2021: Another Challenging Year Ahead

Health & Science
Vaccines that Break the Laws of Time

Photo Feature
Cuban Paradise for Bird Species

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Monetary Unification
HAVANA.- Recovering the upward trend tourism registered in 2019 is undoubtedly the main objective of Cuban tourist authorities in 2021, despite the negative impact of COVID-19 and instability of the world travel market. Constantly committed to strict biosafety protocols, Cuba’s tourism is on the road to recovery and aimed to boost the economy through well-organized plans; hence, the sector is advancing despite the impact of the disease and hopes to rescue the number of foreign visitors.

In Cuba, the measures adopted by the travel sector largely involve strict sanitary control, and even special certifications for hotels. Among other tools, that program includes a doctor and a nurse in every hotel to detect any possible health issue. Therefore, the recovery of tourism is interpreted as a given, mainly after the country’s main tourist resort, Varadero, reopened last October and all international airports reopened in November.

According to the latest edition of the World Tourism Organization Barometer, in the first trimester of 2020 the sector shrank 22 percent in the world, with 67 million less international tourists, which accounts for some 80 thousand million dollars. That pace continued throughout the year.

Tourism is one of the most important sectors to develop the Cuban economy; therefore, local authorities have made numerous improvements such as the over 9,000 projects in Varadero in order to recuperate the sector, and even try to exceed the number of foreign visitors registered in 2019: a little over four million.

Referring to the topic, the Ministry of Tourism’s (Mintur) Delegate in the western province of Matanzas, Ivis Fernández, announced that the 52 hotels in that destination have the More Hygienic and Safe Tourism (T+HS) Certification, as do the rest of tourist facilities in the country.

Internationally renowned companies such as Meliá, Iberostar and Blue Diamond, among others, are already committed to rescuing tourism on the island, in times when Canadian airlines and Germany’s Condor Airline have resumed their flights, together with trips organized by TUI (Germany-United Kingdom).

Despite the slow pace of the sector due to COVID-19, this industry is paving the way and actions with producers and businesses are underway so as to meet the sector’s needs, MINTUR spokesmen commented.

Another important element of the MINTUR strategy is to facilitate foreign investment, increase access to new technologies, with Internet connectivity all over the country allowing for bookings and payments using international financial methods.
HAVANA.- Cuba will face 2021 with the proven strength of last year, when the island was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftereffects, in addition to the strengthening of the U.S. blockade, which caused a contraction of the economy that amounted to 11 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. The country showed its strength by keeping the disease under control, but also by facing exceptional economic conditions and overcoming Washington's aggressions, said Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel at the People's Power National Assembly (ANPP) that was in session on December 16 and 17. The President also highlighted that the attempts that the Trump government made to asphyxiate Cubans were a complete and evident failure, as our people showed their heroism and withstood the shortages caused by the non-conventional wars and so-called soft coups. These confrontation attempts are focused on the cultural sector in their capacity as an expression of the country's essence, media display and foreign financing, he added. In the face of future relations with the United States, a country that will have a new government, the head of State reiterated that his country is willing to discuss any topic but stressed that our principles and sovereignty will not be negotiable. This new year, Cuba will continue fighting COVID-19 with the strategy and results that place our country below the world's average mortality rate. In 2020, no Cuban child, pregnant woman or health staff member died due to the disease. Over a dozen biomedicines produced on the island have been used in the treatment of COVID-19, and the trials of four Cuban vaccine candidates against the disease bring hope to 2021. The economy will be the other battleground. On January 1, Cuba eliminated monetary duality. The Cuban peso will prevail for both individuals and legal entities with an exchange rate of 24 pesos to one U.S. dollar. At the same time, a salary, pension and price reform will be made, a process in which the authorities will be on alert in the event that inflationary outbreaks arise. These measures will be complicated but essential to remove many of the obstacles the economy faces, and to pave the way for the 2030 socio-economic strategy. Díaz-Canel stressed that there will be no shock therapy in Cuba, the concerns of the population will be met and revised and no one will be abandoned. These actions will be accompanied by a State budget, 52 percent of which will be dedicated to education, public health and social care. The economic plan is foreseen to grow from six to seven percent of the Gross Domestic Product. However, this increase will be in relation to the 2020 contraction. Cuban Deputy Prime Minister of Economics and Planning Alejandro Gil stated that the fulfillment of this goal will depend on the reactivation of the tourist industry and the increase planned in 19 percent of the income for exports and services. Cuba was expected to receive 5 million tourists in 2020, but the borders had to be closed for seven months because of the world health crisis. This year, the country expects to welcome 2.2 million visitors, a figure far below its potential, with the addition of 5,000 rooms - equivalent to 17 hotels. On the other hand, the economic plan gives priority to the substitution of imports and the materialization of links between the different productive actors, including the non-state sectors and foreign investment. At the institutional level, the Cuban Parliament endorsed a readjustment of the legislative schedule, affected by the pandemic. In this sense, the ANPP's agenda this year will include a dozen bills, such as the laws related to the Popular Courts, Administrative Processes, Legal and Civil Procedures, Labor and Economics. Other bills include those related to Food Safety, Territorial Order, Personal Data Protection, Family Code, Claim of Constitutional Rights, among others. Cuba is nearing the 63rd anniversary of the Revolution, a year that will face its own challenges and victories, as President Díaz-Canel predicts.
HAVANA.- Sending love to their homeland, members of the Cuban community settled in the United States donated medical supplies to contribute to the fight against Covid-19 on the island.

