Negative impacts of the blockade

Steps toward Immunization

Social Outbreak Has Colombian Government on the Rack

Prensa Latina Resists and Grows
Holguín Tourism Potential

By María de Lourdes LEGRA

HOLGUIN.-The province Holguín’s Tourist Observatory (OT), in eastern Cuba, promotes the potential of hotel chains in that area, renowned as an adventure, entertainment and recreational location.

As part of the OT actions, the Cubanacán group recently launched its catalog of tourism facilities, located in the cities of Holguín and Gibara as well as Guardalavaca beach.

The Gran Muthu Almirante hotel – the first five star sun-and-beach resort of the Cubanacán group in Cuba’s east – will be inaugurated on July 1 in Guardalavaca. Officials of the tourist group also note main attractions that tourists can enjoy next summer at the Club Amigo Atlántico, Brisas Guardalavaca and Gran Muthu Almirante hotels, located in the main tourist resort of this eastern Cuban province.

The Islazul group also provided a characterization of its five facilities, which welcome city and event tourism in the Holguín and Moa cities and beach tourism in the Rafael Freyre municipality.

The province’s tourism resort, about 700 km east of Havana, is a mixture of sun-and-beach experiences, nature tourism, history, culture, health and other modalities, which are widely accepted among foreign and local tourists.

The Holguín Tourist Observatory, opened last April 16, intends to highlight the presence of this destination on different digital platforms, as well as providing up-to-date information on the area.

TripAdvisor Awards Cuba’s Santa Lucía Beach Resort

By Fidel MANZANARES

CAMAGUEY.-Santa Lucía Beach Resort currently stands as one of Cuba’s leading tourist destinations, increasing after the Gran Club Hotel received the Travellers’ Choice Award granted by TripAdvisor website.

Despite COVID-19 and its negative consequences on Cuban tourism, the recent recognition proves that this kind of facilities are well accepted, as corroborated by clients’ positive reviews, being one of the most recommended destinations in the world.

According to Ivonne Montejo, Business Manager of Gran Club, which belongs to Cubanacán Group, the award makes them very happy because it reveals that guests speak highly of the hotel in their reviews and recommend others to visit. Santa Lucía Beach Resort has experienced a decrease in the number of foreign visitors due to the reduction of operations at the international airport, both due to the pandemic and restrictions imposed by the U.S. government since the end of 2019.

TripAdvisor has been promoting Santa Lucía’s facilities over the past five years, posting photos and videos that showcase the potential of this sunny Caribbean destination, located some 540 kilometers east of Havana. Gran Club Santa Lucía, which operates as an all-inclusive, has 252 frontline beach rooms surrounded by the beautiful natural landscape that characterizes the northern coastline in this Cuban region.
Prensa Latina Resists and Grows

By Jorge LUNA

HAVANA.- The Prensa Latina News Agency (PL) was born out of the need for Latin American journalism to challenge the information monopoly of the United States, when alternative media was scarce. Against all odds, it still goes strong and continues to grow, soon to celebrate its 62nd anniversary.

On June 16, 1959, when an announcement was made about the foundation of Prensa Latina – the region’s first alternative media agency – Washington officials declared that the agency would only last one month and interposed several obstacles to prevent its creation and development.

Argentinean Ricardo Masetti – the first director of the agency – and his team managed to open, in less than a year, the first 16 offices around the region. The first were located in New York, Mexico, Caracas, Buenos Aires, Bogota, Lima, Santiago de Chile, Panama, La Paz, Rio de Janeiro and Quito.

“We have to compete with incompetence,” Masetti told the U.S. information agencies UPI and AP. At the same time, he urged editors to make “objective while biased” journalism (because unbiased is an impossible stance against).

Several generations of Prensa Latina journalists have covered the main political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural and sports events over the last 60 years. Military coups, wars and aggressions were widely featured on the PL editorial agenda.

Throughout its history, its journalists have had to face raids, closures, fund freezing, imprisonment and even murder. At present, some face visa restrictions in certain countries, are prohibited from making bank transfers and are the victims of maneuvers aimed to prevent their hiring in Latin American news media.

In spite of the current economic difficulties resulting from the U.S. blockade on Cuba and COVID-19, Prensa Latina has 38 offices in most continents and a great deal of experience.

The agency, an active multimedia institution and Cuba’s most read media on the island, broadcasts 400 news segments 24 hours a day in six languages, prints about 20 publications (including The Havana Reporter) and has a valuable patrimonial, photographic library, in addition to an online radio station and TV service.

With an increasing presence on the Internet and social media, PL has signed over 70 agreements on information exchange with foreign agencies and news media, as well as several collaborators all over the world.

At present, the agency and many of the region’s journalists and communicators face huge challenges, such as the large amount of fake news, misinformation, distortion, manipulation, censorship and the large concentration of the media in few hands.

According to recent studies, five or six global media monopolies own thousands of newspapers, magazines, publishing companies, radio and television stations, controlling 90 percent of the news and 70 percent of the information market in the world.

In spite of the complex scenario at present, there is an increasing spirit of resistance among Latin American communications teams and importantly, alternative media continues to emerge, thus joining Prensa Latina’s fight.

When opening Prensa Latina’s services, the agency’s founders described it as “the agency that was needed,” because of its strategic Latin American imprint. Today, with 62 years of experience, the agency continues to resist and grow, in more needed than ever.
Calls to End the Blockade Increase

By Ibis FRADE

HAVANA.- Calls to the end the blockade imposed by the United States on Cuba increase on the digital platforms and as part of other initiatives worldwide, such as the solidarity caravans.

