

4-19-2001

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuba News." (2001). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8829>

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Cuba News

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2001-04-19

A new centrist organization favoring trade and improved relations with Cuba has formed in Washington and challenged a prominent Cuban-exile group to a series of debates. President Fidel Castro has ordered the production of rum in Cuba under the Bacardi label and threatened to sell other products under protected trademarks.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Cuba during a Latin American tour. The visit was billed as economic, but a human rights group says it had to do more with fishing for support in the upcoming human-rights fight in Geneva.

Centrist group challenges Miami exile organization

In March, a group heavily influenced by moderate Republicans has emerged to challenge the power over the US Cuba policy exerted by the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). The Cuba Policy Foundation was founded by former State Department officers, business executives, and others who have staked out a centrist position on Cuba. The chairman of the foundations' board is William Rogers, former assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs during the Gerald Ford presidency. Initial funding for the foundation came from the Arca Foundation.

Besides Rogers, board members include: Diego Asencio, former ambassador to Colombia and Brazil; Ray Ruga, assistant vice president of the American International Group. Ruga was born in Cuba, and served in the Department of Defense under President Bill Clinton; Paul Smike, an advisor to the World Economic Forum; and Maria de Lourdes Duke, head of the Fundacion Amistad.

The group's president, Sally Grooms Cowal, a former diplomat, said the foundation will open an office in Washington and conduct news conferences in Miami and other cities to promote a non-ideological approach to Cuba. Cowal served as deputy assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs under President George H.W. Bush, as ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago, and as minister-counselor at the US Embassy in Mexico. Later, she headed Youth for Understanding, an international student-exchange program in Washington.

At the request of lawyers representing Elian Gonzalez and his father Juan Miguel, she housed the two in the organizations's Washington headquarters during the legal battle over the return of the seven-year-old boy to Cuba (see NotiCen, 1999-12-23). "I've always viewed improving relations with Cuba as a question of what's right for America....American businesses are losing millions of dollars a year because they're not allowed to trade with Cuba. And while I agree with the need for democratic reform in Cuba, our current policy hasn't achieved that for 40 years," Cowal said. Cowal told Reuters that the major US interests in the Caribbean region were immigration and drug trafficking but that neither were served by the current Cuba policy.

On March 28, Cowal wrote to CANF chairman Jorge Mas Santos suggesting that he debate her on Cuba policy, "since both our organizations aim to educate the American people on relations between the people of the United States and Cuba." Jose Cardenas, director of CANF's Washington office dismissed the offer and said the Cuba Policy Foundation was "selling a defective product that no one is buying in Washington."

Cuba to sell rum under Bacardi label

In retaliation for a Supreme Court ruling awarding ownership of the Havana Club label to Bacardi Ltd., Castro has made good on his threat to start selling Cuban-made products under US trademarks. Bacardi rum is made in Bermuda by Bacardi Ltd. and sold in North America by Miami-based Bacardi- Martini. In October 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Bacardi in a suit brought against the company by Havana Club International, a joint venture between the French company Pernod Ricard and the Cuban state-owned Havana Club Holdings that sells Havana Club everywhere but in the US. The European Union (EU) strongly opposed the ruling and has taken the case to the World Trade Organization (WTO) for a ruling (see CubaSource, 2000-10-20).

In mid-March, Castro announced that Cuba would sell rum under the Bacardi label and sell Cuban-made AIDS medicines patented by US companies. He said Cuba might also sell Cuban-made products under the Palmolive label. Profits from the sale of these products would partially compensate Cuba for the damages caused by the US embargo and by the loss of the Havana Club rights in the US market, said Castro. In 2000, a Havana court assessed the US US\$300 billion in damages caused by the embargo and "for thousands of compatriots who died from [US] acts of terrorist sabotage, mercenary invasions, and pirate attacks." Castro also referred to the US use of Cuban funds frozen in the US to pay damages assessed against Cuba in Florida courts (see NotiCen, 2000-03-29).

Producing patented AIDS medicines would bring Cuba into conflict with the World Trade Organization (WTO), but Cuban officials say the WTO rules are stacked against developing countries. Vice Minister of Science, Technology and Environment Daniel Codorniu, said, "Patents, knowledge, and technology are more and more in the hands of the big private companies."

Chinese President Jiang Zemin visits Havana

During a four day state visit to Cuba, Chinese and Cuban representatives signed agreements covering economic and technical matters, and educational and sports exchanges. The Import and Export Bank of China agreed to extend US\$374 million in commercial credit for Cuban purchases from three Chinese companies. The credits will help finance imports of Chinese-made television sets, the construction of a hotel in Havana, and improvement in telecommunications equipment. Ties between Cuba and China have strengthened in recent years. Bilateral trade rose from US\$270 million in 1993 to US\$500 million in 1999. In 1993, Jiang paid a visit to Havana, and Castro went to Beijing in 1995.

In 1999, the two countries signed a commercial agreement though China has never taken the place of the former Soviet bloc in supporting the Cuban economy. Last December, military chiefs from

the two countries signed a military cooperation pact in Havana. While the agenda of Jiang's Latin American tour was largely economic and cultural, the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) saw it as an attempt to build support against the upcoming vote in the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. The US is pressing hard for a resolution condemning both countries for human rights abuses.

Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque said Cuba could count on China "to confront aggressions of the United States. In a statement April 11, Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the HRW's Americas Division, said "The leaders of both countries have something in common that goes beyond trade and economic interests. Their human rights policies and governing practices are bankrupt in the eyes of the rest of the world."

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