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FITCuba Sums up Promotional efforts

By Timo Manuel

HAVANA.- The International Tourism Fair (FITCuba), whose 39th edition will be held from May 7 to 11, sums up the Cuban industry’s promotional efforts in the world.

Delegations from the Ministry of Tourism (MINTUR) attend the world’s most important fairs of this sector, such as Fitur Trade Show in Spain, the ITB of Berlin and the World Travel Market of London.

The examples are many. This year FITCuba will be hosted by Havana, on the occasion of its 500 years of founding, while Spain will be the guest of honor country and the leading product will be meetings, congress, incentives and travel sector.

It is a significant opportunity to know the performance of the Cuban tourism industry and its potential.

An example of the performance between fairs was highlighted in a recent report about the MINTUR’s presence at Colombia’s International Tourism Trade Show, ANATO 2019.

The MINTUR report said that the Cuban delegation was presided over by representatives of that central body and the tourism advisor at the Cuban embassy in Colombia.

The delegation also consisted of specialists with major hotel chains such as Gran Caribe and Cubanacan, Cubatur and Paradiso Travel Agencies, and associate hotel chains like Meliá, Iberostar, Blue Diamond, Roc Hoteles and NH.

The Colombian market continues to be of great importance for Cuba’s tourism, the note stressed.

In 2018 the Colombian market was ranked 16th on the list of main issuing markets of tourists to Cuba, with 45,966 visitors, accounting for an 11.7 percent increase over the previous year. This figure represented a historic record in the number of Colombian arrivals to Cuba.

So far this year, Colombia stands as the second largest issuing market of tourists to Cuba with the greatest growth rate.

During the ANATO 2019 Fair, the participants were invited to attend the 39th edition of the International Tourism Fair, FITCuba 2019.

But the Cuban presence in the tourism sector is also recognized in awards to places, landscapes and works, such as new hotels, circuit tourism, and other modalities.

An example: at the end of February TripAdvisor chose Varadero—some 140 kilometers east of Havana—as the second best beach in the world.

The resort, which has some 20,600 hotel rooms, is visited by over one million travelers from around the world every year.

According to TripAdvisor, the number one beach is Baia do Sancho in Brazil, while Eagle Beach, in the Caribbean island of Aruba, is the third best in the world. The U.S. website’s 2019 Traveler’s Choice awards for beaches take into consideration the quantity and quality of services and the beauty of the place.
New Cuban Constitution and the Road Ahead

HAVANA.- After the new Constitution of Cuba was ratified on February 24, the country is facing the challenge of its implementation in order to foster socio-economic development and overall public wellbeing.

Almost seven million Cubans voted “Yes” during the constitutional referendum, representing 86.8 percent of the people who cast their free, secret ballot. A little over 706,000 Cubans, about 9 percent, voted “No”.

“A large legislative process is ahead, which is already underway. We hope to approve and implement the laws that support the new Constitution as soon as possible,” said President Miguel Díaz-Canel, referring to future action.

He explained that the constitution is the law of laws, setting guidelines to materialize its content.

“We have identified several laws already and are inviting jurists, law students from the University of Havana and other universities, as well as professors, to get involved in this commitment, so as to have a comprehensive process and work,” the President stressed.

According to experts, at least 50 laws will be needed alongside active public participation for the Constitution to come to fruition.

The Family Code, as well as the regulations of the People’s Power National Assembly and of the Council of State stand out among the norms identified.

Specific challenges are posed by the implementation of rights and guarantees, which were considerably strengthened in the newly approved Constitution including the Habea Corpus, the presumption of innocence, among others.

In this regard, Penal and Civil Procedure laws will need to be adjusted, along with those at the People’s Courts.

In an interview with The Havana Reporter, Cuba’s first vice President Salvador Valdés said that the new Constitution “bets on the future” by creating the basis for construction of a prosperous and sustainable socialism.

He shared Díaz-Canel’s opinion that the text was “collectively built” from many of the 780,000 proposals submitted by the nearly nine million Cubans who participated in the popular consultation from August 13 to November 15, 2018.

Cuban parliamentary deputies have called the initiative modern and revolutionary, because it improves the structure of the State, strengthens human rights, promotes foreign investment, reinforces the people’s power at the grassroots (the municipalities) and recognizes several forms of property: the socialist, mixed and private.

Cuba Diversifies its Foreign Trade

HAVANA.- Cuba is committed to diversifying its foreign trade as part of the economic updating process underway in the country.

The above was clearly stated during the recent official visit a Turkish delegation headed by Deputy Minister of Trade Gonca Yilmaz Batur paid to Havana.

The delegation was composed of businesspersons from the fields of energy, mining, agriculture, trade, freight and passengers shipping, biotechnology and health, among others.

Authorities of both countries showed their common interest in fostering commercial ties, especially through direct exchanges.

In the framework of the visit, held from February 26 to 28, the Cuban National Hotel hosted the I Session of the Cuba-Turkey Entrepreneurial Committee.

“Both sections of the Committee are working together to attain direct trade between the companies from the two countries, as well as to encourage wider knowledge on both markets and bring businesspersons closer in order to eliminate relations through third countries,” said Cuban Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Ileana Núñez.