On May 30, another edition of these caravans toured the streets of several U.S. cities, such as Miami, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Seattle and Minneapolis, promoted mainly as part of the Bridges of Love project.

The Secretary of the Foundation for the Normalization of U.S.-Cuba Relations (FORNOM) Julio V. Ruiz told The Havana Reporter that these types of actions are essential and have widespread international repercussions.

Ruiz also stressed that U.S. President Joe Biden, his legal advisor, the U.S. population and people all over the world have to be educated about the reality of life in Cuba and the sufferings of the people because of a failed blockade and a pandemic.

According to this activist, a retired psychiatrist of Cuban origin who lives in Miami, the U.S. siege is unfair, criminal and cruel, and has failed from the political point of view for over 60 years.

Several people in the United States have also recently raised their voices to demand a change in Washington’s policy toward Havana. For example, former secretary of Energy of the Barack Obama administration, Joe Garcia (of Cuban origin), stated that the “normalization” of relations should eventually happen.

Meanwhile, chairman of the Cuba Study Groups Carlos Saladrigas highlighted that it is important for Washington to deal with Cuba relations as soon as possible, especially in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last February, that group submitted a document to the Biden administration urging the United States to make progress towards the full normalization of relations with Cuba.

However, the White House continuously says that a policy change towards Cuba is not included among the priorities of the Government.

Although the Democrat president promised during the electoral campaign that he would move away from the path traced by former president Donald Trump, the over 200 measures taken by the Republican magnate against Cuba are still in effect.

Leader of the New York-New Jersey Cuba Sí Coalition, U.S. activist Ike Nahem, stated that Washington’s hostility and sanctions are particularly criminal amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, the island continues to set a good example of how to face the health crisis and shows international solidarity by sending its health brigades, he added.

In this scenario, Nahem considers that he has the obligation of urging the government of his country to put an end to all sanctions, sieges and hostile measures against Cuba.

The car and bicycle caravans held in different U.S. cities precisely demand the lifting of the U.S. blockade and other economic and political sanctions, which cause serious economic difficulties for Cuba, he stressed.

“Let us stop U.S. attacks on the right to travel and family visits for residents of both countries,” said the New York-New Jersey Cuba Sí Coalition, which represents dozens of activists and groups.

The Sao Paulo will put off a campaign with the slogan “Blockade No, Solidarity Yes - Our America Forever” the voted at the UN.

RESOLUTION AGAINST THE BLOCKADE

In this context, on June 23, the UN General Assembly will hold a vote on the resolution project that calls for the end of the U.S. blockade – a text similar to the one endorsed on 28 previous occasions by the multilateral forum.

Since 1992, the international community has stated its rejection of this mechanism at the General Assembly, Washington has remained deaf to this call and for over 60 years, has maintained a policy addressed at economically asphyxiating a whole nation and its people.

In fact, it strengthened its hostility amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and the damages to Cuba because of the U.S. blockade exceeded 5 billion dollars last year, for the first time in six decades.
HAVANA.- Cuba is living its worst moments of the pandemic, with reports in May of more than 1 150 infected people daily. Because of this scenario, health authorities have applied several measures, including a sanitary intervention with Soberana 02 and Abdala, the two vaccine candidates for COVID-19 undergoing clinical trials in light of their registration as future immunogens.

Soberana 02, produced by the Finlay Institute of Vaccines, started to be administered last March as part of phase III of clinical trials with a vaccination scheme of zero, 28 and 56 days. Abdala, by the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology Center, started to be administered during a period of half the cycle.

This temporary, sanitary intervention process taking place around most of the island is the result of a request the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) made to the regulatory authority. In addition to the tense epidemiological situation, several other factors justified this process, such as the favorable benefit/risk relationship, the spread of new strains and variants, and the data provided by the intervention study.

The latter is another process that was previously conducted in order to protect the health staff and the workers of the biopharmaceutical industry. Along with the clinical trials in progress, these two studies hope to stop the transmissibility of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The idea is to immunize 70 percent of the population by August this year.

In order to do so, over a million 800 thousand Cuban people have already been administered at least one dose of the vaccine candidates.

Since May 12, the sanitary intervention reaches territories and groups at risk of several municipalities of Havana, as well as the provinces of Pinar del Río, Artemisa, Villa Clara, Cienfuegos, Sancti Spíritus, Camagüey, Las Tunas, Ciego de Ávila, Holguín, Matanzas and which were included in this study and where seniors and groups at risk are given priority.

This research process, aimed at proving the effectiveness of the vaccine candidates against COVID-19, is a complex health operation in which 2,117 clinical sites were created, health authorities indicated.

Information technology specialists, communicators responsible for data processing, family doctors and nurses, are the main architects of this task in the communities, said director for Sciences and Technology at the Ministry of Public Health, Ileana Morales.
The Buena Vista Social Club Story

By Marlene SAAVEDRA

HAVANA.- For years, the Buena Vista Social Club represented the sound of Cuban music in the international market and featured indispensable figures in the artistic world, mainly from the first half of the 20th century.

The idea came up when U.S. music arranger and guitarist Ry Cooder arrived in Havana in 1996 to record a Cuban son album. With that goal in mind, Juan Marcos González, the director of Sierra Maestra band at the time, gathered singers and instrumentalists.