The donation, received on December 10 at the “José Martí” International Airport of Havana, was mainly addressed to the “Pedro Kourí” Tropical Medicine Institute (IPK). The institution’s Director, Doctor Manuel Romero, appreciated the donation sent by his fellow citizens, which was composed of 102 health and protection material packages for the healthcare staff. The delivery will also benefit 17 molecular biology labs located all over the country in their work to detect the new coronavirus disease.

The donation was sent thanks to the arrangements made by the Wajiro Import and Export company, with the support of former member of the U.S. House of Representatives Joe Garcia – of Cuban origin – and a group of Cuban-Americans settled in Southern Florida, who support the improvement of relationships between the two nations. Before the press, Romero emphasized the importance of this event, not because of its economic value but because it shows the solidarity between Cubans wherever they are, and for the human value it has. He added that this action is a follow-up to the memorandum of understanding the Cuban Ministry of Public Health and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services signed in 2016 as part of the restart of relations between both countries and the rapprochement taking place at the time.

“This load shows the wish of the Cuban community living abroad to cooperate and collaborate with their home country,” said Yanet Stable, head of Migratory Policy at the Department of Consular Issues and Cubans Living Abroad (DACRE) at the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Stable stated the appreciation of the Cuban government and ratified the will to strengthen ties with emigrants in any part of the world, including the United States, regardless of the person who rules the White House. For his part, DACCRE General Director, Ernesto Soberón, highlighted on Twitter that having received the donation from the Cubans living in the United States is a proof of the fact that “what matters are the reasons to strengthen and tighten links and collaboration with the homeland.”

He added that this aid is in addition to other support made by Cuban people and associations living abroad, in support of the battle the country fights against COVID-19. During this period, Cuba has received about 170 donations of solidarity, which are highly appreciated, IPK director noted. This is one of the lessons the pandemic teaches us, the need to unite in the face of challenges, he commented.

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HAVANA.- When doing clinical trials, a week of reaction in animals is equivalent to one year in humans; however, the Cuban vaccine Soberana 02 broke that law.

Phase I of clinical trials of the abovementioned vaccine candidate started at the beginning of November and just 14 days after its administration, its first dose showed promising results.

On December 17, the Finlay Institute of Vaccines announced that Soberana 02 would start phase II of clinical trials, thus becoming the first Latin American medication to go into that phase.

"If in the first dose we can see that a significant percent of volunteers responds well, then we can take the risk of going into phase II, because the probabilities of success are high," director of the Finlay Institute, Dr. Vicente Vérez, told The Havana Reporter.

Soberana 02 is a conjugate vaccine in which the virus antigen – the receptor-binding domain (RBD) – is chemically bound to the tetanus toxoid.

According to Vérez, this medication has two formulations and the second one was highly effective in animals, as it caused an immune response the very first week in which its first dose was administered. This medication also induces a long-duration memory in the immune response, which in addition to producing antibodies, makes these last longer.

That's the reason why this formula is creating a different expectation and would only require confirming those results in humans.

PANDEMIALS: HYPER-CONNECTED BUT ISOLATED

COVID-19 is leaving behind a new generation whose limit is not marked by social or technological changes, but by the existence of a virus that’s proven harmful to humanity.

Those born in 2020 and those who lived the crisis caused by the disease will be known as Pandemials.

Pandemials are hyper-connected through information and communication technologies, while also being isolated. Their lives will be marked by expressions such as “new normality,” “asymptomatic” and “curve levelling,” and especially by uncertainty and the wait for vaccines for the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

However, Soberana 02 is also designed for this generation.

According to Dr. Vérez, protecting kids is essential, as education is one of the most affected social spheres in any confinement situation.

"Developing a conjugate vaccine, with tetanus toxoid and as safe as Soberana 02 is, led the way to study children's immune response, in order to avoid taking too long to get it to them," he said.

Pandemials will be the first kids to be vaccinated against COVID-19 with medications that are already a landmark in the history of medicine, for progressing in record time.

