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FEATURED Q&A

What are the Prospects for Thawing US Relations With Cuba?

Q In oral testimony during her Senate confirmation hearings, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirmed President Barack Obama's commitment to lifting travel and remittance restrictions on Cuba, and said she hopes the Castro brothers would see the new administration as "an opportunity to change some of their typical approaches." How might Cuba's leadership respond to Obama's proposed policy changes? What are the prospects for direct talks with Cuba, another of Obama's campaign proposals?

in research and development and clinical trials of drugs and vaccines being developed in Cuba. It is the right thing to do. It is the humanitarian thing to do. Americans will benefit, Cubans will benefit and the rest of world stands to benefit. Let us open the gates to allow a free exchange between our countries. It is long overdue."

A **Guest Comment: Otto J. Reich:** "Direct talks with Cuba are not new. Since the US renewed direct talks in 1977, Castro's response
Continued on page 2

A **Guest Comment: Elaine Scheye:** "President Obama is to be commended in closing Guantanamo. It is a good start. But we need to go further. We need to engage in dialogue without preconditions. Preconditions as a basis for opening talks with Cuba only serve to keep the channels of communication closed. If we are going to improve bilateral relations, then we must go beyond removing certain travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans and remittances and remove all travel and remittance restrictions, lift the embargo, overturn the Helms-Burton Act and begin investing in and trading with Cuba. We should stop funding transition study groups and respect Cubans' right to self-actualization as they alone should determine their own political direction. We should encourage and engage in scientific exchanges in biotechnology that include joint-ventures



Guatemalan President: Drug Gangs Tightening Control

Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom, seen meeting Tuesday with National Civil Police Director Marlene Blanco, said the country is outspent in its fight against drug traffickers. See story on page 3.

Photo: Guatemalan Government.

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NEWS BRIEFS

Chavez Says Referendum Defeat May Not End His Presidency

Reversing an earlier statement, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez told CNN Monday that if the February 15 referendum to abolish all elected officials' term limits is defeated, his supporters could try again, the Associated Press reported. "There's no limit in the constitution regarding the number of times that an amendment can be attempted," Chavez said. In a newspaper column January 22, Chavez said he would step down if voters reject his attempt to remain in office.

Group Protests Attack on Synagogue in Caracas

A group of about 100 people gathered Tuesday in Caracas to protest the January 30 attack on the city's oldest Jewish synagogue, reported the Associated Press. Though President Hugo Chavez condemned the attack and said an investigation was underway, the protesters warned of growing anti-Semitism in the wake of Chavez's condemnation of the war in Gaza and his expulsion of Israel's ambassador. On Monday, US Congressman Eliot Engel (D-NY) said Chavez had created a "climate of fear and intimidation against the Venezuelan Jewish community."

Dow, Santelisa Vale Joint Plastics Venture On Hold

US-based **Dow Chemical** and Brazilian sugar and ethanol producer **Santelisa Vale** have put on hold a \$1 billion project to produce plastic resins from ethanol in Brazil, Bloomberg News reported on Tuesday, citing an article in local paper *Valor Economico*. The plant, which was planned for Santa Vitoria in the Minas Gerais state, was supposed to start producing 350,000 metric tons of polyethylene by 2011.

Political News**Colombia's FARC Frees Former Meta State Governor Alan Jara**

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on Tuesday freed Alan Jara, a former governor of Meta state, the Associated Press reported. Jara, whom the rebels had held for more than seven years, was the fifth captive to be released this week by the rebel group. The FARC released three police officers and a soldier on Sunday. Jara, 51, hugged his wife and son after being released and appeared thin but relatively healthy. "He looks a little worn out to me," said Jara's 15-year-old son, Alan Felipe. Jara said he had trouble with one of his eyes as well as a thyroid problem. Jara was released to the International Red Cross in Colombia's eastern jungles and was taken by helicopter to his hometown of Villavicencio in the eastern lowlands. "Free and happy," Jara yelled to reporters gathered at the town's airport. "I've rested for seven and a half years. Now it's time to get to work." Guerrillas abducted Jara in July 2001 from

a United Nations vehicle as he toured construction sites in Meta. The FARC has pledged to release Sigifredo Lopez, a former local legislator, on Thursday. Lopez, 45, was kidnapped in April 2002 and is believed to be the only remaining politician held by the FARC. Last July, former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt was among 15 hostages rescued in a

“I've rested for seven and a half years. Now it's time to get to work.”