The list of those first chosen included Francisco Repilado—a famous Cuban singer Omara Portuondo, known as “The Buena Vista Social Club Diva,” when asked to describe that artistic manifestation. Whenever she performs on national and international stages, Omara, who is also known as “the bride of feeling,” responds to the public’s spontaneity. “They welcome me with great love. I was born a singer and life awarded me that artistic manifestation. The Havana Reporter.

CUBA IS MY BELOVED COUNTRY

“Music is the sky, the earth, the sun, happiness and reason,” said famous Cuban singer Omara Portuondo, known as “The Buena Vista Social Club Diva,” when asked to describe that artistic manifestation. Whenever she performs on national and international stages, Omara, who is also known as “the bride of feeling,” responds to the public’s spontaneity. “They welcome me with great love. I was born a singer and life awarded me with that talent,” she told The Havana Reporter.

Before reaching adulthood, Omara was already dancing at Tropicana Nightclub. It was in that symbolic place of the capital where she met composer César Portillo de la Luz, author of the classical piece “Contigo en la distancia,” among other artists. She keeps fond memories of those nights when, as a member of the O’Aida female band, she was introduced to U.S. artists Nat King Cole and Josephine Baker. She belonged to that vocal quartet for almost 15 years. Haydée Portuondo, Elena Burke and Moraima Secada were the other members of the quartet, which was directed by pianist Aida Diestro.

“One retires when life tells you: you are done now. I will continue to work as long as I’m healthy. Music makes me very happy. It is people’s soul, it heals sorrows, it helps overcome obstacles and motivates you,” the Cuban artist commented. At the end of the 1990s, while she was rehearsing for the tour of one of her solo albums, Omara was asked to sing “Veinte años” together with Compa Segundo and “Silencio” with Ibrahim Ferrer, two unforgettable songs of the Cuban musical repertoire.

Those performances were included under the Buena Vista Social Club label, which also involved other Cuban artists such as Eliades Ochoa and Pío Leyva. Portuondo cited all the times that she represented Cuba abroad. She finished the interview saying, “I am very Cuban; I’m honored and pleased to be Cuban. I do not think I could have been born anywhere else. For me, this is the most loving country. I like its people, its history, its kindness and the happiness of those living here.”

Juan Padrón’s Cuban Guerrilla Fighters and Vampires Invade Tenerife

By Fausto TRIANA

MADRID.— Although he stood out for his charisma, Cuban filmmaker Juan Padrón probably never imagined that his characters would flood the Canary Islands, Spain, identified with independence fighters known as “Mambises” and vampires.

Among posters and books of his authorship, Juan Juan Padrón’s smiling face became a figure during the fourth edition of the Ibero-American Animation Quirino Awards, with an homage to the creator of Cuba’s mythical character Elpidio Valdés. Padrón, who died a little over a year ago, left a legacy of phrases that are part of the Cuban people’s cultural heritage, both connected to the intrepid Mambi fighter against Spanish colonialism and with humorous remarks about vampires.

In remarks to The Havana Reporter, Silvia Padrón, the daughter of the creator of the Quinoscopio series (together with Quino, the talented Argentinean author of Mafalda) and Vampires in Havana, talked about her father’s international acknowledgment. Silvia Padrón, who inspired her father to create the character Silvia –Elpidio Valdés’s girlfriend and future wife– said, “this homage has been a catalyst, because I know many more things will follow. It’s like an engine that has just started, stimulated by this Ibero-American event.”

Padrón dreamed about children going to La Manigua Creative and Cultural Center (one of his own initiatives) to draw comics, a field little exploited in Cuba compared to the great talent that exists in the country, she commented. It will be very important to develop that space in order to train and develop more talent, as Cubans have so much potential, she noted. Silvia recalled her father’s great vitality and love of learning throughout his career in visual arts.

“He was ahead of his time and never wanted to cling to the past. He had lot of faith in development and democratization of technologies, because many new talents would emerge,” stated Silvia. The last week of May in San Cristóbal, Tenerife, the Canary Islands, the Cuban caricaturist, illustrator, comic strip artist, screenwriter and filmmaker received many tributes, including the exhibition of some of his works.

“It is very important for us that my father’s work does not end with his passing. His life has been so significant to Cuban culture that we cannot leave it in silence,” Silvia commented.
HAVANA. Cuba celebrated the Day of the Cuban Son Music for the first time to honor that music genre and remember the birth anniversaries of two of its greatest exponents: composer Miguel Matamoros and singer Miguelito Cuní. Matamoros and Cuní helped spread the importance of that genre from the country’s east to west and, according to Maestro Adalberto Álvarez, May 8 recognizes the performers of “the father of all popular music styles on the Caribbean island.”

“Classical artists, jazz musicians, trova music exponents and even dance and theater specialists supported the decision to choose a day to mark son, because it is in Cubans’ blood, it forms part of our DNA,” said Álvarez. The pianist, composer and orchestra director stated recently that May 8 honors that musical genre around the world and foretold the event’s future impact and arrival of international musicians to the country to participate in coming editions.

The first edition remembered the anniversaries of birth of Arsenio Rodríguez (100 years) and Nico Saquito (120 years), the Habanero Septet’s centenary and the 75th birthday of guitarist Eliades Ochoa, one of the stars of the Buena Vista Social Club and director of Patria Quartet.

