Cuba Advances Administrative Reform

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Culture
An Interview with Viengsay Valdés

Spotlight
Tradition and Quality of the Cuban Cigar
THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF HABANOS S.A.

Habanos S.A. turned 25 years on September 14, 2019 with successful operations in the international market and positive growth prospects, as announced by its top executives.

The corporation’s directors sustained that they hold 70 percent of the market quotas in terms of units, and 80 percent in values (excluding the United States). The operational marketing director, Ernesto González, and the deputy director of development, José María López, spoke with the press at Salón Cetro of Meliá Cohiba Hotel, expressing their satisfaction with the work of the company.

Founded in 1994, Habanos is a joint venture between Cuba’s Tabacalera business group and UK’s Imperial Tobacco Group (which closed 2018 with 450 million cigars).

They noted that the premium cigar market grew two percent that year, while Habanos S.A. grew seven percent, thus placing it in a privileged position in the world Premium cigar industry.

Habanos S.A. offered a dinner at the Protocol Halls of the Cuban Council of States (El Laguito) that was attended by business partners that have stood next to the firm along its 25 years of existence, with sales in more than 160 countries worth some $537 million in 2018.

In Paris, France, the first limited edition of the brand Quai D’Orsay was launched by its exclusive distributor for France, Coprova and Seita Cigars.

This product was presented in a box exclusively designed for this limited edition, containing 25 Habanos made entirely by hand and with a long filler, after each leaf was carefully chosen from Pinar del Rio fields, where the best tobacco in the world is grown.

Quai D’Orsay, named after the famous avenue in Paris, was created in the 1970s upon the request of the French Minister of Finances. These cigars try to represent French refinement and art, mixed with Cuban authenticity and passion.

After all of the events in the last months of 2019, cigar enthusiasts hope that the upcoming festival is as successful as the previous ones; a unique opportunity to know the Cuban cigar industry firsthand.

THE BEST OF THE CUBAN CIGAR INDUSTRY

In Havana, the Cuban cigar industry is a focal point for many people around the world due to the popularity of Habanos, which are considered the best Premium cigars in the world.

Habanos are the result of a perfect combination that has placed them on top for many years: soil, weather and expertise. The International Cigar Festival, celebrated each February, is the perfect space to get insight into this agro industry and its elite products, which are in high demand in the international market.

The celebration in February of the 22nd Habano Festival in Havana reaffirms the idea that this city is the best place to smoke the Premium cigars.

This assertion is corroborated by the more than 1,000 cigar aficionados from some 70 countries that come to Cuba each February to attend one of the world’s most prestigious cigar events.

This year set for February 24-28, the festival will bring many surprises, especially to those that chase the best brands and novelties that Habanos S.A. firm will offer this year.

The event’s program includes a welcome dinner, tours of the best tobacco fields, this time in Partido Zone, San Antonio de los Baños Municipality (in western Cuba), visits to the most emblematic cigar factories and the trade fair.

It also includes seminars on the Habano, its history and culture, the 3rd edition of the International Habanos World Challenge Contest, the much anticipated presentation on cigar hand-rolling and the gala dinner with the auction of humidors, among other activities.

The welcome gala night will be dedicated to the Bolivar brand, and the following night will celebrate both the 30th anniversary of La Casa del Habano franchise and the 85th years of Montecristo. Meanwhile, the gala night will have the brand Romeo y Julieta as the protagonist, one of the most popular brands of Cuban cigars that is turning 175.

As the prelude to the festival, Habanos, S.A. and its exclusive distributor in Germany, Fifth Avenue Trading GMBH, had a stand at INTER-TABAC Fair, held at the end of 2019 in the German city of Dortmund.

INTER-TABAC is Europe’s largest trade fair of cigars and smoking accessories. Over 400 exhibitors from 60 countries presented an exclusive variety of products and services to participants.

Habanos S.A. Chairman Inocente Núñez and Luis Sánchez-Harguindey said that in spite of the well-known economic and financial obstacles imposed by the United States against Cuba, they were optimistic about future operations, given the high quality of Cuban cigars and high demand in the international market.

They added that the good results also due to a sales strategy that includes 148 La Casa del Habano establishments, over 1,000 Habanos Specialist, 2,100 Habanos Point, 16 Cohiba Atmosphere and 380 Habanos Terrace.

Fans of the Cuban cigars can purchase them all over the world, and these establishments also illustrate the entire agricultural and industrial process of the Cuban cigar, together with its traditions.

The International Habano Festival is one of the most important events held by the corporation to promote this product.
Havana.- The reform on governmental administration, foreseen in the Constitution of the Republic, was endorsed and proclaimed a popular referendum in 2019, with the purpose of improving institutionalization.

In addition to changing the titles of various positions, the prerogatives of officials were extended in relation to budget use and control, the execution of development plans and the collection of income in local areas.

The Constitution first established the election of the president and vice-president of the Republic (last October), the president of the People’s Power National Assembly (parliament), and the president of the Council of State.

The figure of the Prime Minister—a responsibility that the historical leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, held until 1976—was reintroduced in December. Former Minister of Tourism Manuel Marrero, was elected as the Head of Government.

As part of the Constitution’s provisional regulations, the delegates of the Municipal Assemblies recently elected governors, a position also reintroduced to define leadership of territories, as well as deputy governors. These positions, in addition to the presidents of the Municipal assemblies and mayors, will compose the People’s Power Provincial Assemblies, as of next February.

The candidates for governor and deputy governor were proposed by President Miguel Díaz-Canel, as established in the Constitution. According to a report issued by the National Electoral Council—the main electoral entity—all of the nominees received more than 93 percent approval at the polls.

Governors have the primary mission of fostering the economic and social development of their territories and act as coordinators among municipalities and central structures of the State.

To be elected as governor, the following requirements have to be met: be a Cuban citizen by birth and have no other citizenship; be over the age of 30; live in the province; and be in full possession of civil and political rights.

Deputy governors are also elected for a five-year term and have to meet the same requirements, according to the recent Electoral Law.