CUBA’S FOUR VACCINE CANDIDATES FOR COVID-19

In addition to Soberana 01, Cuba launched another medication that was also developed by the Finlay Institute and whose phase of clinical trials started in August. This vaccine candidate finished phase I before the end of 2020.

After this stage, a determination will be made to decide which of its five formulations will be approved to advance to phase II, as of January 2021.

Both vaccines, Soberana 01 and Soberana 02, will also start completing their efficacy studies abroad.

Cuba also has other two candidates for COVID-19 developed by the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center (CIGB): Abdala and Mambisa.

The latter will be administered via the nose.

Abdala, a name given in honor of Cuban National Hero José Martí's first dramatic poem, started its clinical trials at the beginning of December in the eastern province Santiago de Cuba.

The study will include two phases: the first, until February 2021, with 200 volunteers; the second with 600 people. This vaccine uses a type of yeast as a RBD protein and alumina as an adjuvant.

Mambisa, also called CIGB 669, goes through the nasal canal and is a sub-unit vaccine that uses AgnHB protein as antigen.

CIGB director for Biomedical Research Gerardo Guillén explained that nasal immunization favors the development of a local response whose objective is to prevent the disease, its colonization and the transmission of the pathogen agent.

He also added that the new vaccine candidate is based on a protein of the hepatitis B virus, produced through the recombinant genetic engineering in bacteria and yeasts in the form of particles, whose properties also boost the immune system.

The world race headed by the United States, Russia, China and the United Kingdom to have an efficient, safe and fast vaccine to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic has led the international and Cuban scientific communities to address their efforts to finding efficient and safe vaccines for COVID-19.

“In Cuba, since this endeavor started, we have not taken a break and have gotten until here with a lot of creativity,” Vérez concluded.
Documentary on Young Dancer

By Martha SÁNCHEZ

HAVANA.- The 42nd International Festival of New Latin American Film provided room for the Havana premiere of Cuban Dancer, a documentary directed by Italian filmmaker Roberto Salinas. The director was unable to present it in person due to the pandemic, but hopes to return to the Cuban capital sometime in 2021 to be present during further screenings.

The film tells the story of Alexis Valdés, a talented Cuban student of the Fernando Alonso National School of Ballet, whose life changes when his family decides to move to Florida to reunite with the sister. The adolescent was thus forced to adjust his expectations and goals in a completely new environment.

Cuba's National School of Ballet is a jewel not only of Cuban society but of the world, the Italian Theater History graduate said in an exclusive interview with Havana Reporter.

According to Salinas, the Cuban school's training program combines discipline and opportunity, teamwork and individual discipline, making its students feel proud and fully motivated during the long days of classes and rehearsals.

“I also think that this school teaches something more than dance. The students learn to live and develop values that accompany them for the rest of their lives. Alexis takes those ideals of commitment, seriousness, love for art, solidarity with him to the United States,” he noted.

Adolescence is the most beautiful and difficult stage of our emotional formation. Personalities are defined in that period and life gives us those unforgettable memories that we'll carry with us, commented Salinas.

According to the filmmaker, today more than ever, immigration is an important issue, and “if we look at Latin America in particular, there has been a substantial migratory crisis in recent years that makes us think about concepts of identity, borders, economic, political and cultural barriers.”

It was very interesting for the filmmaker to see along the four-year production process how the values acquired at the Cuban school helped Alexis face major challenges and difficult times.

Those values are part of his emotional “luggage,” as well as his love for his family and homeland, Salinas sustained.

Dance is the documentary's thread and is not only present inside the halls but outside as well, both in San Agustín Town in Havana, where Valdés' family lives, and in Pembroke Pines, Miami, Florida, his new place of residence.

Both cities' streets become natural stages for authentic choreographies by Laura Domingo Agüero, who is also the documentary's co-author and graduated from Cuba's National School of Ballet.

“While working with this academy’s students, Laura and I realized that the most direct and best way for them to share their dreams and fears was to let them do so through their natural language: body language,” the filmmaker said.

Other audiovisuals by Salinas, who is a passionate fan of documentary filmmaking, are about Nicaraguan Priest Miguel D'Escoto and another about the transition between Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francisco.

Ritual about Afro-Cuban Identity

By Claudia HERNÁNDEZ

HAVANA.- In times of debate and protests against racial discrimination around the world, art becomes an essential bastion to raise public awareness of civil rights and inclusion in all fields.

Over the years, the theater as a platform for cultural expression has increased visibility of the most pressing social issues present in Cuban society, a country in which institutional and artistic efforts go hand in hand with antiracist ideology.

With ritual as its motto, Cuban actor Jorge Enrique Caballero acknowledges that he is a teacher and actor committed to the reality of his nation, which promulgates actions against the traces of a phenomenon that is still latent in the 21st century.

