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Cuba News In Brief

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Under pressure from the publishing industry and academic presses, the Treasury Department has dropped rules prohibiting the editing and publication of academic and literary work from Cuba and two other sanctioned countries. The top US diplomat in Havana provoked a confrontation with the Cuban government about a political display included among Christmas decorations in front of the US Interests Section building. Canadian oil-exploration companies announced a new oil discovery off the coast of northern Cuba. The oil is of a higher grade than currently produced and could move Cuba toward energy independence.

Publishing sanctions relaxed

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced Dec. 15 that it was easing restrictions on the publication of scientific and literary works by authors in Cuba, Iran, and Sudan countries under US sanctions. The announcement canceled previous OFAC restrictions that forbade US firms from publishing the work of writers, including dissidents, in the three countries. The previous restrictions had derived from a controversial OFAC reading of the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act, which gives the president authority to regulate business transactions with a declared enemy.

A 1988 amendment by Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA) exempted "informational materials" from regulation under the act. But in 1989, OFAC reinterpreted congressional intent by declaring that the Berman Amendment did not apply to works that were "not fully created and in existence at the date of the transactions," or any "substantive or artistic alteration or enhancement of informational materials." In effect, OFAC claimed the power to block publication of all new works and to prohibit ordinary editing such as proofreading and fact checking.

OFAC was now exposed to the accusation that it considered correcting grammar a form of trading with the enemy. Publishers found in violation of the rules faced fines of US$1 million per violation and individuals faced prison terms of up to 10 years and a US$250,000 fine. Among the prohibited foreign publications were Cuban works on archaeology and history, a scholarly paper on earthquake prediction by Iranian geologists, an English translation of an architectural work by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, the Field Guide to the Birds of Cuba, and the Encyclopedia of Cuban Music.

A Treasury spokesperson said the rules were "a very important part of our overall national security," but Rep. Berman called them "patently absurd." Congress passed another bill in 1994 reiterating the original intention of the Berman Amendment, but OFAC ignored it. In 2003, pressing on with its own interpretation, OFAC prohibited the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) from editing technical manuscripts from Iran and continued to issue ambiguous and conflicting rulings with no clear definition of what it was prohibiting.

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Under accusations that it was engaged in censorship, OFAC said that publishers could apply for licenses if they wanted to contract with writers in the listed countries for new works or make substantive editorial changes in manuscripts already submitted. The writers advocacy organization PEN, the Association of American University Presses (AAUP), and other associations joined with publishing houses to file suit against OFAC. The suit argued that OFAC's rules violated the First Amendment and various laws, including the Trading with the Enemy Act as amended. OFAC denied that its Dec. 15 reversal was the result of the pending suit but rather an effort to clarify matters.

A Treasury official said, "OFAC's previous guidance was interpreted by some as discouraging the publication of dissident speech from within these oppressive regimes. That is the opposite of what we want." The Dec. 15 reversal does not end OFAC intervention in publishing because it still prohibits certain informational exchanges such as the marketing of software made in the blacklisted states.

US diplomat in Havana displays political Christmas greeting

The top US diplomat in Cuba, James Cason, started a skirmish with Cuba regarding Christmas decorations by setting up a provocative display outside the building that houses the US Interests Section in Havana. Besides Santa Claus and other traditional Christmas representations, Cason erected a large sign with the number 75 illuminated in neon lights. Seventy-five is the number of Cuban journalists and others arrested in 2003 in a crackdown on US-supported dissidents recruited and paid by the Interests Section. Most were convicted of working as paid agents of the US government (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24).

As the display was going up, Cuba was in the process of releasing 14 of the 75. Since the 75 were arrested, the US government and much of the world's media have maintained that the convicted journalists, librarians, and human rights advocates were persecuted for their political beliefs. But the Cuban government presented evidence at their trials showing that many had been directed by Cason to among other things write negative articles about the Cuban government for publication abroad and that they were paid through private organizations funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Cason refused Cuban demands to take down the 75 sign and said he would go on working for human rights. "We're prepared to pay whatever price for the things we believe in," he said. Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban National Assembly, said Cason was apparently "desperate to create problems." The Cuban government responded by erecting a billboard in front of the Interests Section plastered with enlarged photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. Cuban artists contributed additional political commentary, including a caricature of Cason as a Santa Claus bearing bombs as gifts. By combining the political statement implicit in the number 75 with traditional Christmas decorations, Cason and the State Department framed the Cuban reaction as a petulant attempt to suppress the holiday spirit.