Mayors were also appointed by the municipal assemblies to head the Municipal Councils of Administration. Mayor, a position that existed during the colonial period (until the end of the 19th century), will be the executive wing of all 168 municipalities in the country.

**CHANGE WITHOUT PRESSURE**

“The President of the Republic proposes the governors and deputy governors but we are the ones who elect them, because if they don’t get 50 percent plus one of the votes issued by the municipal delegates, then they are not elected, as established in the electoral law and Constitution,” said parliament member Orlando Gutiérrez, who represents over 2 thousand voters.

“The most important thing is that it is evident that this (the Constitution of the Republic) is not a dead letter,” he affirmed answering a question of The Havana Reporter.

“We see this as another step towards strengthening the democracy, which we created, as part of the role of the People’s Power, and it’s now our responsibility to improve it without external pressure,” added the delegate, one of the voters who participated in the election of the governors and deputy governors.
Anti-Cuba Helms-Burton Lawsuits Dismissed in U.S.

By Dionys SANABIA

WASHINGTON.- This year in the United States began with the dismissal of lawsuits brought against the cruise lines MSC Cruises and Norwegian Cruise under Title III of the anti-Cuba Helms-Burton Act.

In both cases, Judge Beth Bloom issued an order in Miami, Florida, on January 3 and 7, respectively, to “dismiss based on damage.” That means that the court has adopted a final decision about the grounds of the process; therefore, the plaintiff cannot present another legal action using the same reasons.

Havana Docks Corporation, a company that claims to be “the legitimate owner of certain immovable items” at the Port of Havana, filed a legal action against MSC Cruises, Norwegian Cruise, and Royal Caribbean last August 27 for using the infrastructure. The lawsuit reads that on December 10, 2018 or very close to that day, MSC Cruises “held and promoted” its business operations in Cuba with the regular boarding and disembarkation of passengers, “without the consent of the plaintiff or any U.S. citizens claiming their ownership over that property.”

However, the cruise ship company sustained in a motion that the lawsuit should be overruled due to four reasons, being one of them that those who presented the claim failed to “provide enough charges on the alleged trafficking at the property.”

The motion added that the claim fails in terms of law that Title III of the Helms-Burton Act infringes the clause of the due process stipulated by the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Likewise, the defendants said that the claim over the “property” should not proceed because the plaintiff’s interest of the infrastructure is based on a lease that finished in 2004.

With regards to Norwegian Cruise, the lawsuit presented a similar case concerning MSC Cruises, for activity beginning in March 2017. According to the document issued by Bloom for both cases, “the plaintiff’s claim involving a concession for a limited amount of time gives it no right to sue due to activities that occurred years after the property was of no interest to them.”

On the other hand, on January 2 lawyer Cecilia M. Altonaga of Florida decided to dismiss a lawsuit filed against the Meliá hotel chain supported by the aforementioned act.

Altonaga stopped a trial set for January 10 that was meant to analyze the claim presented by a family for the use of one of the hotels run by Meliá in Cuba. The judge’s order also benefited online booking travel agencies such as Trivago and the Cuban hotel groups Gran Caribe, Cubanacán and Gaviota.

The Spanish magazine Preferente added that on December 31, Meliá presented a motion before a court in Florida to put an end to the litigation and the request was considered two days later by the judge conducting the trial.

As part of its aggressive policy against Cuba, on May 2, 2019 the Trump administration activated Title III of the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, which codifies the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by Washington against the Caribbean island for nearly 60 years.

Criticized both in Cuba and abroad, that title allows U.S. citizens to file lawsuits at U.S. courts against persons, entities and even third-party countries that invest in Cuba in properties nationalized after the revolutionary triumph on January 1, 1959.

Therefore, about 20 legal actions have been presented against cruise ship companies, online travel agencies and hotel chains, among other entities. Considered a violation of international law, that article gives the authority to Cuban-American plaintiffs that were Cuban citizens when those properties were nationalized.

Crucial Moment for U.S. Democrats

WASHINGTON.- The next few weeks are essential for democratic candidates, as they wage to win the nomination of the party leading up to US presidential elections, to be held in November.

After months of campaigns, millions fundraised and endless television debates, the figures that remain in the fight to be presidential candidates now face the first caucuses and primary elections of the current electoral cycle.

The hard-fought battle will reach important results during the Iowa and Nevada caucuses on February 3 and 22, and the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries on February 11 and 29, respectively, but no clear favorite has been identified yet.

Nonetheless, former Vice President Joe Biden has led the group of democratic candidates almost the whole time and continues in the lead according to a survey by RealClearPolitics.

The progressive Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren aren’t far behind, followed by former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, who trails farther behind. They are the four hopefuls with the biggest chance of winning the Democratic Party elections.

In order to win the nomination of the party at the National Democratic Convention, taking place in July in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, candidates must receive the support of 1,990 of the 3,979 delegates that will participate in that meeting.

The four states with caucuses and primary elections in February only represent 155 delegates of the convention, a small number compared to the total needed to win; however, they are important as they are the first electoral meetings.

The winning democratic candidate will have the important challenge of defeating current Republican President Donald Trump in November. Although Trump has a low approval rating, he continues to enjoy unwavering popularity within his party.

The first contests are crucial in the battle for the Democratic Party. The results will give candidates a clue about their chances in the primary elections.

These first results might prove tendencies favoring moderate figures like Biden or even Buttigieg, or on the contrary, the more progressive wing represented by Sanders and Warren.

But in a race with so many contenders, the lack of definition might continue even after those events. If that were the case, it would not be until March 3 - when 14 states will hold primary elections - that a clear panorama with a leading figure will emerge.

The winning democratic candidate will have the important challenge of defeating current Republican President Donald Trump in November. Although Trump has a low approval rating, he continues to enjoy unwavering popularity within his party.

DEcratchocratic STANCE TOWARD CUBA

During the various debates held since June 2019 by the democratic candidates, questions about foreign affairs have largely focused on the Middle East, Russia and China, with few or no questions about Latin America or Cuba, in particular.