Since last year, Cuban and international son performers have been promoting a campaign to officially recognize May 8 as the Day of the Cuban Son. That initiative was fostered by Álvarez himself, who described it as “a day to pay tribute to the genre.”

In its October 2 edition, the Official Gazette of the Republic of Cuba published Decree 19 of the Council of Ministers, which recognizes the importance of this Cuban born music style as immaterial heritage of the country since 2012 and as a cultural expression of communities, groups and individuals, with values that go beyond time and space.

That announcement and the media campaign related to the day are part of a process to declare Cuban son intangible heritage of humanity, a category granted by the UN Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO).

The list of emblematic son bands includes the Oriental Quartet, created in 1916 and renamed the Habanero Septet two years later. It began to enjoy a boom and great popularity one decade later, with the introduction of commercial radiobroadcasting services. The National Septet of musician Ignacio Piñeiro turned out to be one of its main exponents at the time.

Son was created by and represented black communities, workers and other members of poor social classes, with the passing of time it was also adopted by the halls of the Havana bourgeoisie and influenced the origin of other rhythms such as son montuno, mambo and salsa. Among its most representative pieces are Lágrimas negras (1930) and Mamá, son de la Loma (1922) by Miguel Matamoros; Suavecito (1929) and Échale salsita (1933) by Ignacio Piñeiro; Guantanamera (1934) by Joseito Fernández; Fuego en el 23 (1956) by Arsenio Rodríguez; Que bueno baila usted (1956) by Benny Moré; La Guarapachanga (1958) by Miguelito Cuní and Chan Chan (1984) by Francisco “Compay Segundo” Repilado.
Havana.- Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel inaugurated on May 24 the National Innovation Council, an unprecedented consultative body in Cuba and the Latin American region.

Official sources indicate that about thirty businesspeople, scientists and academics will foster innovation as part of the functioning of the Cuban State, Government, economics and society, in a coordinated and integrated way.

During the holding of the first meeting, Diaz-Canel raised a number of issues to be discussed at the next gathering in relation to innovation in the entrepreneurial and public administration system, as well as the privately owned sector; in addition to the topics of training for management and the challenges of science and innovation as part of the national development plan, which tries to contribute to the pharmaceutical industry, reduce imports and foster exports.

“It is the space to debate national topics that help improve policies through discussing concepts and approaches,” he said.

The National Innovation Council should meet every three months, but meetings could also be held monthly, if needed. Diaz-Canel presides over this body, which is also composed of the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister for sciences and the heads of nine strategic sectors.

Cuba fosters a governmental management strategy aimed at a higher application of science and innovation as part of the state's management philosophy.

The National Innovation Council should help improve policies through discussing topics that are part of the Cuban State, Government, economics and society, in a coordinated and integrated way.

Farmacuba Flagship Entity

HAVANA.- Farmacuba, the country’s largest importing-exporting enterprise within the group of the Biotechnological and Pharmaceutical Industries (Biocubafarma), welcomes its 20th anniversary.

However, its achievements are not the fruit of fortuitous events but of human resources efforts and the vast experience accumulated in foreign trade.

Biocubafarma Vice President Tania Urquiza Rodríguez explained that the entity's main task is to import raw materials, reagents, test kits, tools, spare parts; disposable supplies such as personal protection kits; in short, everything needed to ensure the production of medicine for the Basic Program of the National Health System.

The director said that the center also exports to clients in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. However, she stressed, production is highly committed to the domestic market and, on principle, nothing is exported if there is not enough supply within the country.

It’s worth mentioning that in 2003 and 2004, when Commander Hugo Chávez created the Barrio Adentro Social Program in Venezuela – and thanks to the support of the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro – a strategic alliance in health services was created between the two countries.

Farmacuba was the enterprise chosen at that time to supply medicine and has been exporting products for that program ever since.

With a long list of goods, clients and providers, the entity imports over 10,000 items of different origin and has 499 suppliers, of which 51 percent are intermediaries. That strategy is necessary to evade the U.S. economic, financial and commercial blockade against the island, which punishes transactions, she noted.

GOALS TO DEFEND CUBAN IDENTITY

Referring to the obstacles posed by the U.S. blockade, Farmacuba General Director Adis Nuvia Neyra Muguerza said it is difficult to lead a group that faces its outrages in its daily work and has to constantly look for various alternatives.

The Cuban pharmaceutical system was born with the creation of Farmacuba, and this meant improving the medicine distribution scheme and identifying demand. In short, it humanized that process and made it more accessible, which is clear in the distribution of COVID-19 vaccine candidates.

The enterprise hopes to accomplish several goals in the future, such as improving competitiveness among its human capital which, according to Neyra, is its most important asset. Another goal is to introduce computerized systems that allow for better traceability and stronger, more coherent work.

“We are working to help include our pharmaceutical industry in international networks and help make the different supply chains that guarantee the production of medicine more effective,” she said.

Farmacuba aims to diversify its portfolio of exporting goods and services, Neyra added.

In sight of attaining Farmacuba's goals to contribute to the pharmaceutical industry, which can be seen today with all that has been supplied for patients during the pandemic, its determination continues to privilege Cubans and all countries of the world, she sustained.
Efficient Food

By José CASTAÑEDA

HAVANA.- Economic efficiency, for which Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel repeatedly calls for, is the main objective of the nearly 40 members of La Victoria Basic Cooperative Production Unit (UBPC) in the neighborhood of Marianao, Havana.