A graduate of the Higher Institute of the Arts and a man who has a vocation for artistic teaching, Caballero has made a name for himself in cinema in acclaimed national and international feature films such as Kangamba, Bailando con Margot (Dancing with Margot), Siets díais en La Habana (Seven days in Havana), Nido de Mantis (Mantis nest), and Inocencia (Innocence).

Considered one of the most famous faces of Cuban cinema because of his talent and technique, the actor has played roles linked to racial prejudices, such as a militiaman in Cuba's pre-revolutionary period and a jurist, at present. However, when it comes to movies, television and plays, the latter has a privileged position in his career. In this field, he has vindicated personalities that are hardly known in the cultural and historical panorama of the island.

Caballero now promotes a project called Ritual Cubano (Cuban Ritual), a stage trilogy born from the professional and creative necessity he felt to play roles that are absent from the Cuban theater and which had not been staged because of their complexity and rigor.

“I dedicated my first monologues to world boxing champion Kid Chocolate and 19th century musician Le Chevalier Brindis de Salas, considered the black Paganini. After the première of both plays, I came up with the idea of the trilogy as a closure of the cycle,” Caballero told The Havana Reporter.

With the third production, entitled 1912, the actor will save a part of the regrettable historical event staged by members of the Independent Color Movement, which ended in the massacre of over 3,000 black people during the Neocolonial Republic.

“I was interested in closing the trilogy in the framework of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), a proclamation made by the United Nations and the Durban Program that urges higher development, justice and acknowledgment to black people and their legacy,” he said.

The idea of making Ritual Cubano was supported by the work of experienced National Theater awardees Fátima Patterson and Eugenio Hernández, who have increased visibility of Afro-Cuban expressions that are deeply rooted in the continent through playwright.

“I work with the concept of Afro-Cuban theater and ritual itself. This approach was not present in most of the current context. Its search is limited to Cuba and Cuban expressions; our nation and its creators, who can be characters or not,” Caballero concluded.
Camposomor Theater: A Cultural Symbol in Havana

By Tino MANUEL

HAVANA.- The restoration of Havana’s Camposomor Theater is very good news, since the building represents a lot for Cuban culture and those that visit the capital. The announcement that a team will begin restoration work was welcomed with optimism, after the important architectonic piece was full of rubble for years, with a falling façade as a reminder of its glory days. It was in this theater, which is located on the corner of Industria and San José, where Warner Brothers’ first sound film was premiered in 1928, four months after its premiere in the United States.

The elegant Camposomor Theater was the result of an initiative by Santos and Artigas, the owners of Cuba’s most important circus. It was built on the land previously occupied by the Albusu Theater, the oldest in Havana and very popular from 1870 to 1918, when it was destroyed by a fire. Camposomor was inaugurated on October 20, 1921 with the performance of a great operetta company that visited the capital, with very popular musical theater staged there. Shortly afterwards, it began functioning as a cinema, too. It is said that in order to guarantee the highest quality possible of the first sound film shown there, the same audio system of the theaters in New York, Chicago and California was installed there, too.

Famous musical companies from Spain and Cuba performed there, including the vernacular theater company, as well as internationally renowned artists such as Angelita Castany, Blanquita Amaro, Candita Quintana, Alicia Rico, Lola Flores, Libertad Lamarque, Imperio Argentina and Rita Montaner, among many others.

Decorated with gold edging and boxes with bronze rails, the horseshoe-shaped building was a symbol of good art in Havana in the 30s and 40s, due to its elegance, functionality and spectacular shows. Its recovery responds to requests by the late historian of Havana, Eusebio Leal (1942-2020), and other figures such as Cuban poet, journalist, writer and researcher Miguel Barnet.

The most popular artists of the continent, Spain and Argentina performed on its stage, according to Barnet. Its name honors the memory of one of the most popular romantic poets of Spain in the 19th century, Ramón de Campoamor, an Asturian comedian and a master of satirical stories.

Campoamor is “a sort of Viennese, horseshoe-shaped theater, ideal for washed-up and minor voices, for operettas, elaborated with gold trimming and roccoco lamps, where the cream of society used to meet and where the rabble massed around to hunt the tough, whistle or throw eggs,” commented Barnet, who is also an ethnologist.

Alicia Alonso Grand Theater

By María MARTÍNEZ

HAVANA.- Founded 182 years ago, the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater of Havana is Latin America’s oldest active coliseum, a sacred temple in Cuba for dramatic arts, especially dance.

Personalities from around the world have shown their talent in the majestic neo-baroque building since it first opened its doors. The mythical Russian dancer Anna Pavlova captivated Havana residents at the beginning of the 20th century, when the then Teatro Tacon (Tacon Theater) was renamed Teatro Nacional (National Theater). The new name was adopted after the establishment of the Republic of Cuba on May 20, 1902 and after the building was fully refurbished and became part of Havana’s Galician Center, to which it largely owes its current appearance.