However, during the campaigns, reporters have asked about the position of the democratic candidates in regards to Cuba. The majority of them said to be against the many measures adopted by the Trump administration, such as the travel restrictions and limited amount of remittances to Cuba.

In August 2019, when there were 26 democratic candidates, the coalition Engage Cuba, which advocates for lifting the blockade imposed by Washington against the Caribbean island for nearly 60 years, tweeted that all democratic candidates were in favor of a bilateral rapprochement.

Among the people interested in improving bilateral links is Senator Amy Klobuchar, who is still fighting with her presidential campaign. In statements to The Havana Reporter last year, the senator reiterated her rejection of the blockade and noted that she is heading a draft bill presented before the Senate to end the policy, which she considers a failure.
Cuba in Pursuit of Digitalization

By Marnie FIALLO

HAVANA. Access to the internet, 4G connection and a number of applications intended to increase electronic trade and payments have given a major boost to the process of informatization in Cuban society over the past few years.

In 2019 Cuba was the second Latin American country with the best mobile speed with 28 MB per second, according to the report by Speedtest, a website that measures the speed of internet connectivity.

Another new element that characterized 2019 was the implementation of Resolutions 98 and 99 of the Ministry of Communications, related to the organization and lawfulness of wired or wireless interconnected communities.

On the other hand, it’s worth highlighting the efficacy of EnZona, a new online payment method that allows the Cuban population to make financial and business operations on Android phones.

A similar application is Transfermóvil, which can be used to pay the electricity, gas and telephone bills, send money, make bank transfers and put more credit on cell phones.

At the same time, the country is developing the government’s online presence, such as the website “El portal del ciudadano Red Pinar,” created by experts in Pinar del Río Province for people to communicate easier with institutions, to send in suggestions, requests and opinions.

The website posts news and has charts of the governmental structures, as well as a section with cultural and sports programs, together with a section entitled “Orienta tus pasos” (Get Informed) where the population can get information about different institutional procedures.

The Cuban public health sector has also benefitted from the advance in informatization. The digitalization of medical records is underway, with the consequent informatization of different processes at hospitals: appointments, admissions, lab tests, CATs, x-rays, and MRIs.

New technology was first implemented at the Manuel Fajardo Hospital in Havana, and all specialists can access that information online when they need to treat patients or consult a diagnosis.

In the meantime, the Hermanos Ameijeiras Hospital, also in Havana, is applying medicine services at a distance, through holding video conferences for teleconsultations, second-opinion consultations, and to record conferences in different digital formats.

Additionally, software was recently developed by the Enterprise for the Commercialization and Distribution of Medicine to trace medicine more accurately and faster in emergency situations.

All of the country’s medicine distribution centers have the software, used by health administrations in every territory to find medicine in other hospitals.

These and many other projects will be presented at the 2020 International Information Technology Convention and Trade Fair, to take place on March 16-20 under the motto “Towards Digital Transformation.”

This is considered the most important event of its kind in the country as it facilitates exchange between developers, enterprises and universities. Its main objective is to promote the use of digital services in processes and products in order to meet the needs of the society.

The convention’s program will include 13 conferences debating different aspects of technology. The fair will provide a space to present projects, new technologies, products and services with the objective of seeking strategic alliances between Cuban and foreign entities that help strengthen the software industry.

Among the anticipated attendees are the General Secretary of the International Telecommunications Union, Houlin Zhao, and professor Fang Binxing of the Chinese Academy of Engineering.

Infant Health, A Priority of the Cuban Government

By Laura ARBESÚ

HAVANA. For more than 10 years, Cuba has maintained the infant mortality rate below five per one thousand born alive, placing the island among the 35 countries with the lowest statistics in the world and among the few lowest in the region.

In 2019, the country again maintained that figure, which was first reached 11 years ago, with values as low as four per one thousand born alive.

A report of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health indicates that in 2019, 109,707 children were born, which represents 6,626 less in comparison to the previous year.

Complications associated to premature birth and delay in intrauterine growth are listed among the main causes, in spite of programs for pregnant women and newborn babies, according to the report issued by the Medical Records and Health Statistics Division.

The document also highlights that for three years in a row, the infant mortality rate associated to congenital malformations has been maintained at 0.8 per one thousand born alive. The Cienfuegos and Sancti Spiritus provinces, in addition to the Isla de la Juventud municipality, closed the year without deaths associated to this reason.

"This rate is the best in the Americas and is the result of the work of the community genetics services, the development of the national medical genetics network and the national program for the prevention of congenital malformations and genetic diseases," said the Director of Medical Attention at the Ministry of Public Health, Noemi Causa.

The progress made in children’s attention is also evident in the consolidation of the Infant-Maternal Program, which is centered around mothers and babies’ health from the moment of conception.

Other data demonstrates the lack of reports on mothers’ deaths due to postpartum hemorrhages, a persistent problem in developing countries and a situation Cuba has overcome as a result of multidisciplinary work over the last three years.

Many other indicators listed in the document led to positive results, such as the guarantee of vaccination coverage of more than 98 percent that allowed protecting the infant population against 13 diseases.

Since birth, Cuba administers the required dose of 12 different types of vaccines, which prevent 13 diseases. Eight of those vaccines are nationally produced and offered free of charge.

Attention to children in Cuba starts at the very moment each baby is born, when a blood sample is taken from the umbilical cord and the heel to test for endocrine-metabolic and genetic diseases, which if diagnosed in time, can be successfully treated. These diseases include, for example, phenyketonuria, congenital hypothyroidism, glucosemia, biotinide deficiency and congenital adrenal hyperplasia.

Cuba celebrated its ratification - since 2015 - as the first country to eliminate the transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis from mother to baby, which was certified by the World Health Organization.
HAVANA.- The appointment of Viengsay Valdés as General Director of the Cuban National Ballet Company (BNC) was not a surprise. In addition to being an outstanding ballerina, the 43-year-old dancer has also taught lessons and led performances as a maestra. Additionally, she received an Honors Degree at the Havana’s Higher Institute of Arts (ISA). Valdés’ path ballerina has taken her to high technical and interpretative levels, requiring significant sacrifices, hard work, dedication and discipline. When she talks about her career, often she starts to tear up, as her results have been rewarded by excellent reviews, invitations to participate in galas and international festivals, and increasing recognition.