"As part of the country’s Economic and Social Strategy we have a production chain that includes the construction of rustic greenhouses, including four hectares where we grow vegetables ecologically," UBPC President, Arturo Pérez, said in an interview with The Havana Reporter.

Pérez explained that they supply their agricultural products to two state-run markets and other social sites, such as schools, day-care centers and an isolation center for Covid-19 suspects, located on municipal boundaries, without overlooking the self-consumption of cooperative members.

According to La Victoria leader, a mini-industry was created to provide added value to less desirable products due to overproduction or size, producing pastes, pulps, sweets and pickles in high demand among clients, due to their price to quality ratio.

The cooperative member was proud that in 2020, the UBPC surpassed goat-milk production with which they helped to replace imports on the basis of a project suggested in 2011 by the historical leader of the Revolution, Fidel Castro.
HAVANA.- Following the monetary reform process implemented in Cuba last January, exports of goods increased over during the first four months of 2021, compared to the same period last year, Cuban Economy and Planning Minister Alejandro Gil stated.

Although that process is not the only incentive to boost sales, the minister explained that it helped increase exports significantly.

“There are non-state forms of management that are exporting already, while state-run enterprises that did not export are now doing it and are actively looking for markets,” the minister noted.

Gil, who is also Deputy Prime Minister, stressed that the monetary reform has contributed to make the work environment more dynamic in the middle of economic restrictions, when over 150,000 Cubans -35 percent of which are youth- have joined the workforce.

The decision to unify the CUP-to-USD exchange rate resulted in a 2,300 percent devaluation but, he noted, it enabled maintaining prices on a same level, which is vital for efficiency.

Referring to the entrepreneurial sector, he informed that some 500 entities reported losses as of March, while 1,300 others had profits worth 41 billion Cuban pesos.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

When talking about the country’s economic performance, Gil said the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is expected to reach six percent in 2021, which would be a modest growth taking into consideration that the economy registered an 11 percent decrease at the end of 2020.

“The projected growth would not entail a considerable increase in the level of activities and offers because we would be below the level of economic activity recorded in 2019,” Gil explained.

“If we have six percent economic growth in 2021 and nearly six percent the next year, by the end of 2022, we would be recovering the same GDP level with which the country closed the year 2019, estimated at some 56.90 billion Cuban pesos,” stated the minister.

Although tourism, which is the “driving force of the economy” and hopes to welcome 2,200,000 visitors, has not yet recovered, other sectors show positive trends. Examples of this is the nickel industry -a ton of that mineral costs over 17,000 USD on the international market- as well as telecommunications, he noted.

Steps will be made this year towards the diversification of the economic actors, as the necessary conditions are being created, the official sustained.

“We have not abandoned the strategy concerning self-employment, the generalization of non-agricultural cooperatives or the creation of micro, small and medium enterprises,” Gil added.

The efforts Cuba is making to grow would have different results if the U.S. blockade against the island did not exit, the official pointed out, and stressed that the country is victim of financial persecution.

“If we did not have to cope with the criminal pressure of the U.S. blockade, it would be another Cuba, another economy. We want nothing else than to work under normal conditions,” Gil stated.

The Cuban state Budget has assigned nearly 2 billion Cuban pesos for COVID-19 expenses, the minister highlighted.
HAVANA’s Central Park

HAVANA—Havana’s Central Park is undoubtedly one of the busiest places not only in the capital but on the entire island, with the statue of National Hero José Martí at its core and surrounded by hotels, shops and colorful gardens.

It is one of Cuba’s most famous and central places. Its construction finished in 1877, after the walls surrounding the city were brought down.

The buildings in the surrounding area include the Alicia Alonso Grand Theater of Havana, the Hotels Inglaterra, Telégrafo, Parque Central, Grand Manzana Kempinski and Plaza, as well as the international building of the National Fine Arts Museum.

This popular place is located near the Capitol building and Parque de la Fraternidad (Fraternity Park) - which belong to the Central Havana Municipality. The Paseo del Prado promenade and the famous El Floridita Bar are very close as well.

According to historians, two years before its inauguration, that place featured a statue of Spanish Queen Elizabeth II, which had been dismantled in 1899 during the U.S. intervention in Cuba.

That same year a poll was conducted by El Figaro journal to decide which historic or allegorical figure would be erected and José Martí was chosen. Sculpted by José Villalta de Saavedra, that was the first statue of the hero of independence erected in a public place.

Surrounding the statue there are gardens with interwoven paths, featuring 28 royal palm trees that symbolize Martí’s birthday (January 28), along with eight flowerbeds in the form of a coffin that represent the eight medical students killed on November 27, 1871 by the Spanish government in the country.
HAVANA.- The event in the country’s contemporary history had the government of Iván Duque on edge as people have mobilized in the street for over a month now.

The protests began on April 28 against a tax reform bill that affected most workers, even the middle class. Although the government withdrew the measure, the protesters increased their demands.

Implementing the Peace Agreement and protesting for the end of militarization, respect for human rights of all Colombians, including indigenous people, are some of the requests made by the protestors.

Senator Victoria Sandino, of the Comunes Party, told The Havana Reporter that the mobilizations in the country had major achievements such as voting in Congress to file the health reform bill.

The social pressure of the people resisting in Colombian streets, plazas and different public areas destroyed the proposal, which would have privatized the few public health services that still exist in Colombia, she said.