She added that in 2018 Cuban companies materialized the direct purchase of anthracite coal and various metals, which shows that joint work to encourage direct trade is already bearing fruits.

Núñez commented that work was conducted to make direct exports to the Turkish market, including sales of charcoal, fruit juices and beauty and make-up products, among other items.

According to the Deputy Minister, trade between both nations increased by more than 30 percent in 2018 and actions were taken to avoid the presence of middlepersons from third countries in the operations between the Cuban and Turkish companies.

The official also talked about the importance of finding modalities that guarantee the financial support for the operations and projects resulting from the Entrepreneurial Committee’s Binational Action Plan for the 2019-2020 period, signed during the meeting.

Turkish Deputy Minister of Trade Gonca Yilmaz Batur, for her part, noted that these meetings will contribute to establishing a solid trade relationship between both countries, in addition to coming up with new ideas, projects and ways to improve relations in different sectors.

“Cuba and Turkey have been working together for a long time and we have established a successful relationship in the economic and commercial fields;” she recalled.

She added that although considerable efforts have been made, there is still an important potential to analyze and exploit in areas such as agriculture, public health and transportation.

“Turkey is willing to further develop its commercial ties with Cuba. Our Cuban colleagues have given us details on the investment opportunities available, all of which opens the doors for exchanges,” the official said.

2019-2020 ACTION PLAN

During the visit of the Turkish delegation, the Entrepreneurial Committee signed a Binational Action Plan for the 2019-2020 period that includes actions aimed at encouraging trade and investment.

The document includes the exchange of information; organization of entrepreneurial missions; participation in fairs, and other ways to explore the respective markets.

According to the information provided by the Cuban Chamber of Commerce, the Plan is intended to strengthen bilateral commercial ties through direct exchanges between the companies; attract Turkish investments in key areas of interest for both parties; encourage the export of Cuban products and services to Turkey; and import Turkish products.
HAVANA.- In his desire to destroy the Cuban Revolution, U.S. President Donald Trump is resorting to any tools within his reach, including plans that have been shelved for over two decades.

In recent months, the president and several government officials have intensified the anti-Cuba rhetoric as part of a scheme to change the socioeconomic model on the island, a policy unsuccessfully implemented by the eleven previous administrations.

This strategy contrasts with that of his predecessor Barack Obama, who took concrete steps at the end of his term in office to advance towards the normalization of diplomatic relations.

A clear example of the new ideology at the White House is the possible inclusion of Cuba on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, drawn up by the U.S. State Department and very questionable for its partiality.

That list was utilized by the northern power for years to justify its anti-Cuba punitive measures, especially the ongoing six decade economic and commercial blockade that has caused an estimated $933.67 billion dollars of damage to Cuba.

The White House Director of Latin American Affairs, Mauricio Claver-Carone, made the announcement in January when, following his boss’s script, he launched strong attacks against the island.

Cuba had been included on that “black list” from 1982 to 2015, when Obama ordered to remove it amid the normalization process.

On the other hand, Trump’s decision to activate Title III of the Helms-Burton Act partially is another step in the series of covert attacks with serious repercussions for third party countries.

The Republican administration has promised to implement the act approved in 1996, which tightens and codifies the blockade.

Three of its four titles have been implemented since its promulgation with intent of a change of government in Cuba, but now the U.S. president wants to step up the pressure.

In order to achieve it, he initiated Title III, which authorizes companies from third party countries that have dealt in U.S. properties nationalized in Cuba since the 1960s to be tried by U.S. courts.

The island rejects this theory saying that the U.S. government at the time refused to collect due compensation, unlike many other countries like Spain and Canada, and highlights that the expropriations were rightfully made for the people’s benefit.

What’s more, Cuba has also reiterated its desire to find a solution for U.S. demands and mutual compensation.

For over 20 years, U.S. presidents, including Trump during his last two years in office, have used their executive power to suspend the implementation of Title III every six months, due to the international community’s unanimous rejection of its extraterritorial character and infringement on other countries’ internal affairs.

However, it doesn’t appear that international opinion has much of an impact on Trump anymore.

According to Cuba, both its inclusion on the list and the actuation of Title III have the same objective: to sow uncertainty and fear among possible foreign investors in Cuba as part of Washington’s economic war on the island.

The use of force strategy includes the Torricelli Act of 1992, which is also notably extraterritorial in character, as it prohibits any U.S. subsidiaries based in a third party country to trade with Cuba.

As part of his strategy against Cuba, Venezuela and other regional countries, Trump recently underlined his policy toward Latin America by saying that the day when the western hemisphere will “get rid of socialism and communism” is approaching.

His offensive comment against the progressive governments in the region was quite stark in his recent speech at the Miami University.

The U.S. president seems determined to bury any rapprochement between the two countries, while advocating a policy of confrontation that is ever more rejected by the American people, as corroborated by recent polls.
Cuba Makes Modest Contribution to Global Brain Health

By Ana Laura ARBESU

HAVANA.- Dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases are considered a sanitary priority at present. It is estimated that by the middle of this century, from 115 to 135 million people will suffer from a brain-related disease.