“I am grateful for the confidence people have resided in me; I feel I can greatly help dancers with their formation and development. I hope to help boost confidence and inspiration, to be able to share the common dream of a united and strong company,” the artist told The Havana Reporter.

When asked about the qualities a professional dancer should have, Valdés didn’t refer to aptitudes but instead to attitudes. “In the life of a dancer, constant, restless work is essential, morning till night, to improve technique and learn new skills. Dancers demand more of themselves than any other career, with both devotion and tenacity.

“I am very demanding of myself and I practically never rest; I am constantly working to make everything I do better, either a certain move or any aspect,” she said.

In the theaters of Moscow, Beijing, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Budapest, Paris, Cannes, London, Manchester, Prague, Lisbon, Madrid, Oporto, Dortmund, Istanbul, Caracas and Seoul, among many others, Valdés has been featured, showcasing her name and that of Cuba. However, little is known about the tireless, enthusiastic, wily young woman who loves butterflies.

“Our career takes a lot of time because of the shows, rehearsals and international commitments, and we have to balance our professional lives and our families. In my case, my parents, whom I love very much, have supported me since I was a child and have taught me not to settle but to grow as an artist. I owe them a lot,” she commented. Valdés devotes most of her time to the rigorous training that she now combines with the numerous tasks as a director. Her dedication is the main thing that allows her to maintain and improve her high level.

“I am proud to be a member of the BNC and I am specially privileged to have had such great maestros,” said the pupil of Alicia and Fernando Alonso, the ‘four jewels’ of the Cuban ballet (Josefina Méndez, Loipa Araújo, Aurora Bosch and Mirta Pía), and many other maestros who have forged the renowned company’s path of glory.

Considered one of the most outstanding figures of the Cuban modern classical dance, Valdés has been an invited artist at the United States Washington Ballet, the Puerto Rican Concierto Ballet, the Ukrainian Donetsk Ballet, the South African Joburg Ballet, the Russian Bolshoi and Mariinski Ballet, among other worldwide renowned companies.

She has received several acknowledgments, such as the Distinction for the National Culture (1999), the Alejo Carpentier Medal (2003) and the Raúl Gómez García Medal (2014), which were granted by the Cuban Ministry of Culture. The Stage Artists Association of the National Association of Cuban Writers and Artists granted her the Female Interpretation Award in 2009 and the Lorna Burdsall Award in 2015.

In addition, the prestigious Dance Europe magazine selected her among the world’s best 100 ballerinas in the 2010-2011 season. Recently, ISA granted her the Distinction of Artistic Merit and on January 1 of this year, she received the Award of the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater of Havana.

At the theater’s annual gala, the National Ballet Company also celebrated the 100th anniversary of Alonso’s birth. According to the BNC General Director, the climax of the celebrations will be the XXVII edition of the Havana’s International Ballet Festival, taking place from October 28 to November 6, 2020.
HAVANA.- Admired and renowned around the world, the Cuban tobacco industry is planning to consolidate its global supremacy in 2020, an objective supported by larger investments and higher quality and production levels.

In addition to sugar and rum, cigars have been one of Cuba's main exports for centuries, as the country's history is partly related to the growing of tobacco, which the native population also appreciated.

Cuba produces about 70 percent of the (handmade) premium cigars internationally, besides the United States market due to the restrictions associated to the blockade imposed for over 60 years.

The Cuban development strategy aims to increase exports to boost the national economy. In that sense, the tobacco industry plays an essential role for the nation.

According to authorities, the tobacco industry will increase its income levels by $300 million dollars this year.

"In 2019, we topped the projected total income as well as export sales and overall contribution to the country, although we are not fully pleased," said the chairman of the TABACUBA Entrepreneurial Group, Justo Luis Fuentes.

Among the challenges mentioned, he referred to the need to increase the quality of rolled cigars and the productivity of the 800 cooperatives dedicated to the growing of tobacco, which is made up of about 16,700 farmers.

He also highlighted the importance of fostering the production of Burley tobacco, which is currently in high demand around the world because of its blends, such as the production of Virginia cigarettes.

Only in the westernmost province of Pinar del Río, where about 70 percent of the national production is harvested, about one thousand hectares of Virginia tobacco will be planted.

"In general, the objective is to cover about 19,700 hectares in this territory, which is the cradle of the world's best cigar," commented Virginio Morales, a specialist in the TABACUBA agricultural division.

The investment process is another important step to diversify and improve the quality of cigars. In this regard, several cardinal works opened in the last week of December.

As part of that strategy, three raw tobacco-processing centers were opened at the end of 2019, which join five others already in operation in Pinar del Río.

"The product we export from those factories have no use in the industry of rolled cigar, which is our priority; on the contrary, before it was not efficiently used," explained the director of the TABACUBA pre-industry, Félix Ramón Hernández.

Other facilities that have recently opened include a training center and a modern warehouse. The latter, the first of its type in the country, allows the quality of leaves by preventing high temperatures inside the facility.

Cuba has 50 factories that produce rolled cigars for export, and the same number for the production of national consumption cigars, in addition to two industries that produce machine-manufactured cigars. In addition, there are two plants for the production of cigarettes and one that produces wooden boxes.

Habanos S.A., the company that has the exclusive rights of the commercialization of all the Cuban cigar brands, is present in about 160 countries through its distributors.

Another important area for the development of this crop in Cuba is the use of innovation and state-of-the-art technology in order to protect the aromatic leaf.

Cuba hosted in 2019 the first International Congress on Tobacco Research, in which more than 60 lectures were conducted on the topic.
UPCOMING EVENTS

29 Havana International Book Fair (Feb 6-16 2020)

FESTIVAL DE LA SALSA
Festival de La Salsa
(Feb 25 - Mar 1 2020)

29 Havana International Book Fair

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HAVANA.- Climate change and foreign interference are the main challenges the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) members have to face in order to materialize the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Barbados assumed presidency of the regional bloc for the next six months and in her New Year’s message, Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley urged governments to raise funds in order to progress the integration of the Caribbean nations.