It was there precisely where Alicia Alonso would dance Carmen for the first time. In 1985 she baptized the institution as Gran Teatro de La Habana (Grand Theater of Havana), but in 2016 the name of the legendary dancer was added to the official designation. Since the 1960s the theater has been the headquarters of Cuba’s National Ballet Company and the main venue for Havana’s International Ballet Festivals, an event that brings the greatest stars of world dance together on the stage of the historic building.
Fiesta de Máscaras (Masked Ball), an exhibition by renowned visual artist Moisés Finalé, is on display in ARTIS 718 - a gallery attached to the Cuban Cultural Assets Fund, located on the corner of Calle 7ma and 18, Playa, from December 5 to January 15, 2021.

The International Congress Pedagogía 2021 will be held online in Havana from February 1-3, 2021 under the motto "For the unity of teachers." Debates will focus on the new context in which education has developed and its related challenges. The congress will create a discussion around the experiences of thousands of teachers and officials and the way they carry on with the educational process amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the entire world.

Casa de las Américas announces the holding, this year, of the 62nd edition of its Literature Award. On this occasion, unpublished works can compete in the genres of novel, poetry and socio-historical essays. The event, to take place from April 28 to May 7, will also grant three honorary awards: the José Lezama Lima poetry prize, the José María Arguedas narrative award, and the Ezequiel Martínez Estrada essay prize. The contest will also consider essay books published in Spanish on Latin American and Caribbean topics, regardless of the nationality of their authors.
HAVANA—The recent holding of the ‘Cuba 2020’ Entrepreneurial Forum allowed updating foreign businesspeople on Cuba’s exportable products and services, as well as investment opportunities on the island, contributing to sustainable development.

The Cuban Portfolio for Foreign Investment Opportunities includes over 500 businesses, 131 of them linked to tourism and 119 to oil extraction.

At this forum, held in December, Cuban Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca affirmed that the 2020-2021 portfolio – with businesses valued at 12,070,000 dollars – includes 43 additional projects than the previous year.

In general, the list of options to invest in Cuba includes 112 new possibilities distributed throughout national territory – 44 of them at the Mariel Special Development Zone. Other areas in which Cuba promotes the investment of foreign capital include construction, pharmaceutical industry, mining, food production, professional services and other key sectors linked to the national Economic-Social Strategy.

Malmierca informed participants – over 2,350 from 104 countries – that changes were made in relation to the previous portfolio in order to ease and foster exports, as well as to include franchise contracts and the leasing of tourist facilities linked to foreign investment.

Another peculiarity of this portfolio is the possibility of building new agribusiness-sugar complexes and allowing foreign-capital companies to set up their businesses in scientific-technological parks as the one present in Havana. The minister also mentioned that new facilities for the investment of foreign capital in the national economy include the computer system for the Foreign Investment Single Window and legal guarantees such as the Security and Mortgage Decree-law and the Trusteeship Decree-law, to avoid damages to investors.

Similarly, the official proposed over 800 exportable offers for the 2020-2022 period: 570 products and 260 services will be available for sale abroad, some of them from the private sector.

Some of the goods offered include products already consolidated in the international market, such as cigars, coffee, rum or vegetable charcoal, in addition to new proposals, such as fruits, vegetables, honey, and cosmetic treatments, among others.

The list, published in the website of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Investment (MINEX), also includes health and academic services outside of national territory, as well as intensive Spanish courses.

According to the minister, foreign capital investments and exports are essential to the country due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the new U.S. measures implemented against Cuba as part of the blockade.

In spite of these adversities, 34 new businesses, estimated at about 1,895,000,000 dollars, were set up last year, mainly in the tourism, construction, mining and industry sectors, he added.
HAVANA.- Since January 20, the U.S. people will have a new president, Democrat Joe Biden, who takes up the country's highest position with an agenda different than that of Republican Donald Trump in presidency over the last four years.

Biden, with a long career in U.S. politics—where he held the position of senator for 36 years and vice-president of the Barack Obama administration (2009-2017)—defeated Trump in the elections held on November 3 with 306 electoral votes, against 232 by his opponent.

In these elections, with a record turnout of 157 million people, the Democrat also won the popular vote with over 80 million ballots in favor—the highest number a presidential candidate has reached in the history of the nation.

However, unlike other years in which the results were known the same night or the next morning, the U.S. people had to wait until November 7 when the media announced Biden as president elect, as the high volume of votes cast by mail delayed the count.

The notable increase of that form of vote was essentially the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced new dynamics in the U.S. electoral campaign and whose scourge is still one of the greatest challenges the new administration will have to face.