It was also thanks to the national strike that the tax reform was withdrawn, while Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla, Foreign Affairs Minister Claudia Blum, General Juan Carlos Rodríguez, Commander of Cali’s Metropolitan Police, and the Colombian Navy General Director, Rear Admiral Juan Francisco Herrera, were forced to resign.

In this context, the Colombian people had the Duque government agree to create a program for youth, which offers jobs and announce another of the protesters’ demands: zero enrollment, which allows students from the lowest social strata to enter universities.

Amid the protests, High Peace Commissioner Miguel Ceballos announced his resignation due to disagreements with former President Álvaro Uribe, founder of the Democratic Center Party and President Duque’s mentor.

Known by the opposition as “war commissioner,” Ceballos stressed that President Uribe ignored him during actions to approach the National Liberation Army for the negotiation process. Although he denied that Colombia was co-ruled by Uribe, Ceballos told the press that Duque made decisions about the ELN topic first proposed by the former president.

Likewise, the two-chamber Congress debated a vote of no confidence against Defense Minister Diego Molano, who faced denunciations due to police violence against the demonstrators.

Meanwhile, Sergio Marín, representative in Congress for the Comunes Party, said Colombia is living a real uprising not seen in decades, both in magnitude and duration.

The battle against the harmful tax reform resulted in a protest that, “we hoped was significant, of great repercussion, but the reality is that the social movement far exceeded all expectations,” he stated.

All of these achievements, which do not yet fully meet the people’s demands, are still claiming young lives, whom the police, the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad and even the army are targeting.

According to various NGOs, more than 50 Colombians died due to police brutality and hundred others were injured -many with eye injuries, sexually abused and hundred others are still missing.
HAVANA.- The Cuban financial sector is adopting measures related to banking, loans and insurances to finance agricultural and livestock productions, of top priority for the country as it aims to increase food production.

With this goal in mind, the Cuban banking system is carrying out a group of actions that support the 63 measures recently approved to solve structural, organizational, productive and economic-financial problems in land tenure. The idea is to help increase agriculture and livestock yield using the banking system’s experience in financing Cuban agriculture, through specific credit policies for independent farmers and agricultural and livestock cooperatives.

According to Francisco Mayobre, the first Vice President of the Central Bank of Cuba, the entire banking system has always supported agricultural growth in the country, including differentiated treatments due to the impact caused by meteorological events.

In this regard, the credit policy for individuals, self-employees and small farmers was updated in 2011. On the other hand, a development fund was created in 2016 with budgetary resources to finance the part of the costs of production regarded as top priorities for the country, just to mention some of the experiences in this endeavor.

As an example, Mayobre recalled the resources for working capital and investments in the agricultural and livestock sector, a mechanism that has so far granted 81,000 credits worth over eight billion Cuban pesos ($333 million at the official exchange rate), benefiting producers with more than 650 million pesos ($27 million).

Nearly 31 percent of the credits approved last year were for the agricultural and livestock sector, thus corroborating the priority given to agricultural production.

The monetary reform that took effect in January led to a rise in the price of supplies and services, with the consequent increase in costs and financing requests. In order to cope with this situation, credits were assigned based on risk analysis with the necessary guarantees, to ensure producers’ access to banking services and create a low-interest development bank with state budget assigned to strategic fields.

Similarly, that bank will finance agricultural and livestock producers as much as possible to recover that money, so there is no limit and it will depend on the ability of producers or institutions, whether state-owned or private, to pay it back.

The agricultural promotion bank is a challenge for the country’s banking system, as it is a crucial initiative to boost food production based on efficiency and crop yield (amount of a crop or product per unit area of land).

Together with these efforts, Cuba is also promoting the role of insurance in the agricultural field with the adoption of measures that will encourage more requests to cover higher risk situations in this economic market. According to top executives of Cuba’s National Insurance Company (ESEN) farmers have low awareness of the importance of this topic. The fact that only 25 percent of the sector is insured corroborates this.

ESEN General Director Fermín Mesa highlighted that a group of regulations were approved to increase insurance coverage and risk assessment. “Cuba is creating all the conditions needed to ensure greater food production, and the banking sector and ESEN are accompanying this process with a more dynamic and flexible approach,” he said.