Different factors lead to the outbreak of brain diseases, but according to the World Health Organization (WHO), population aging is one of the main causes, due to the increase of life expectancy rates especially in lower-income countries.

At present, several world projects are being conducted to study the brain and its related diseases, but these require extremely high financing. In the face of the emergency, scientists consider that it’s essential to share the data collected in each study, as research focuses on the structure and function of human brain through advanced neuro-image equipment.

Cuba, a small country with limited financial resources, has been part of a joint project with China and Canada since 2017 that is aimed at searching, comparing, personal experiences of each individual.

In this concept, the concept of global precision brain health, a preventive strategy to stop the development of neurodegenerative diseases. This concept is a new health approach, just like the human genome sequence, which opened a new chapter in biological sciences.

In the case of precision health, the objective is to use genetic markers to predict when a person has more risks to suffer the disease, so as to select a better treatment and the subsequent follow-up based on analysis and research on the genome, the brain connections and the personal experiences of each individual.

However, the concept is viewed differently in the developed world: as a precision medicine for rich countries.

Valdés explained that the topic should be analyzed from two points of view: first, that it cannot be addressed to the elite but to the population in general. “We are not interested in people having medicine but in their health, which is a wider concept,” he said.

“We when use medicine it is because we are in the presence of a disease, and the idea is to have global health,” he stressed.

Valdés, who’s also an emeritus member of the Cuban Academy of Sciences, considers that the main role the Cuban scientific community plays on brain-related studies is linked to making a contribution to knowledge. “We might lack financial resources but we do have experts, the strength of our universities, in addition to a health system whose fundamental principle is the prevention work, based on the family doctors (general practitioners) program.

In his opinion, it is necessary to conduct more clinical trials in order to prevent these diseases, and to incorporate this system into the primary attention program in order to have better treatments.
Attractons of Cuban Ballet on Posters

HAVANA.- Some of the elements for which the Cuban Ballet School has been internationally renowned can now be appreciated in one of Havana’s downtown areas, thanks to their representation on 20 posters.

Although classical ballet dancers are not usually associated with ice cream due to their disciplined diets, half a century ago the Cuban capital decided to name its main ice cream parlor after a ballet piece: Coppélia, since then becoming a point of reference in Havana, which will soon celebrate its 500th anniversary of founding.

Currently, Coppélia Ice Cream Parlor’s entrance features a billboard of photos taken by photojournalist Gabriel Dávalos–photos that reveal sensations, emotion, poetry and social chronicles of Havana, where the artist was born.

Outstanding dancers - most of them members of the Cuban National Ballet Company (BNC) at one point or another dance in the streets with ease, courage, love, sensuality and dedication.

In tune with the general intention, the exhibit is entitled “Habana Pasión” and includes a selection of quotes by Cuban National Hero José Martí compiled for the occasion by renowned researcher Carlos Rodríguez Almaguer.

The protagonists of these photos include BNC leading dancers Viengsay Valdés, Grettel Morejón and Rafael Quenedit, in addition to other members of the company, such as Chanell Cabrera, Ivis Díaz, Katherine Ochoa, Dario Hernández and Diego Tápanes.

Also featured are Alejandro Virelles, Amaya Rodríguez, Arianni Martín and Dayessi Torriente, among other Cuban ballet dancers who are currently performing with different companies around the world.

The Cultural Communication Center (CREART), attached to the Ministry of Culture, made this exhibit possible – which has a high artistic and testimonial level. It is located at the corner of streets 23 and L in the Vedado neighborhood.

“Havana arouses emotions and sensations; dance here has a lot to do with the people's idiosyncrasy and way of living. The Cuban ballet reflects Havana’s residents,” Dávalos told The Havana Reporter.

The young artist has published four photography books and has been showcased in numerous national and international exhibitions.

In 2015, he was awarded the contemporary dance photography and new trends prize: Urdimbre, dance on the network, in Colombia. In 2016, he won the International Ana Pavlova Ballet Photography Contest in the Netherlands.

Appreciating the series of posters that enhance this central spot in Havana, Cuban Culture Minister Alpidio Alonso noted that the artistic discourse effectively conveys human values.

Many aspects of the illustration of the capital seem to have been premeditated in various shots, such as century-old architectural backdrops; however, when one is taking photos it is impossible to anticipate the size of the waves along the Malecón (sea wall) or the strength of the wind.

The fact that this exhibition was installed at the popular Coppélia gardens, allows passers by to enjoy several of the attractive features of Havana and dance.

“Havana's cultural values are reflected in these photos, as well as the magic that is inherent to ballet,” Alonso said.

“Several municipalities in Havana were badly hit by a tornado at the beginning of this year,” he recalled. “However, the most beautiful of this city came to light instinctively amidst the disaster: the human beings, as reflected in Davalos’ photos,” he added.

“The people are the most beautiful element of this city, and the wonderful solidarity we have seen these days speaks for itself, even by the artists themselves,” he said.

Although the photos were taken long before the tornado, they show bold leaps, resistance to the waves and couples in ecstasy.