The high number of votes cast by mail was also one of the main excuses Trump used to claim several groundless accusations of electoral fraud on his social media profile, and the reason why he filed dozens of lawsuits in key states in which Biden won by a narrow margin.

Most of those legal efforts were rejected at court, even the one filed at the Supreme Court of Justice. However, in spite of the result, the outgoing president refused to explicitly acknowledge the victory of his opponent at the polls and kept denouncing irregularities without any backing.

Trump maintained that stance even after December 14, when the Electoral College—the body responsible for appointing the president of the nation—officially held a vote to elect Biden as the 46th President of the United States.

Thus, the new president will start his term with the challenges of the health crisis and the burden of the controversial policies fostered by his predecessor, which have left deep impacts in all sectors of the U.S. society.

Although the Republican president was unable to materialize two of the promises made in his 2016 campaign for the White House—abolishing the healthcare act known as Obamacare and building the criticized wall along the border with Mexico—his actions in the field of medical attention and immigration, in particular, were constantly repudiated.

For many, it is impossible to forget the travel veto Trump exercised against different nations, mostly Muslim, the separation of thousands of families in the southern border, and the historic dismantling of immigration and asylum policy.

In relation to environmental issues, Trump fostered actions to reverse many of the rules implemented by the previous Executive power and withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, in spite of the numerous national and international calls against that action. He also made clashes with Washington’s so-called usual adversaries deeper; increased hostilities and sanctions against Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Iran, and damaged relations with long-standing allies, such as Canada and members of the European Union.

According to Biden, since 2017, the head of the White House brought “a lot of rage, fear and division” in the United States. For that reason, he promised that he will address what is best for the U.S. people, as in his opinion, it is time for unity in a fragmented country with a strong political polarization.
Ciego de Ávila.- A large variety of wild birds, one of the main treasures of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, live in the grasslands and forests of Ciego de Ávila, a central Cuban province located more than 420 kilometers east of Havana. Some 200 types of birds can be seen there, including the majority of the endemic species as well as those that migrate there in the winter. Fresh water ecosystems and wetlands are also home to birds, with some 160 species identified in those fragile places, according to studies. Meanwhile, a considerable number of them live in coastal areas, especially in mangroves, as they can find shelter and food there, particularly those that come to Cuba during the winter or use it as a transitory space as they migrate.

The northern keys of Ciego de Ávila province are the perfect refuge for many bird species, because they have all of the conditions necessary for their sustenance and reproduction. That group of keys, known as Jardines del Rey, is the largest of the four archipelagos surrounding Cuba. It stands out for the great diversity of its flora and fauna, its beautiful coastal and sea landscapes and the good preservation of its ecosystems. Covered by forests, featuring small trees and mangroves, and with more than 40 kilometers of beaches, Keys Coco, Guillermo, Paredón Grande, Antón Chico and Media Luna, are part of the Buenavista Biosphere Reserve. Other Cuban regions such as Cubitas, Escambray and Rosario Mountain Ranges, just to mention a few, are home both to local and migratory birds.

By Neisa MESA DEL TORO

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Democracy Prevails in Venezuelan Elections

By William URQUIJO

CARACAS.- In a year marked by the strengthening of economic and political aggressions by the United States as part of its strategy to provoke a change of regime, democracy grew stronger in Venezuela after the legislative elections held on December 6. Despite foreign pressure to boycott the process, the complex economic situation the country faces, and repeated appeals for abstention, an important sector of the population endorsed the democratic vocation as a way to settle political differences through a vote, over and above the results obtained at the polls.

The Gran Polo Patriótico alliance won 253 of the 277 seats on the Venezuelan National Assembly (unicameral Parliament) with the participation of over 30 percent of the 20,700,000 Venezuelans summoned to exercise their democratic vote.

Similarly, the opposition group Acción Democrática won 11 seats, Avanzada Progresista and El Cambio won three each, Primero Venezuela won two, and the Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee and the Communist Party each won one.

In addition to the MPs elected on December 6, three parliamentarians were added in representation of the native people, chosen for the first time in the country’s history in an event held in 10 states, following the customs of the indigenous communities.

The National Assembly set up on January 5, 2021 now has the challenge of getting back on the institutional path and leading a constructive political debate on the main issues that affect Venezuelan society, including urgent economic recovery and political dialogue. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro described the elections as a major victory of democracy, in which the Venezuelan people elected their representatives in Parliament for the 2021-2026 period, after five years of a legislature controlled by sectors of the extreme right.

“We are heading toward a new recovery cycle in the country with sovereignty and independence,” Maduro said. He also ratified the support of the government to the legislative power with the purpose of solving the difficulties that the country faces.

The head of State asked to leave out all forms of sectarianism and called all political actors to sit at the same negotiation table in order to work together for the development of Venezuela and plan out an electoral route for the upcoming years.