ESEN provides insurance to almost all kinds of production, be it crops, livestock or patrimonial assets, which can be protected from damage caused by storms, heavy winds, floods, droughts, fires, landslides, and diseases, for example.
Havana.- The Cuban chemical industry made over 20 investments worth about 150 million dollars in key strategic sectors of the country, in order to materialize its gradual transformation and development process by 2030. The increase in capital was mainly addressed to the chloride, NPK fertilizer and egg-tray plants, technical and development director at the Engineering and Chemical Research Center (CIQ) Noel Villartold The Havana Reporter. CIQ is a science, technology and innovation center whose main lines of research and development are focused on fertilizers, pesticides, chemical products and paints, sectors in which over 50 projects are to be developed in 2021, Villar explained. This center annually saves about 5 million dollars in import substitution and each year, new items are introduced. Saving is possible through creating new products in each period and developing technology that contributes to reduce expenses in connection to imports, the official added. As for the challenges the chemical industry faces, he noted that they are focused on achieving integration with universities; managing foreign financing in order to implement the changes needed, increasing staff training, and making better use of the information, science and technology resources. The main achievements the center has reached include the registration of new pesticide and fertilizing formulations, to be introduced in the country. This will allow for more efficient usage and reduce costs by 25 to 30 percent. In this sense, the Gas Company developed an ecological paint and a product to combat giant African land snails by using the residue of the acetylene plant, while the Rubber Company is making progress on studies related to cement and cushion gum for hot retreads, in addition to 38 different types of technical items. Villar highlighted that an aluminum poly-chloride was also obtained at the lab from recycling, to be used as coagulant in the treatment of drinking water and sewage. The most important thing, though, was the registration of the CEBERFER brand – the most famous fertilizer – at the patent office. This brand includes a series of products that reduce the consumption of imported raw materials and benefit the environment. On this liquid fertilizer, CIQ titular researcher Rolando Gil explained that CEBERFER is a high-quality nutrient with formulations based on the requirements of each crop and need, containing less chemical products than natural ingredients. They are produced at present at a semi-industrial plant that has the capacity for up to 200,000 annual liters, although projections are made to increase production up to 500,000 liters and transfer technology to central and eastern regions. The increase in capital was mainly addressed to the chloride, NPK fertilizer and egg-tray plants. The objective, at present, is to diversify its use, while work is being conducted on the growth of rice, soy, bean, tobacco and other economically important grains. When evaluating its performance on different crops, higher agricultural yields were appreciated, as well as less plagues and diseases, and, in some cases, the growing cycle got shorter. The increase in capital was mainly addressed to the chloride, NPK fertilizer and egg-tray plants.

Habanos Makes the Difference

Havana.- Habanos S.A. International Corporation announced that their 2020 annual income was estimated at some $507 million, and designated 2021 as Cohiba Year with the objective of highlighting the Cuban cigars. The Cohiba Year designation honors the 55 years of the cigar brand (first issued in 1966), the best of Premium cigars, not only in Cuba but around the world, according to experts. As part of the reports published during the virtual celebration of the Habanos World Days, held from May 4 to 6, debates were conducted about the Cuban tobacco industry and the success of the Cuban cigars in spite of the impact of COVID-19, the organizers said. Such success is mainly seen in markets which Habanos S.A. commercializes handmade cigars, considered the world’s best Premium cigars. Sales decreased by four percent in 2020 as a result of the fall in the countries that mainly depend on tourism and on the Duty Free and Travel Retail channels (in airports and ports), a situation that is expected to improve in 2021. Habanos S.A. vice-presidents for trade and development, Leopoldo Cintra and José María López Inchaurbe, respectively, affirmed that 2020 was a “challenging year; a period in which capacity for adaptation, resistance and pro-activity made the difference.” They also explained that Habanos S.A. adapted to the international situation and was innovative in achieving their commercial objectives. According to officials, in regard to the company’s turnover, the first five markets included China, Spain, France, Germany and Switzerland. For the first time, the Asian giant became the world’s top buyer of Cuban-made Premium cigars. By regions, Europe remains the first destination of the Habanos cigars, with 60 percent of the company’s volume of sales, followed by Asia-Pacific (16.2), Latin America (13.6) and Africa and the Middle East (10.4). Officials also referred to some of the latest features introduced in 2021, such as three new Cohiba brands: 55 Aniversario Edición Limitada (55 Anniversary Limited Edition), Ambar (Amber) and Ideales (Ideals). Other special brands are Montecristo, with Wide Edmundo and Partagás Gran Reserva Cosecha 2015 (Partagás Grand Reserve 2015 Vintage). Specialties will be available at the La Casa del Habano (Habano’s House) network of franchises and the Duty Free and Travel Retail channels, among others. Habanos, S.A. is a world leader in the commercialization of Premium cigars both in Cuba and worldwide and has an exclusive distribution network in over 150 countries, where 27 Premium brands are sold. The Cohiba brand is the leader of the production and commercialization programs of the Cuban tobacco industry. Cohiba was created in 1966 and for a long time, it was only given as a present to government personalities both from Cuba and abroad, until 1982, when it was introduced to the world market. That famous brand is manufactured at the prestigious El Laguito factory, in Havana.
Resounding Success of Cuban Athletics

By Jhonah DIAZ

HAVANA.- With the Olympic Games just around the corner, Cuba took another step forward towards its goal of Tokyo 2020 in athletics, with the victory of the 4x400m female relay at the World Athletics Relays held in Silesia, Poland. Zurian Hechavarría, Rose Mary Almanza, Lisneidy Veitia and Roxana Gómez were the stars of the track. After crossing the finish line, the athletes held each other in an emotional embrace, on their knees in gratitude of their victory.

The event took place on May 2, when the Cuban athletes ran a praiseworthy performance, fueled by power, conviction and talent. The athletes wrote themselves into the course of history, while spreading optimism a few weeks before the opening of the Olympic Games. However, in Tokyo the panorama will be different, because the United States, Jamaica and the Bahamas – all-time powers – did not attend the event. Nonetheless, that does not minimize the Cubans’ performance nor the fact that they are on the path to Tokyo. Hechavarría, Almanza, Veitia and Gómez have their feet on the ground but still set their sights on reaching the Olympic podium, which no doubt would be a praiseworthy result for the athletics team.

In the medal match, the Cuban quartet timed out at 3:28.41 minutes, a record that allowed them to cross the finishing line before Poland (3:28.81) and Great Britain (3:29.27) – silver and bronze, respectively – in a dramatic final race. Behind the frontrunners finished the Netherlands (3:30.12), Italy (3:32.69), Germany (3:33.00), Belgium (3:37.66) and France (3:40.58), nations that also qualified for the Olympic Games, to take place from July 23 to August 8 in spite of the difficulties caused by COVID-19.