The effects of hurricane Dorian and the interference of the Organization of American States (OAS) in the region’s domestic issues are some of the problems inherited from 2019, which mark the socio-economic panorama of the Caribbean countries in this period.

THE FACES OF HURRICANE DORIAN

Last year’s cyclone season was the third most active in the history of the region, with 18 storms. Six of them were hurricanes, Dorian and Lorenzo both reaching the highest category on the Saffir-Simpson scale.

At the beginning of September 2019, Dorian was stationary for almost 48 hours over the Grand Bahama and Abaco islands, with torrential rains and maximum winds of 295 km/h. Dorian’s intensity caused the certified deaths of over 70 people, in addition to over 600 missing persons, about 75,000 people affected and over 1,500 sheltered.

The weather phenomenon caused damages to housing, transportation, health, electricity and water supply in the Bahamas.

According to data provided by the Prime Minister’s Office, until October 21 of last year, the Bahamas received over 7 million dollars in donations from foreign governments, multilateral organizations, corporations and private entities.

In a visit to the affected areas, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres urged the international community to contribute to help recover the Bahamian nation.

Regional Integration and Rejection of AOS

Several debates took place in 2019 in the political field, including the VI CARICOM Summit; the Forum of Single Market and Economy; the Symposium of Regional Transformation for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth, and a meeting of agricultural planners.

The representatives of the region also analyzed topics related to digital transformation, trade and the economic development of sea-powered technologies in the Caribbean, all hoping to foster the community’s progress.

During this period, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines made history as the smallest State to be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Surinamese president Desiré Delano Bouterse and Dominican Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit rejected OAS’s interference in domestic issues of the Caribbean nations, following OAS’s attempts to delegitimize the elections held in both nations.

CARICOM internationally ratified its opposition to the use of force and foreign interference in any nation of the world. In that sense, the regional bloc criticized the U.S. siege against Venezuela and stated its stance behind ending the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed on Cuba.
2020 Batuta Award Ceremony to be Held in Havana

HAVANA.- The president of the Latin Music Institute (ILM), Daniel Martín, plans to hold an edition of the Batuta Award Ceremony this year in Havana, Cuba, in November. The Young cultural promoter is convinced that music heals and brings people together; therefore, he sees the awards show as an opportunity to build bridges.

His latest role was to organize the Batuta Music Awards, which are equivalent to the Latin Grammy Awards but in this case to recognize internationally-renowned musicians of classical and concert music. The first musical scores were created over one thousand years ago, centuries before the cinema. It is strange that it was not until after one thousand years that the classical music union awarded their own artists, he commented.

So far, classical music has been a battle of egos in many cases, but these days when humanity is perhaps more spiritual and interconnected, the time has come to recognize classical musicians in one place only, Martín said in an exclusive interview with The Havana Reporter.

The original Batuta award winners were icons such as Spanish Plácido Domingo, British Michael Nyman, the Cubans Leo Brouwer and Edesio Alejandro, the Mexicans Enrique Báñez and Carlos Esteva, Swedish Daniel Rozakovitch (considered a young music prodigy), among others. Great musicians will be recognized at an event that binds them together, noted Martín, who was granted the Benito Juárez Order in 2019 in Mexico for his contributions to the Latin American culture, as well as the Honoris Causa Doctorate by two universities, the International Gaviota Award and an Honorary Mention by the University of Puebla.

The ceremony will be held in between the 27th International Ballet Festival of Havana and the 42nd International Festival of New Latin American Cinema.

Martín hopes to bring together artists from North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, among other regions. Among the musicians included on the list of award winners, he mentioned the Cuban maestros Guido López Gavilán, Enrique Pérez Mesa, Zenaida Romeu, Ulises Aquino and Frank Fernández.

"The award ceremony will include music performances and we will invite many great maestros to be part of the shows," he added. Martín announced that the perfect place to host the Batuta Awards will be the García Lorca Hall of the Gran Teatro de La Habana Alicia Alonso (Grand Theater of Havana), and thanked the support of the Cuban Ministry of Culture and the Cuban Institute of Music for the event’s organization.

"This entails great teamwork; the ceremony would not be possible without it,” stressed the producer of "Tito reacciona" (Tito Reacts), an animated series that honors different ambassadors of culture on the continent and highlights the values of Latin artistic heritage.

According to Martín, his role within the Batuta Music Awards is to give due recognition to many great maestros while still alive, which is why the event could have different travelling editions in the same year, at least during its first five years. Later on, it might be held once each year, or perhaps one in Asia, another in Europe and a third in America, in order to honor such international treasure, he noted.

Arrangements to hold one event in China and another in Russia began already. This year, Martín will support the making of a documentary to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Latin Music Institute in 2021, directed by Cuban musician Edesio Alejandro, an ILM cultural ambassador and active member of the Hollywood Academy of Arts and Cinematographic Sciences.

In addition, he will compose a piece that will be performed by several Cuban musicians and Mexican singer Lila Downs.

"The ILM is currently growing and I love this idea. We not only try to be in the big cities but in the municipalities as well; we are studying folklore," he said.

“I think we must look inside, at our ancestors and be proud of our roots,” Martín affirmed.

Cuban Artist Recognized in Mexico

HAVANA.- The Honors Causa International Foundation, founded in Mexico, named Cuban visual artist Rafael San Juan as their 2019 Man of the Year. The award ceremony took place on January 24, at the House of Representatives Legislators Hall in the Mexican capital.

San Juan is known for his huge sculptures and many are exhibited in different parts of the world.

He gained popularity in Havana, his native town, around 2015, with the installment of a giant woman's face looking at the sea from the Malecón (sea wall), at its intersection with Galiano street.

Primavera (Spring), the name of the eight-meter tall sculpture of recycled steel, was made in Mexico and exhibited at the XII edition of the Havana’s Visual Arts Biennial. After the closing of this event, it remained there as a present to the Office of the Havana City Historian.