Equality, understanding, strength, immeasurable commitment and diversity are some of the messages conveyed by the 20 photos of Cuban dancers, some of them living in the country and others hired by foreign companies. Incredibly, none of the shots are photomontage.

By Martha SANCHEZ
HAVANA.- Once again the Cuban capital will showcase its musical talent during the sixth edition of the Havana World Music Festival, an event that will assemble musicians from all over the world.

From March 21 to 23, Havana will host a variety of musical styles that characterize current tendencies, where fusion is an essential aspect of the creative processes.

The Festival will also be the perfect occasion for musical genres that stand out in the market, thanks to their unique features, which ultimately allow them to keep afloat in the competitive and complex music industry.

The organizers of the Havana World Music Festival do justice to previous editions of the event by inviting artists who are not only famous but who are music and sound innovators. This year, they have confirmed the attendance of guests from 10 countries, including the host nation.

The Festival’s program includes the bands Ozomatli (USA), Francisco El Hombre (Brazil), Nomadic Massive (Canada), Mental Abstrato (Brazil), Vox Sambou (Haiti-Canada), Korean Men (Korea), Ëda (France), Les Deuxluxes (Canada) and singer Diego Guerrero (Spain), among others.

Cuba will be represented by the legendary rumba band: Muñequitos de Matanzas; Yissy & Bandancha; Leyanis Valdés; Kumar; Manolito Simonet y su Trabuco; Telmary, Nengón Kiribá, and Eme Alfonso – the artistic director of the event.

Like previous editions, the festival will include the ‘Primera Base’ (First Base) Contest, for the up-and-coming names of the Cuban music, and the Women of the World Project, in which female composers and instrumentalists improvise based on randomly selected themes and collaborate in a unique, interactive concert.

This year, the Festival will also host workshops, exhibitions and lectures, serving as an important occasion of artistic exchange that involves many interested in contemporary musical trends and tendencies.

Parque Metropolitano (Metropolitan Park) will be the main venue of this event, and with its increasing success it is becoming one of the most popular in the field of Cuban music, thanks to featuring bands that are renowned for their authenticity.

The Havana World Music Festival is sponsored by the Cuban Music Institute and the National Popular Music Center.

Homage to Wifredo Lam at Cuba’s Fine Arts Museum

HAVANA. - The exhibition Wifredo Lam: Myth and Poetry to Honor the Most Universal of the Cuban Painters will be open at the National Fine Arts Museum of Cuba until August.

The exhibit consists of 30 engravings –etchings and lithographs- from three important decades (1947-1976) along the creative period of the avant-garde painter born in the central province of Villa Clara.

According to the exhibition’s curator Roberto Cobas, this selection reveals the strength of the artist’s mythical elements and the emotion contained in the work of contemporary poets.

It is no coincidence then that the exhibition focuses on the engraving technique, which is closely related to Lam’s pieces and is very much influenced by the surrealism poetry of that period.

According to Laura Araño, another curator, the works Apóstrofe-Apocalipsis (1966), Visible e Invisible (1971) and El último viaje del buque fantasma (1976) –inspired by the work of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez- stand out among the pieces of this series.

Lam’s varied multicultural inheritance and his relation with santería (Afro-Cuban religion) is largely manifested in his graphic work, which is considered one of the most important of the 20th-century Cuban art.

Wifredo Lam was the author of famous paintings, many of them exhibited at the main museums of the world and others sold at auctions of Latin American art that enjoys international prestige.

Among them are La mañana verde, sold at an auction on May 27, 1998 at Sotheby’s Latin American Art and La Jungla (1943), which has been on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the United States, since 1945.

This homage adds to the exhibition Nada Personal, which is part of a new cycle of exhibits the museum is preparing for the 13th Art Biennial of Havana, set for April 12-May 12 this year.

The National Fine Arts Museum plans to develop a megaproject for the largest visual arts event, which will go over the Cuban history, from the understanding of race to the influence of the sugarcane industry’s development on arts.
UPCOMING EVENTS

XXIV International Urban Landscape Dance Festival (Abr 3-7)

Havana’s 13th Biennial (Apr. 12-May. 12)
HAVANA.- Strengthening unity among the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member states to respond strategically and decisively to the changing global scenario, was one of the main conclusions of the 30th Inter-sessional Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government held in Saint Kitts and Nevis.

Differences and similarities, consensus and debates characterized the two-day meeting closed on February 27. The event’s agenda focused on issues such as the need to make progress on the materialization of the region’s Single Market, Economy and Transportation, among others.

A stance on the peaceful solution to the situation in Venezuela and non-interference in other countries’ domestic affairs were also discussed in depth at the regional meeting.

The protests in Haiti started last February 7 and the demonstrators demand that President Jovenel Moise and his ministerial cabinet step down immediately.

In the face of this scenario, which has left people wounded and dead, the Community reiterated their call for calm and an end to violence to boost national and regional development.

"The shadows cast by those issues cannot detract us from our path of regional development," said CARICOM Secretary General, Irwin LaRocque.

On behalf of the Community, he appealed to all parties involved to engage in a constructive dialogue to return to a state of normalcy.

The group also expressed its serious concern about the constantly-changing European Union’s (EU) approach to good fiscal governance, which infringes the region’s sovereignty.