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Asked by a reporter if the 75 sign was not an act of provocation, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher replied, "Putting up a number of 75 on Christmas tree lights at your own residence is provocative? I really find that a little hard to explain that way."

Earlier in December, Cason invited dissidents to his residence and promised a Castro-free future. "That future could come at any time. Cubans know that the Castro regime is literally on its last legs," he said. In September, in another display of solidarity with dissidents, Cason ordered a replica of a Cuban prison cell constructed in the back yard of his residence. The cell included a plate of rice and beans and a plastic rat. "This is how political prisoners are treated in Cuba," he said. The construction followed details supplied by Oscar Elias Biscet, jailed in Cuba on various occasions.

Cason also conducted a ceremony burying a time capsule in his back yard in observance of International Human Rights Day. The capsule included a 2002 speech by US President George W. Bush reiterating the US sanctions policy (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23). Also buried in the time capsule were reports on human rights in Cuba from the State Department, Amnesty International (AI), and other organizations, "to remind those who open this capsule what dark times Cubans survived," Cason said.

During the same month, Amnesty International issued its most scathing report on US human rights violations. The report said, in part, that, during President George W. Bush's first term, "the USA has violated and undermined basic human rights principles and the rule of law...and continues to be far from the global human rights champion it proclaims itself to be." The report compared the State Department's assessment of human rights in Cuba with documented incidents of abuse and deprivation of due process in the US-run prison camps at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station in southeastern Cuba.

New oil find boosts Cuba's energy prospects

The Canadian firms Sherritt International and PEBERCAN announced last month that they had discovered oil deposits in the Santa Cruz 100 oil field in the Gulf of Mexico. According to the results of explorations in offshore blocks allotted to the companies 55 km east of Havana, the Santa Cruz 100 field could measure up to 20 sq km and produce high-grade oil of far better quality than the heavy crude Cuba now produces. Two appraisal wells are to be sunk in early 2005 to permit detailed analysis. Sherritt and PEBERCAN are developing other fields in joint ventures with the Cuban state oil company Cubapetroleo (CUPET).

In recent years, oil production has increased enough to bring Cuba close to self-sufficiency in oil for firing its power plants. Production was 26 million barrels in 2003 though slightly lower in 2004. At present, Cuba consumes 150,000 barrels per day, half domestically produced and most of the rest imported from Venezuela under favorable terms (see NotiCen, 2000-11-03). CUPET projects that by 2006, 60% of its oil needs will be domestically produced. The Spanish firm REPSOL YPF and Brazil's Petroleo Brasileiro (PETROBRAS) plan exploratory drilling in 2005. Two Chinese companies are also considering investment in oil-exploration blocks.

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The possibility that Cuba could become energy independent or even a net exporter of oil would radically alter its economy and international political situation. Even before the Santa Cruz 100 announcement, US energy companies were chafing at the US economic blockade, which prevents them from entering the promising Cuba petroleum industry. Now it appears that Canada, Brazil, Spain, and perhaps China could be the dominant partners with CUPET even if the blockade were lifted.

In 2003, Reuters reported that an official of the Houston-based energy giant Halliburton publicly opposed the US sanctions policy. John Gibson, president of the firm's energy-services division, said, "There are foreign companies making money in those countries, and I think American companies should have a shot at those markets as well." Despite the possibility of oil independence, Cuban officials are still depending on tourism as the chief motor for the economy.

Tourism Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz announced in December that the number of tourists visiting Cuba in 2004 reached a record 2 million. Whatever profits the new oil finds may produce in the near future, they are unlikely to equal tourism, which now generates 41% of the country's income and is projected to rise as the number of visitors reaches an estimated 5 million during the next several years.

Meanwhile, prospects for converting Latin America's petroleum industry into a tool for political and economic integration increased with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's plan for a regional petroleum consortium. Petroamerica would integrate Cuban, Mexican, Venezuelan, and other Latin American producers into a giant transnational that could control 11% of known world oil reserves, stabilize oil prices in the region, and reduce the outflow of petrodollars.

In 1999, Venezuela and Brazil signed a letter of intent to integrate their oil companies, and Cuba and Venezuela further shaped the concept in 2000 (see NotiCen, 2000-11-02).

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