The legislative elections held on December 6 were part of the agreements reached at the national negotiation table on September 2019 and counted on the participation of over 14,000 candidates, in representation of hundreds of political organizations, mostly from the opposition.

Ecuador approves 2021 election observation program

By Sinai CÉSPEDES

QUITO: Ecuador announced a Program for International Election Observation and Guests for the 2021 General Elections, which will allow the accompaniment of the votes scheduled for February 7.

The mechanism, approved by the plenary session of the National Electoral Council (CNE), includes inviting the diplomatic corps accredited in the country, judicial authorities from other nations, scholars, electoral experts and recognized personalities in the field, as well as those related to human rights and transparency.

Likewise, the program included national observers, such as Ecuadorians living abroad and universities registered in the country that meet the requirements for natural and legal persons, respectively.

The national councils for equality, disabilities, gender, human mobility, peoples and nationalities and intergenerational, the Citizen Participation Corporation and the ‘Fundacion haciendo Ecuador’ (Making Ecuador Foundation) may also be accredited.

As for domestic observation, the CNE authorized 789 natural persons, two foreigners residing in Ecuador and eight Ecuadorian citizens living abroad.

The agency denied accreditation to 479 nationals, four foreigners and five legal entities for failing to comply with the requirements and the enabling documentation.

The approval of the program is part of the calendar developed by the CNE for the general elections.
MONETARY UNIFICATION

HAVANA.- At the expense of taking some risks, Cuba is trying to remove an obstacle that has prevented its economic development with the enforcement of monetary and foreign exchange unification, amidst a complex national and international situation that requires the effort and the cooperation of the public in order to attain the anticipated results.

Following an interdisciplinary and transversal approach that also requires the elimination of excessive subsidies and unnecessary benefits, in addition to the transformation of incomes, the country’s top authorities consider this process an essential task.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?
As of January 1, Cuba woke up with the peso as the only national currency, with a single exchange rate of 24 pesos (CUP) to one dollar, which means the withdrawal of the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC) from circulation.

From that date on, over 20 regulations issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security will govern topics related to salaries, pensions and social assistance benefits.

In accordance with these regulations, the country’s minimum wage rose to 2,100 pesos (at the official exchange rate in relation to the dollar), while the pensions granted by the General Social Security Regime increased in relation to a scale that goes from 1,528 to 1,733 pesos.

According to official regulations, workers are now divided into 32 groups of complexity, depending on the function they perform. As a result, salaries go from 2,100 to 9,510 pesos. However, payments will still be made for abnormal labor situations, such as night shifts and employees’ scientific degree.

In a radio and television speech, President Miguel Díaz-Canel, accompanied by Raúl Castro, first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, acknowledged that this reform “is not risk-free” and can cause inflation and price speculation. However, he affirmed that in spite of the elimination of subsidies to certain products and services, no one will be abandoned.

With all of these measures, a redistribution of wealth is expected, as the objective is that workers and pensioners improve their purchasing power.

On the other hand, they favor higher transparency in what regards relations between the different economic actors, including the non-state sector. In addition, they foster work as the main source of income, while being an incentive for the creation of conditions that lead to prosperity.

THE ELIMINATION OF MONETARY DUALITY
Until last year, two currencies were circulating in Cuba: the peso (CUP) and the Cuban convertible peso (CUC), at an exchange rate of 25 CUP=1 CUC=1 USD for the population, and 1 CUC=1 CUP=1 USD for legal entities.

This situation created a confusion in the measuring of the entrepreneurial activity’s real costs and distorted profitability analysis.

Thus, according to the Cuban president, the ordering task removes the obstacles of most of the unresolved economic topics, although as he acknowledged, this isn’t the solution for all economic and financial problems accumulated throughout the years.

However, it should lead to an increase of labor productivity and a more efficient use of the productive forces, he added.

By Alberto CORONA

PHOTOS: Prensa Latina.
HAVANA. - Cuba’s use of its energy forms (electricity, diesel and gasoline) dependent on production of goods and services, changed in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak, a local expert explained.

In remarks to The Havana Reporter, the Director of the National Office for the Control of the Efficient Use of Energy (ONURE), Elaine Moreno, said that energy consumption in the country had behaved almost exactly the same since 2018, but last March the pandemic practically paralyzed the economic panorama on the island and consumption in the residential sector rocketed.

Faced with that challenge, local authorities committed to attaining greater efficiency through the production of goods and services, thus reducing consumption levels and assigning the energy saved to the residential sector to prevent people from being affected, she stated.

The Cuban economy largely depends on services, so tourism, hydraulic resources, steelworks and sugar production are the sectors that report the highest energy consumption rates, the official stated.