LaRocque said that the blacklisting of some fiscal jurisdictions as non-collaborative by the EU is a “constant threat” to the Caribbean countries’ development efforts.

The Heads of Government recognized that the blacklisting of CARICOM Member States by the European Union (EU) has brought considerable reputational damage to the Community.

In the communiqué issued at the conclusion of the meeting, they added that the damage inflicted is irreparable and has consequential implications for building Member States’ economic and climate resilience given their inherent vulnerability.

In this sense, Prime Minister of Saint Kitts and Nevis and CARICOM President Timothy Harris came against the inclusion of CARICOM Member States on the said blacklist of deficiencies in financial issues.

He questioned the EU stance because of its interference in the internal affairs of the regions’ nations and described it as an infringement of their sovereignty.

It takes us “back to a different era when we had to heed the dictates of our colonial masters, who imposed mercantile laws that restricted our development," he said.

The Heads of Government emphasized the Community’s commitment to good governance and the drive to enhance the mobilization of domestic resources in accordance with the United Nations Addis Ababa Action Agenda.

They accordingly requested that the EU bloc cease the blacklisting of CARICOM States which have already made commitments to reform their tax structures in good faith.

They also analyzed how to use technology in a better way in order to improve the rendering of governmental and private services and efficiency and to create a more organized society.

Harris urged the Heads of Government of the region to take the necessary actions to reposition the group in order to face the challenges and recalled that the unity of the Member States is the foundational purpose of the Community.
HAVANA.- The Cuban Habanos have ratified their condition as the best Premium cigars in the world due to the quality of the new products launched and a festival that captivates the world's attention.

The Habanos Festival is a unique event, and this year's edition (February 18-22 at Havana's Convention Center) welcomed more participants than in previous years.

In addition, one of the highlights this time was the motto marking the 500th anniversary of Havana's founding (to be celebrated on November 16), a city that has a lot to do with cigar traditions and culture.

It is in Havana where the most famous cigar factories in the world are located, and its cigar makers stand out for the mastery with which they roll the cigars entirely by hand.

The word Habanos also shows its relation with Habana (Havana), which gave the name to this product, considered the best in the world thanks to a perfect combination: soil, weather and tobacco growers' expertise.

Although some people took some Cuban tobacco seeds to plant them in other parts of the world, the result was never the same; therefore, the Cuban cigars continue to be the number one on the market.

The International Cigar Festival comprises a significant number of activities including debates, talks, the Trade Fair and the International Seminar, visits to tobacco plantations and cigar factories, and the cigar-drink-food pairing, in this case Spanish wines.

The second edition of the World Challenger Contest was held during the festival which, as usual, closed with the award ceremony and the auction of humidors and perfect cigars. The money raised is appropriated to the Cuban healthcare system.

According to the event's organizers, on the last day of the 21st Cigar Festival –attended by 2,200 participants from 70 countries- an auction of Premium cigars raised 1,505,000 Euros.

The participants also had the opportunity to bid for seven lots of beautiful humidors made out of cedar wood and full of the best cigars. This activity was held at Pabexpo exhibition site.

One of the festival's highlights this time was the San Cristóbal de La Habana (Saint Christopher of Havana) cigar brand, as all the activities are dedicated to the capital's 500th anniversary of founding.

The Habano of the Year Awards were also granted on the closing day, and they mainly went to Cubans. The Cigar Making Award went to Emilio Luis Rodríguez, while Gabriel Estrada won the award in the business category and Zoe Nocedo in the communications category.

According to organizers, this is the most attended festival of its kind and the participation is expected to continue to increase, together with the interest of international companies. The 22nd edition of the festival will be held from February 24 to 28, 2020, also in Havana.
HAVANA. - Recreational boats have a distinct role in Cuba, as in addition to serving as an enjoyable mode of transportation, they also represent the growth and development of recreational nautical activities within the country’s tourist sector.

Cuba receives over four million foreign tourists annually and a good number of them – especially Canadians and Europeans go on sea tours around a well-preserved insular platform.

The country counts on two important companies, Gaviota and Marlin, responsible for operating sea activities from different nautical centers, jetties and other points located all over the island.

The Cuban Tourism Company Gaviota covers one third of the country’s hotel capacity more than 70,000 rooms and operates 35 modern catamarans. Every year, 225,000 travelers take part in the company’s nautical activities on board 22 fishing boats and 10 diving vessels.

Meanwhile, the Marlin Nautical Entrepreneurial Group attracts more than 400,000 clients every year in five international yacht clubs and 11 nautical bases, from which there is access to 39 diving areas, 23 immersion centers and 900 underwater sites.

Based on this official data and taking statements made by the companies’ spokespersons into account, it’s evident that Cuba is well on its way to becoming one of the top destinations for recreational nautical activities in the Caribbean. In this sense, boats continue to be an important symbol for the island.
MEXICO CITY.— After 21 days of antagonism, debate, criticism, and disagreement, the 127 Mexican senators who were at odds unanimously agreed to reform the Constitution to create the National Guard as proposed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

It’s surprising that the bill passed by the Chamber of Deputies was approved unanimously after so much dispute, as it had undergone a dozen modifications, including a major one that grants formal and operative command to a junta consisting of the Army, the Navy and the Federal Police.