The qualifying round also made the Cubans happy, as they won the second heat with the best time of the competition: 3:27.90 minutes – their all-time third best, after the Daegu 2011 World Championship (3:26.74) and the London 2012 Olympic Games (3:27.41).

Since then, they understood that they had the caliber to take the track and reach the long-awaited podium, which many consider a dream. To have an idea of the magnitude of such a result, note that this is the first medal Cuba has achieved in all five editions of the World Athletics Relays.

Thus, this achievement tasted ever sweeter and leads the team into the Olympic Games with high hopes, an athletic event that will welcome about 11 thousand athletes in the wonderful Japanese capital.

Wrestling for Olympic Glory in Tokyo

By Reinaldo WOSSAERT

HAVANA.- The Olympic Games are the most important event that athletes set their sights on and in the next edition, to take place in Tokyo (Japan), Cuba will participate with 12 wrestlers, all anxious to reach the podium.

In the summer event opening on July 23, the Cuban gladiators can do their best to win a medal for the men, while Yusneylys Guzmán (50), Lianna Montero (53) and Yudaris Sánchez (68) will do it for the women.

From then on, exceptional wrestler Mijain López has been responsible for keeping Cuba at the top of the Olympic podium. López, master of the 100 kg division, reigned in Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Rio de Janeiro 2016, where Ismael Borrero (59) also became champion.

Cuba recently tried to add other quotas to Tokyo 2020, but fell short after the defeat of all three wrestlers at the World Qualifying Championship held in Sofia, Bulgaria. In that event, Freestyle wrestlers Reineris Andreu (57 kg), Yurieski Torreblanca (86 kg) and Milaimis Marin (76 kg) did not perform as expected and lost their last chance to qualify for Japan. This unexpected result left Cuba with only three wrestlers qualified in Freestyle in the male and female categories, and six in Greco-Roman (full team), a style that will be headed by López.

In the meantime, Ismael Borrero – now in the 67 kg division – will try to win his second gold medal and thus match the performance of his fellow countryman Filiberto Azcuy. Other wrestlers that will also try to reach the podium in the Greco-Roman style are Luis Orta (60), Yovanny Peña (77), Daniel Gregorich (87) and Gabriel Rosillo (87).

In regard to the Freestyle, Alejandro Valdés (65), Geandry Garzón (74) and Reineris Salas (97) will do their best to win a medal for the men, while Yusneylys Guzmán (50), Lianna Montero (53) and Yudaris Sánchez (68) will do it for the women.
HAVANA.- A low fertility rate, high life expectancy at birth and migrations place Cuba in the middle of a “demographic storm,” forcing the government to consider alternatives to counteract its consequences.

Since 1979, the annual fertility rate (number of average children per women) has fallen short of the 2.1 born children needed to ensure proper replacement, triggering the alarm on the island, as it means a stationary population pyramid cannot be guaranteed.

High education levels, women’s schooling, economic difficulties and limited access to housing are elements that condition that indicator, the University of Havana’s Demographic Studies Center (CEDEM) described in an article. The panorama shown by statistics in the first quarter of 2020 was not very promising, as it pointed to a natural decrease in population for the first time ever.

A total of 23,666 births and 27,269 deaths were reported in that period, a trend that is likely to continue, said Marino Murillo, Head of the Permanent Commission for the Implementation and Development of the Guidelines of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and the Revolution.

In fact, 105,000 children were born last year but 111,000 people died, he announced later on. This means that the Cuban population, which has been decreasing for years, is not reproducing biologically, because the death rate is higher than the birth rate, he warned.

This situation had been predicted beginning in 2024, but “many indicators have deteriorated, and more boys have been born than girls,” the expert commented.

Population aging is another element that characterizes the demographic trends in Cuba, where life expectancy is over 78 years. The decrease of births, the increase of life expectancy and the migration rate among people of reproductive age are the causes of this phenomenon, reads the article, which is entitled Population Aging in Cuba.

According to official statistics, the last population census of 2012 revealed that 18.3 percent of Cubans were 60 years or older. In 2020, that number rose to 21.3 percent and is likely to exceed 25 percent in 2025. Hence, Cuba will soon be one of the countries with the oldest population in Latin America.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said the current demography is “one of the topics that gets ever more complex,” because of its impact on Cuba’s present, future and socioeconomic development.

In this regard, he stressed that it is important to work wisely and follow the topic adequately, “aiming at more births so as to stop population decrease.”

In order to cope with the phenomenon, the country has designed policies to enhance the attention at day care centers, homes, old folks centers, homes, senior centers and fertility facilities, as well as a program to provide mothers with three or more children under 17 years with a house.

From 2019 to now, 5,735 women have benefited from the initiative to encourage birth rate, either with houses or resources for the construction, enlargement or renovation of buildings. As many as 5,658 premises are expected to be completed or assigned this year with that goal in mind. Speeding up procedures for those cases and following them up properly are some of the actions approved in a country with harmful migration waves since 1930, largely young people.

According to CEDEM data, more than 1,500,000 Cubans have emigrated since 1959, with an estimated annual migration flow between 40 and 44,000 people. Therefore, the studies center warns it is imperative to invest in solving couple’s fertility issues, improve living conditions and favorably change the perception of Cuba’s future and its relation to family planning.