According to Moreno, in spite of the initial impact of COVID-19, ONURE carried out mass media campaigns calling for a more efficient use of energy in order to meet the consumption programs for the past year. The 2021 strategy will focus on keeping the program as stipulated by Law 345, which was approved at the end of 2019 and supports the implementation of a policy for development of renewable sources and well-organized use of energy.

That law establishes terms on the implementation of renewable energy sources, energy efficiency indexes, energy management systems and mass media campaigns, but the arrival of COVID-19 hindered the application of the decree.

Referring to energy management systems, Moreno explained that the body analyzes the energy situation of an entity, plans strategies, puts them into practice and controls its results.

That allows for early detection of problems as well as improvements in technological and organizational mechanisms.

The companies, she noted, should draw up a five-year plan for the development of renewable sources and rational use of energy, which will demonstrate how efficient they are or will be.

For this, they will be supervised by ONURE and the Ministry of Energy and Mines, Moreno added.

The entity, she noted, has implemented a three-year program that includes 300 energy audits, which will characterize different sectors and help those entities.

With regards to the residential sector, ONURE promotes campaigns for the population to adopt better practices, and advocates for teaching eco-friendly sustainable consumption in the educational system.

The strategy also adds non-state-run forms of management to its working systems, chiefly with the promotion of energy-saving technologies and consults on the use of good practices, because some major energy consumers are related to the tourist sector.

With regards to renewable sources of energy, the objective is to produce photovoltaic and wind energy as well as sugarcane biomass, with experienced Cuban specialists developing more sources of solar energy.

In the case of the sugarcane biomass, the idea is not only to generate energy for sugar mills but for the national electricity system as well, and to use forest biomass for when the sugarcane industry stops producing.

Those projects, the Cuban director said, were affected by the lack of financing, due to both the pandemic and the U.S. economic, financial and commercial blockade against Cuba and the persecution of investments on the island.
The year that changed individual and collective routine was left behind as COVID-19 marked 2020 around the world. A new stage has begun, and world sports are looking forward to its main events, including the Olympic Games in Tokyo. Cuba is experiencing that reality as athletes and sport authorities hope to bring at least 80 competitors to the Olympic Games in the Japanese city, after its rescheduling last March for July 23-August 8, 2021.

The number of qualified Cuban athletes could exceed 100 if the baseball and beach volleyball teams make it to the Games, something that might not be easy but the possibility exists. The Cuban list of athletes so far totals 41 in eight sports: athletics (14), wrestling (12, Greco-Roman and free styles), shooting (five), canoeing (four), pentathlon (two), gymnastics (two), cycling (1) and taekwondo (1). That number is likely to increase after the world rankings of judo, athletics and badminton are announced, and once the Olympic qualification competitions in boxing and wrestling close.

Cuba hopes to win from 18 to 21 medals in the Tokyo Games, a result that would place the island among the top 20 countries in the world on the medal table, according to local sport authorities. Therefore, training will be essential and will determine the fulfillment or shortcoming of the delegation's goals, which will not be easy for a country of some 12 million inhabitants without the economic resources that contemporary sport entail in the 21st century.

Wrestlers such as famous Mijaín López and Ismael Borrero, boxers Andy Cruz, Julio César la Cruz, Lázaro Álvarez or Arlen López, illustrious judo athletes such as Idalys Ortiz, Iván Silva or Kaliema Antomarchi, and taekwondo athlete Rafael Alba will be leading figures for the Cuban delegation.

Boxer López deserves a special mention. Having fought in a thousand competitions, at 38-years-old he aspires to be the first boxer to win four Olympic titles, thus beating Russian Alexandr Karelin, who holds three gold medals and one silver. There are track and field athletes that are worth mentioning too, as strong performances are expected from discus throwers Yaimé Pérez and Denia Caballero, long jumper Juan Miguel Echevarría, pole-vaulter Yarisley Silva and triple jumpers Jordan Díaz and Cristian Nápoles.

Five years ago, in Río de Janeiro 2016, Cuba finished 18th with 11 medals: five gold, two silver and four bronze. The island also has the challenge of shining at the Paralympic Games in the same Japanese city, with the competitions set for August 24-September 5 at the same sporting facilities. The Caribbean island has so far won four tickets, which are in the hands of Paralympic superstar sprinter Omara Durand, several time champion in London 2012 and Río de Janeiro 2016, javelin thrower Ulcer Aguilera, swimmer Lorenzo Pérez, and tennis player Yunier Fernández. The idea is to increase the number of athletes to 30, so there are still chances for competitors in swimming, weightlifting, archery, taekwondo, athletics, triathlon, cycling and judo.

In addition to the Olympic Games, Cuba hopes to participate in world tournaments with competitions in more than ten disciplines. However, it’s worth saying that everything depends on the international health situation and control of SARS-CoV-2.
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