That was precisely the bone of contention thrown around in the Senate by the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) and the Citizen’s Movement (MC). All four of them attacked the ruling Morena Party which, although holding a small majority with its allies, was failing to prevail over its four adversaries.

The opponents focused their campaigns on sowing fear, alleging that with its military structure even during a transitional five-year period, after which the military would return to their headquarters and discontinue police tasks—the fight against violence would be in and of itself militarized and, with it, a militarized country.

The adversaries, particularly PAN and PRI, were using ungrounded arguments because, according to President López Obrador, under their respective governments the fight against organized crime was more militarized than ever before, “turning Mexico into a giant cemetery,” as stated by the president.

However, the media campaign against an alleged militarization repeatedly denied by López Obrador himself was so persuasive that the majority represented by Morena was neutralized in both chambers, and the original proposal to create the National Guard was denatured.

The campaigns launched by both sides had strong arguments: the government was trying to defend the opinion that it would be impossible to end violence without a military corps. Meanwhile, the adversaries were bringing to light inefficient performances by the military in recent years when, contradictorily, PRI and PAN were responsible.

In its first offensive, the opposition tried to prevent the creation of the new military institution but, having realized that it was politically impossible, they were satisfied with trying to limit its content, particularly in relation to the fight against corruption and impunity, which are the very seeds of violence and crime in Mexico. Now they are saying that they have mitigated the bone of contention.

The reality proves otherwise. In essence, the battle over the creation of the National Guard was the motivation that the two parties needed to revive their spirits lost during the July 1 elections in 2018, when they became minority groups after years in power, at the same time becoming the strong opposition to a new political movement that calls itself a champion of the Fourth Social Transformation in Mexico.

Why then was it important for the opposition groups to so fervently attack the creation of the National Guard proposed by the new government, as they did? Simply because the Guard is one of the central themes of the national security plan against violence of which López Obrador has been committed throughout his three presidential campaigns.

That is to say, the creation of a military corps apart from the failed federal police to fight organized crime and violence is the prominent part of the national security plan. Without it, the social aspect which confronts the true causes of violence would not develop effectively.

At the same time, the national security plan is part of a broader and more comprehensive strategy that aims at carrying the country out of poverty, seeking ways for a coherent distribution of wealth, eliminating social inequality as much as possible, and taking Mexico out of its unimaginable economic and social inactivity, when the country had once been considered an energy power because of its oil.

The strategy is known as the Fourth Social Reform and its primary goal is to eliminate the neoliberal scheme that has prevailed in the Mexican panorama over the past 32 years, as well as the corruption and impunity that undermined the entire national corps like a malign tumor.
EU Cooperation Project Supports Cocoa Growing in Cuba

HAVANA.- The cooperation project recently developed by the European Union to foster cocoa growing in the eastern Cuban province of Guantánamo has yielded positive results.

The initiative further enhanced the different stages of the enlarged cocoa production chain, after the severe damage caused by Hurricane Mathew in 2016, said Beatriz Aguirre, specialist with the Forestry Research Institute and coordinator of the project for the Cuban side.

The project, Aguirre added, allowed bringing cocoa production up to 390 tons at the end of 2018 –more than seven times over the 54 tons harvested after the hurricane.

Likewise, 99 percent of the total cocoa pulp production was sold as first-quality product, accounting for more than eight million pesos.

These results were possible, among other things, thanks to technological improvements at the center in charge of increasing cocoa growing using the micro-graft technique, which last year allowed to bring the number of seedlings from 50,000 to 108,000.

The comprehensive approach of the initiative known as Support for the Cocoa Production Chain in Guantánamo province also stimulated business opportunities in the territory, and not only those focused on the leading product.

It is estimated that the program generated 35 new job sources and benefited nearly 2,000 people.

Implemented by the Spanish International Cooperation Agency for Development, the initiative gave priority to using methodological approaches and good practices that helped obtain the aforementioned results, commented Aguirre.

Fully developed in the municipalities of Baracoa and San Antonio del Sur, the project always aimed at contributing to food security and to the development of that rural zone.

Recovering cocoa production in Cuba is one of the programs prioritized by the Ministry of Agriculture, given the importance that increasing the number of exportable products has for the country.

As part of its 2018-2019 business opportunity portfolio, the country offers investors a project aimed at increasing the acceptance levels of fine flavor cocoa by contributing material resources and helping to recover the plantations and update the technology.

Through a productive administration contract estimated at $9.2 million, the Cuban business portfolio expects to renew the productive chain infrastructure and obtain other benefits connected with the preservation, handling and processing of that raw material.

The project not only aims at increasing cocoa sales and its quality by obtaining 500 tons of fine cocoa annually with exportable goals or for the local confectionary industry, but also includes the training of cocoa growers and all the staff involved in its processing.