The artist studied at the prestigious San Alejandro National Arts School. In 1990, he served as the set designer of plays such as Electra, by Teatro la Luna; the production of Maria Antonia, by the National Folklore Group, and Fabio, La tempestad, and Terriblemente inocente, by the Cuban Contemporary Dance Group.

His work on the stage led him to the performing arts, offering an opportunity to combine different expressions.

"Set design definitely helped me see things in their vast dimensions and that favored my dedication to large-format works," he told The Havana Reporter.

In 2002, San Juan traveled to Mexico to design Cuba's pavilion at the international literature fair. There, he built his first giant piece: a face of Cuban National Hero José Marti made out of books, which were given to kids as presents on the closing date.

That was the start of San Juan’s international recognition, whose sculptures of huge feet, hands and faces made of steel are located in public places in the United States and Mexico. In the latter, for example, five female faces representing all five continents, are installed at the Guadalajara Central Park.

He often uses women as his muses because he considers women as the origin of beauty. However, he often depicts male hands due to the expressiveness of accumulated manual labor.

Primavera, for example, is a tribute to Cuban women. The bunch of butterfly flowers in the woman’s hair represents the Cuban national flower.

Rafael San Juan has worked with steel, concrete, ceramics, wood, stone and plaster. His passion for the anatomy of the human body started at the age of 18, when he was allowed to enter a cemetery and take a human skull during military service.

When he arrived at the Columbus cemetery, the workers were going to throw a large number of bones into a shared grave but because of his unusual interest, he was allowed to take the bones of a whole body, which are assembled at his house, making up a skeleton that he named Héctor.

In order to reassemble the skeleton, he obviously needed the advice of medical faculty. He showed such a strong interest that he was admitted into an anatomy postgraduate course. That connection with the academy helped him use human organs and bones in future exhibitions.

The reference of the body is all over his work, and stronger as a philanthropic institution with a wide social sensibility.

The entity has previously awarded other Cuban artists, such as the diva of the Buena Vista Social Club, Omara Portuondo, and the present director of the Cuban National Ballet, Viëngsay Valdés, among other renowned Cuban artists.
HAVANA.- As part of the tourist development conducted in the central region of Cuba, there is a plan to restore the sugarcane plantations located in Trinidad, including the wonderful San Isidro de los Desfiladeros.

Those who visit this plantation, in the well-known Valle de los Ingenios, will be surprised by the lovely environment, while the buildings are still undergoing restoration. The idea is to restore these sites or at least recreate them as exactly as possible. For that reason, in many of the ruins, there are signs to explain the historic interest of what people can appreciate there.

The Sancti Spiritus province, located in the center of the island, has ample tourist attractions. Trinidad, known as the City Museum, is one of the many attractions in the province. The village was founded in 1514 by Spanish conqueror Diego Velázquez during the colonization of the West Indies.

Among the over 60 sugar plantations in the Valle de los Ingenios, San Isidro de los Desfiladeros was one of the most prosperous.

Information exhibited there show the importance of the valley’s industrial heritage. It is said that the construction of the site dates back to the 18th century, when it was a sugar mill named San Juan Nepomuceno—originally property of Alejo María del Carmen Iznaga y Borrell. The owner was Catalan, who came to Cuba with the hope to make fortune, a goal he met.

Then, the owner renamed the sugar mill after the patron of agriculture in Spain: San Isidro de los Desfiladeros. He later sold the property to José del Rey Álvarez, who benefited from the steam engine and the large increase of enslaved people whose forced labor transformed San Isidro into one of the 10 most productive sugarcane mills in the valley.

Shortly after, Pedro Matamoros Borrell bought the plantation and increased production, coercing enslaved workers to remodel and build colonial structures for sugar production of sugar. According to the plantation’s tour guides, the official documents filed in Trinidad show the patterns of the mill from 1854 to 1893. In 1893, the area was registered as a pasture as it had been demolished 23 years earlier due to the decline of the sugar boom.

The San Isidro plantation has an amazing location, alongside the Escambray mountain range. However, San Isidro also recalls the utmost savagery and subjugation of West African men and women. At present, the specialized guides lead visitors through the complex history of the area and national production.

Every year, San Isidro summons archeologists, engineers, architects and other specialists to the Valle de los Ingenios Industrial Archeology Workshop; otherwise, this is essentially a tourist destination.

The San Isidro de los Desfiladeros plantation is a good example of the area’s most productive and deeply unjust period. Even though it was not the largest sugarcane mill, it has been well preserved, which makes it an ideal place to visit and go back in time.
HAVANA.- The presidential candidates for the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca, represent a future of peace and freedom for the State of Bolivia, said its leader Evo Morales.

On January 19, Morales, who was granted asylum in Argentina, announced that the MAS presidential candidature will take place on May 3. Morales stated that the Democratic and Cultural Revolution of Bolivia will continue on through the two running candidates.

On Twitter, the former president praised the people’s rights achieved during 14 years of government, and said that the Arce-Choquehuanca duo represents recovery to full democracy in the South American country.

Arce, a 57-year-old economist, professor and politician, was the Bolivian Minister of Economy and Finances from 2006 until 2017, and again in 2019, when he resigned his position during the course of the coup d’état.

The MAS presidential candidate considers himself to be socialist. His work positively influenced the Bolivian economy, which registered an average five percent growth annually during the years that Morales was in power.

Interested in transforming the country together with Evo Morales, Arce implemented favorable policies for companies which led to dynamic economic growth, most noticeably in the gas sector. Silver and iron exports also increased, together with other actions that allowed the Andean-Amazon country to amass considerable economic resources.

One of the main achievements of the Morales government’s economic growth (with Arce as minister of economy) was that the distribution of wealth benefited the poorest classes.

In this regard, extreme poverty decreased from 38 to 18 percent under the leadership of Evo Morales, with the World Bank calling these results “amazing.”

