring output into line with low sugar prices, redistribute scarce hard currency to other sectors, and concentrate on the more lucrative use of cane for such products as spirits, building materials, and other derivatives (see NotiCen, 2002-06-27).

Announcing the final 2003-2004 figures, Vice President Carlos Lage said that the harvest was accomplished with improved efficiency but that production had fallen short of the projected output by nearly 3%. He attributed some of the problem to mills that did not meet efficiency targets and to the prolonged drought that has gripped most of the eastern provinces. One reason for the radical reorientation of the industry was to reduce the drain on hard currency spent on short-term, high-cost foreign borrowing to finance production. This year, MINAZ said the per-unit overhead costs dropped by 3.85% compared to 2002-2003. MINAZ has been experimenting with alternative fuels and announced that this year seven mills used no petroleum fuels, burning instead bagasse and straw from the processed cane.

At the International Congress of Sugar and Sugarcane Derivatives in Havana last month, economy officials handed out a prospectus on 26 projects involving investment, technology transfers, and markets to representatives of the industry from Australia, Brazil, the European Union, and Mexico. The congress also discussed a Cuban proposal for a common market of sugar, a plan that would stress the reduction of dependence on high-priced oil and development of sugar-derivative products. Media reporting on the sharply reduced harvests often attributes the decline to mismanagement and the demise of the Soviet Union, which bought Cuban sugar on favorable terms.

A recent report in the International Herald Tribune for example, does not mention the decline in world sugar price and simultaneous rise in oil prices. Nor does it mention that the two most recent harvests resulted from a considered change in economic policy.

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