As much as 93 percent of the entire cocoa production in Cuba is harvested in Guantánamo (some 1,000 kilometers east of Havana).
Brazilian Crisis Remains Unsolved Due to Neoliberalism

By Paulo CANNABRAVA

BRASILIA.- The deindustrialization and denationalization process taking place in Brazil and the resulting transformation of the country into an ordinary producer and exporter of commodities cast doubt on the economic health of this South American nation, all of which will have a negative effect on the social area and will worsen the political and institutional crisis.

By the end of 2018, the gross public debt accounted for 76.7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a figure that keeps growing.

In 2017, the debt amounted to 74.1 percent of the GDP, while by 2020 and 2022, it is expected to exceed 90 and 100 percent, respectively, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

How can the debt be paid back?

Part of this debt is paid back with a new debt, as usual. But even so, in order to guarantee the primary deficit that is, to pay bankers first – the payment of interests and part of the principal takes from 40 to 47 percent of the Union’s budget annually.

Foreign trade is one of the sources of revenue. Deficit in the trade balance of the transformation industry which in 2017 ran to 3.3 billion dollars rose to about 6.7 billion dollars in 2018.

The record was set in 2014 when the deficit amounted to 63.6 billion dollars, a prelude to the crisis the country is currently facing.

Since the 1980s, with the hegemony of neoliberals managing the economy and to meet the population’s consumption demand the country has had to import more manufactured products. The situation is expected to get even worse.

In addition, the so-called commodities have prices set by big transnational corporations, which are subject to periodic crisis.

The State machinery is maintained thanks to the extensive agro-industrial productivity - which is also predatory and export-oriented- and to the collection of taxes on workers.

As the agro-exporting and mining plutocracy has the power, it passes laws on its own benefit while exempting itself from paying taxes in order to maximize profits.

Historically, the productive sectors with a high added value are the ones that generate more resources and foster a development that can support the State and provide healthy living standards to the population.

If there’s no production; if rural producers and those who exploit minerals are exempted from paying taxes, then there’s no way to collect taxes and to pay the bills.

At present, 18 out of the 24 Brazilian States are bankrupt and have no way to pay the bills. To write off the states’ debts, the government of the Union forces them to sell assets, but there’s not much to sell.

As there’s no way to get money, super Minister of Economics, the Treasury, Planning, Industry, Trade, Foreign Commerce and the Central Bank, among other departments, Paulo Guedes the guru of financial neoliberalism says that he needs nothing but a trillion Reales (about 269 billion dollars).

How to do it?

He answers this question himself: by selling State assets and reducing public spending, which in reality means destroying the economy as a whole of course, by sacrificing workers in general and especially the poorest people.

Just by selling oil wells, Guedes hopes to collect about 80 billion dollars in the short term a figure that’s just peanuts considering that such an amount is being paid as interest on the debt.

Moratorium on Oil Ratifies Commitment to Green Economy

By Alejandro GÓMEZ

SAN JOSÉ.- The moratorium on oil exploration and prospecting in its national territory has confirmed Costa Rica’s pledge to decarbonize its economy within 31 years, when it expects to be a green and prosperous country.

On February 25, Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado and Environment and Energy Minister Carlos Manuel Rodríguez signed the decree that extends the moratorium on oil, first signed in 2002 by then President Abel Pacheco and later extended by former Presidents Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014) and Luis Guillermo Solís (2014-2018).

The moratorium will be effective until December 31, 2050, and the decree was signed a day after the Costa Rican government launched the 2018-2050 National Decarbonization Plan. With this initiative, the Central American country aims at having a green economy that fosters the sustainable use of natural resources.

In addition, Costa Rica seeks to become a modern, green, emission-free, resilient and inclusive economy, which entails a balance between long-term approaches and short-term actions.

The road to be followed is based on four key elements: transport and sustainable mobility; energy, sustainable construction and industry; comprehensive waste management; and agriculture, change and use of soil and nature-based solutions.

Likewise, modernizing the institutional and fiscal frameworks and the education system based on comprehensive approaches, among others, are the strategies required to consolidate the change based on social, financial, environmental and technological methods.

Upon signing the moratorium on oil, the Costa Rican president highlighted that the commitment with the present and future generations is to have a country free from activities that could spoil the ecological balance.

“This way, with this decree, we are not only continuing with but also prolonging the protection started by the Abel Pacheco government,” said Alvarado.

Meanwhile, Rodríguez stressed that by signing the new agreement, the Alvarado administration is sending a message very much in tune with the commitment to decarbonize the national economy.

“The country has set the goal of paving the road for a green economy, fostering the sustainable use of natural resources with views to accomplish the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals,” Rodríguez added.

When presenting the 2018-2050 National Decarbonization Plan, Alvarado sustained on February 24 that Costa Rica is ready to lead the commitment with the planet: to decarbonize the economy to improve the life of Costa Ricans.

A decarbonized country is also a prosperous country that generates jobs, economic growth and wellbeing for all the people. The different initiatives that are being implemented already in Costa Rica and the rest of the world show that it is possible, he noted.

The decision to present this ambitious plan was praised by world personalities such as Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, and the executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Patricia Espinosa.