During these almost 14 years, the country also accumulated over $15.40 billion in international reserves as of October 2019, one of the world’s highest levels considering the size of its economy. In the meantime, national inflation rates were kept under control.

Arce reiterates the work he did in the Ministry of Economy during the Evo Morales government was radical and, like Karl Marx, he believes that, “in order to jump to socialism, it is necessary to develop productive forces.”

Choquehuanca, the vice presidential candidate, served as minister of foreign affairs from 2006 until 2017, loyal to Morales’ ideas in favor of indigenous rights.

While serving as minister of foreign affairs, the diplomat supported the traditional consumption of the coca leaf and promoted ancestral concepts such as good living: balance between human beings and Pachamama (Mother Earth).

Over the last few years, Choquehuanca was the general secretary of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA-TCP), which groups countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and more recently, Bolivia.

In the framework of the ALBA-TCP, the Bolivian leader called to strengthen regional integration and multilateral work in favor of the people.

“Our pair: Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca is a combination of scientific and thousand-year-old native knowledge, of the countryside and the city, of body and soul. We have a sovereign political body that has proven that another Bolivia is possible,” the indigenous leader said.

Although he won the October 20 elections, President Evo Morales resigned his post on November 10, 2019, under the pressure by top military forces.

Two days later and in order to materialize the coup d’état, Senator Jeanine Áñez proclaimed herself as the interim president, a post that was to conclude on January 22. However, the Chamber of Deputies approved the Exceptional Law on the Deferral of the Constitutional Power of Authorities Elect, resulting in the extension of the term for Áñez, senators and parliamentary deputies.

Last November 22, the self-proclaimed president promulgated the Exceptional and Transitory Regime Law for the 2020 General Elections, which ignores the elections held on October 20, 2019, when former President Morales won with 47 percent of the votes.

The regulation recognizes the participation of all political groups but prevents the candidature of those reelected for two previous constitutional terms.

During the coup against Morales and its repressive aftermath, over 30 people have died, nearly 800 were injured and 1,500 others arrested.
U.S. Dollar in the 2020 Economic Agenda

HAVANA.- The American dollar started the 2020 financial scenario marked by commercial tensions between Washington and China, along with other big powers’ interest to prioritize other currencies has led to the detriment of greenbacks. The signing of the first agreement between the United States and China eased pressure in foreign exchange markets, though uncertainty remains as for future steps. Other adverse factors include Brexit and the Federal Reserve (FED) decision to maintain a stable interest rate, which fosters saving and somewhat discourages investments.

It is worth mentioning that in 2019, the American dollar index registered its lowest annual movement, with an increase of only 0.24 percent. The dollar fell significantly in December due to a lack of confidence on the part of investors. Gold, on the contrary, emerged as a strong alternative for powers such as Russia, who changed a substantial amount of its currency reserves into gold. Other nations have resorted to their respective national currencies for trading, hurting the dollar’s function as a form of universal payment.

On top of this, the United States-Iran conflict is worsening and its consequences in the international energy scene are still to be determined. A confrontation between the two countries could hinder relations between the United States and its trading partners, in addition to increasing economic friction among others nations. Experts voice concern about the U.S. currency in 2020 due to future economic relations with China, as the second phase of the agreement between the two nations faces many obstacles. Topics to be negotiated include the 5G mobile networks, technological control of exports, and the issue of copyright, which Washington fights tooth and nail. That process is likely to get even more complicated in the context of the electoral campaign in the United States, considering that President Donald Trump is running for a second term. However, according to predictions, the dollar will maintain its lead at least short-term, profiting over the next six months.

The Euro, one of the main rivals of the U.S. currency, has entered difficult times, losing about 7 percent of its value over the last two years. In addition, world economic predictions conducted by multilateral bodies indicate a downward revision in relation to the 2020 and 2021 growth of 3.3 and 3.4 percent, respectively. In light of this, the central banks will follow the progress of economies very closely, in order to make adjustments to interest rates or similar measures to revert any sign of crisis.

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HAVANA.- The II International Workshop Cuba Sabe 2020 is a celebration of tradition, heritage and the most authentic values of Cuban nationality.

It was also an event in which the over 200 participants from the United States, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom and Italy were surrounded by delicious smells, tastes and sights.

The opening and closing ceremonies of the event, held at Havana’s luxurious Iberostar Grand Packard Hotel in the beginning of January, was attended by Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel and Prime Minister Manuel Marrero.

President of the Organizing Committee Liz Cuesta said that the event displayed the essence of Cuban cuisine as part of the culture of resistance prevailing in the country. This international culinary workshop is aimed at perpetuating knowledge in the field and promoting Cuban culinary culture, she added.

Cuesta also highlighted that the objective of this event is to rescue and promote traditional cuisine, which celebrates its selection as a Cultural Heritage of the country.

The present edition of Cuba Sabe 2020 was dedicated to Italy because of its important influence on Cuban cuisine. However, other traditions that are also part of the national heritage were also acknowledged.

Cassava—a pre-Columbian root that can be used in a variety of recipes—was one of the most celebrated ingredients. Cassava can be easily preserved, has many uses and nutritional value. Renowned Cuban chefs reviewed distinguished preparations, from recipes of western Cuba to the easternmost area—where dishes featured the tetí fish to give guests a unique and tasty experience.

President of the Cuban Culinary Federation Eddy Fernández stated that the workshop contributed to the training and preparation of gastronomy professionals and staff, in addition to promoting the values of Cuban cuisine.

He added that the event was an ideal occasion for Cuban chefs to exchange with international experts, celebrating new knowledge and collaboration.

The event featured gourmet cooking lessons, workshops, lectures and food tasting. In addition, the Havana Club Union—the first spirit created for a cigar, the Cohiba Siglo VI—was launched. The rum-cigar pairing went over well with experts, proving to be a perfect combination.

Cuba’s potential to become a culinary tourist destination, in addition to the sun and beach attractions that make the country famous, were highlighted at this event.

On the occasion of Cuba Sabe 2020, the Cuban Sommeliers Association was created, an entity that, according to Cuban Minister of Tourism, Juan Carlos García, will contribute to safeguard the values of national gastronomy.