Those efforts add to the Costa Rican government’s decision to promote electric mobility in the country. As much as 98 percent of the energy consumed in the country over the past four years was obtained from renewable sources: water, wind, geothermal, biomass and sun, in that order.
A Long and Winding Road for Cuban Baseball

HAVANA. - Tokyo, the Japanese capital thousands of kilometers from Havana, will be hosting the 2020 Olympic Games. For this occasion, Cuba has high hopes for its distinctive sport: baseball. However, the country’s chances to qualify for those Games seem as far off as its geographical location.

But let’s start from the beginning. Only six baseball teams will take part in the Tokyo Games: the host country plus another five. For that reason, competition will be extremely tough for all involved in the qualification process.

In order to qualify for Tokyo, the Cuban team will have to win the Premier 12 Tournament, to be held from November 2 to 17.

During the Premier12, the Cuban team-three-time Olympic winners-will play in Group C, together with South Korea, Australia and Canada. The top two finishing teams will move to the Super Round, which will include the leaders of the A and B groups, for six finalists in total.

Group A will be composed of the United States, Mexico, the Netherlands and the Dominican Republic, while Group B will include Japan, Venezuela, Chinese Taipei and Puerto Rico.

The Premier12 tournament will grant two tickets to Tokyo-2020: one for the best team of the Americas and one for the best team from Asia/Oceania, no matter where they place. For example, if Cuba were to place fourth and no other team from Latin America were to place in the top three, then the Cubans would qualify for the Games.

However, if the Cubans don’t qualify in this event, then they will still have another chance at the Americas Qualifying Tournament, to be attended by eight teams.

Some optimistic experts say that Cuba should have its ticket to the Olympics by then, but many are rather skeptical, mainly because the Cuban team will compete in those events with players affiliated with the Cuban Baseball Federation (FCB), the same players who lost three of five games in the recent Caribbean Series, with a poor offensive of .195 and were later defeated by a team of the very weak Salvadoran League.

It’s very unlikely that the FCB managing board will find a way or has the intention-to summon Cuban players involved in the U.S. Major League, in spite of the historical agreement reached by both organizations on December 19, 2018. That will undoubtedly be a huge handicap for the National team, which will have to face opponents composed of Major League players.

If Cuba doesn’t qualify for the Olympics at neither the Premier12 nor the Americas Tournament, then the team will have to participate in the Intercontinental Qualifying Tournament, to be held in the United States with the attendance of six teams. That would be the Cubans’ last chance.

It is worthwhile remembering that baseball was officially included in the Olympic program in the Barcelona 1992 Games, and in all five editions, Cuba has not only qualified but even reached the final.


Since 2008, baseball was eliminated from the Olympic program and couldn’t participate in London 2012 or in Rio de Janeiro 2016, until Japan, which is basically a baseball nation, requested its presence in the 2020 edition.

Cuba’s road to qualification for the Olympic Games is then rather difficult. Could the country sail such a rough sea and arrive ready for Tokyo 2020?

Cuba and the Future of Sprint

ATHLETICS

CAMAGÜEY. - For years Cuba has been looking at the results of many Caribbean islands at sprinting tournaments with a certain dose of envy. If we look at the top ten best times ever in the men’s 100-meter race, Jamaican names stand out, headed by Usain Bolt with his 9.59 seconds.

The other names on the list are Yohan Blake (9.69), Asafa Powell (9.72) and Nesta Carter (9.78).

Although Cuba has recorded the most outstanding results Latin American history, over the past 30 years it has failed to get close to ‘decency’ times in any of the two genders.

However, the second month of the year brought a rape of hope for Cuban male sprinters. The 9.98 seconds set in the hecetometer by Roberto Skyes equaled the national record that Silvio Leonard had set in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1977.

The result is the fruit of crucial efforts that have benefited the general athletics infrastructure in Cuba, including the remodeling of the Rafael Fortún Chacón Athletics Track, with a total investment of more than $260,000.

Located in Camagüey City, over 500 kilometers east of Havana, the facility each year celebrates the National Festival of Sprint. It was precisely during this year’s competitions that the 28-year-old Cuban sprinter —Pan-American 200m champion in Guadalajara-2011 and Central American and Caribbean champion in Veracruz-2014- set the best time of the year, according to the IAAF website.

However, it’s worth mentioning that the best sprinters of the world are still competing indoors, as part of the current season.

A series of injuries have affected the continuing evolution of Skyes, who in 2009 had set a national record of 20.24 seconds in the 200-meter race in the junior category.

The good result of the runner born in Minas, in northern Camagüey, is enhanced by the 10.06 seconds set by Reinier Mena during the semifinals of the aforementioned competition, also showing rays of hope for future events.

The two records were enough for them to qualify for the World Athletics Championships in Doha, Qatar, next September.

The tracks will tell if the performances of the Cuban athletes, at least in sprint competitions, will allow them to rub shoulders with the best figures at the Diamond League or World or Olympic championships. Time will have the last word.
Auditory disorders represent a frequent health problem in children. According to statistics provided by the WHO, 1-3 out of a thousand children are born with severe bilateral auditory deficiencies. If there is a failure to detect and treat congenital cochlear damage and/or those that are expressed in the pre-verbal stage (before the age of 3), they have a negative impact on the cognitive development, so they undoubtedly become a health problem.