The event illustrated the versatility of typical Cuban dishes and the reinvention of traditional recipes to meet current international standards.

The next edition of Cuba Sabe will take place from January 14 to 16, 2021. According to the organizers, it will be dedicated to the Chinese influence in Cuban cuisine. In addition, tribute will be paid to the culinary culture of the Sancti Spiritus province.
A Big Step Backwards

By Yasiel CANCIO

HAVANA.- The year 2019 started full of hope for Cuban baseball. However, things changed and the dreams of many fell into the abyss of mistakes and shortcomings. The cold war times seem to have returned to the national pastime, striking out as never before.

It all started in April 2019, when U.S. President Donald Trump used his executive order to cancel the agreement between the Major League Baseball (MLB) and the Cuban Baseball Federation (FCB), which allowed the participation of Cuban players in the Major Leagues, in a legal and organized way. That cancellation destroyed the bridges created between Cuba and the MLB, thus causing chaos among Cuban baseball players, the only ones in the world that have to seek residence in a third country and give up their citizenship to sign with the Major League clubs.

The conflict intensified at the beginning of January this year, with the commissioner of the Caribbean Professional Baseball Confederation, Yandy Puello, expelling Cuba from the 2020 Caribbean Series in San Juan due to alleged problems with granting visas, and even accusing an FCB official to justify his decision. Puello refuses responsibility by blaming an FCB official for Cuba’s inability to participate in the Caribbean Series, the Cuban federation stressed in a release.

It also emphasized that Puello knows perfectly well how difficult it is for the FCB to make any visa procedures to travel to the United States, including the terms and additional expenses that this entails. After being a founder and host of the first edition of the Caribbean Series in 1949, Cuba stopped participating in 1960 after professionalism in the Cuban sport was abandoned. Later on, in 2014, the winning Cuban clubs returned to the games and even won the series in 2015, a feat made by the Vegueros de Pinar del Río team in San Juan, interestingly.

The return was characterized by a singular detail: Cuba would play as a guest country and not as a full member, due to the big influence of the Major Leagues of the United States, a country that has maintained an economic blockade against Havana for nearly 60 years.

In statements to the press, the Caribbean director made it clear that, “if we include Cuba (as a full member), it means that the agreement with the Major Leagues runs the risk of seeming senseless. The confederation cannot fully engage Cuba now if it wants to keep its relation with the MLB.”

The FCB said in the release that it is a clear sign of discriminatory treatment, just like the exclusion of the Cuban team from the 2020 Caribbean Series.

Six years after its re-entry, the Cuban monarch is once again absent from the games and its future return is up in the air after these big conflicts.

The history of Cuban baseball, amateur and professional, has earned the right to participate in the Caribbean Series and deserves to be recognized at any international event, the FCB release states.

Matanzas: Champion of Cuban Baseball

HAVANA.- Over the past few years, the Matanzas team has overcome every obstacle to climb from the last place of Cuban team rankings up to first in a recent tournament.

In the previous eight tournaments, this team suffered two defeats in the finals, was ranked third five times and even got last. However, this January the team’s performance improved as it defeated the Camagüey team 4-2 in the play offs of the 59th National Baseball Series.

“We worked hard every day to achieve this victory,” the Matanzas team’s manager Armando Ferrer told The Havana Reporter. “Discipline, perseverance and strong desire were key to win the national series,” he added.

The members of the Matanzas team thus broke the streak of almost 10,600 days without winning a title, in part thanks to the talent of shortstop Erisbel Arruebarrena, who contributed with his experience after playing with Los Angeles Dodgers Major League team.

“Since I got here, I’ve said this is the best Cuban team,” Ferrer noted.

The Crocodiles of Matanzas game a stellar performance between August 10, 2019 and January 18, 2020. “We put our hearts into every game,” said the 20-year-old second baseman, César Prieto. “I was a bit anxious at first but then I calmed down and then came the results,” the player said at the Premier 12 tournament.

The win wasn’t like that of the Leicester City Football Club, who jumped from beggar to king in the 2015-2016 English Premier League, as Cuban baseball is currently a bundle of unexpected results where experts have no idea how to make predictions.

“The victory was long-awaited so now the celebrations are twice as many,” stated Jonder Martínez, a 41-year-old pitcher and national champion with the Havana and Villa Clara teams. “Age doesn’t matter; the joy is the same because it is all the fruit of collective labor,” he added.

Matanzas seemed to be synonym for failure because, after they won the series under the names of Henequeros (1970, 1990 and 1991) and Citricultores (1977 and 1984), the much awaited victory hadn’t come, in spite of having first-class players and seasoned coaches.

But, as the saying goes, nothing lasts forever and the hard work of the team led by Ferrer bore tremendous results.

The heroes of the title won in 1991 under the name of Henequeneros included Jorge Luis Valdés, Carlos Mesa, Juan Manrique, Julio Germán Fernández, José “Pepeito” Estrada, Eduardo Cárdenas, Lázaro Junco, Juan Manrique, Carlos Kindelán and Guillermo Heredia.

This time, other names were responsible for the victory: Yamichel Pérez, César Prieto, Yoanni Yera, Yurisbel Gracial, Erisbel Arruebarrena, Freddy Asiel Álvarez, Javier Camero, Jefferson Delgado and Jonder Martínez, just to mention some of the players with the best performances.

The fans of the Citricultores and Henequeneros teams had to wait for a long time to savor victory again. “We are very happy with this title and I am very pleased to give such a thrill to our fans after so many years,” said pitcher Yamichel Pérez, who was chosen as the Greatest Player of the Postseason.

The Crocodiles spared no efforts to smash the Bulls of Camagüey, who have never won under their current name, either. They were defeated in 1991, were second in 1985 –with its current manager Miguel Borroto- and were the winners in 1976 under the name Ganaderos.

Matanzas attained a victory full of nuances and passion, embodying the biblical phrase “the last shall be first,” like an urban legend that will be heard one day about how a team went from the sublime to the ridiculous and returned to have its name included in the history of winning teams.
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