— Alan Jara

Colombian military operation. Opposition Senator Piedad Cordoba, who helped arrange this week's hostage releases, expressed appreciation to the FARC for releasing the hostages. "This restores tranquility to the country and demonstrates that a negotiated end to the conflict is the solution," she said.

Featured Q&A

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regarding 'change' in Cuba has been uniformly negative and hostile. The most recent rebuff was given to President Obama by Fidel Castro himself, last Thursday, January 29, when he rejected Obama's avowal to consider the return of Guantanamo Naval Base because it was conditioned on some political opening, some gesture, by Cuba. Castro said that would constitute 'a demand on the political system of Cuba.' Castro does not recognize that he owes the world anything (as he does not recognize any violation of human rights in Cuba). Raul Castro's presence at the Kremlin last week, attempting to revive the former Cold War alliance with Moscow, also demonstrated the Castro government's posture. For 50 years the Castro brothers have been driven by only one motive: how to stay in power. Everything else is secondary: the lives, the liberties and the welfare of the Cuban people. The Cuban

Government rules by police-state tactics, deceit and suppression of dissent. If the Obama Administration wants to see change in Cuba it must go over the heads of the ruling class in Havana and deal directly with the increasingly bold and growing dissident movement on the island, the oppressed Cubans who extend their open hand of friendship to us. To do otherwise, to conduct unconditional talks with the 'clenched fist' oppressors, would violate the sacred US values and principles that Obama so eloquently underscored in his Inaugural Address."

A Guest Comment: Kirby Jones:
"During her testimony, Hillary Clinton reaffirmed the Obama campaign position to lift travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans. If this is the only action the Obama Administration takes, it does not at all

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Guatemalan President: Drug Gangs Increasing Hold of Border Region

Drug traffickers are increasing their control of the Mexico-Guatemala border area as they move drugs north, Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom said Tuesday, adding that his country's security forces are struggling to fight the cartels, Reuters reported. "The number of narco-traffickers is adding up, particularly those from Mexico," Colom said during a local radio interview. "The Sinaloa cartel and the Gulf cartel have an impressive presence in Guatemala." Colom has sent hundreds of soldiers to the border, but they are having difficulty because of the huge amounts of money traffickers dole out in bribes to police and local politicians. "The problem is we have mobilized a tremendous amount of personnel but we don't have enough resources, so sustaining an operation is difficult," said Colom, who on Tuesday met with local leaders to discuss security in the Pacific coast department of Escuintla.

Economic News

Mexican Peso Falls to Record Low On Fears of Shrinking Economy

The Mexican peso on Tuesday fell to a record low against the US dollar on fears that Mexico's economy this year will contract for the first time in eight years, Bloomberg News reported. The peso's drop, for the fourth straight day, illustrated growing concern about the US recession lowering demand for Mexican exports and curbing investments. At 5 pm New York time, the Mexican currency had fallen 1.1 percent to 14.57 per dollar. During the day, it sank as low as 14.64 per dollar, its lowest level ever. In the past six months, the peso has plummeted 32 percent. It recovered slightly during the day's trading after Mexico's central bank purchased \$400 million of pesos in two auctions. Since October, Banco de Mexico has bought \$16.6 billion worth of pesos. In a Central Bank survey published Tuesday, economists predicted that the country's economy will shrink 1.6 percent this year. It grew 1.5 percent in 2008.

Around the Hemisphere

A Perspective by the Dialogue's Marifeli Pérez-Stable

US, Mexico Must Expand Efforts to Fight Human Trafficking

By Marifeli Pérez-Stable and Landen Romei

WASHINGTON—According to the International Labor Organization, there are 12.3 million people in forced labor and sexual servitude around the world. However, other non-profit organizations estimate that the number is closer to 27 million and growing, especially in Latin America. Since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000, the United States has dedicated millions of dollars to protect victims of contemporary slavery worldwide. Under TVPA, a special T visa was established to give victims safe haven in the United States. Of the 800,000 victims of trafficking globally, more than 14,500 slaves are brought into the United States annually, yet only 1,094 have qualified for T visas since 2000. On December 8, US Citizenship and Immigration Services issued an interim rule granting permanent residence to up to 5,000 T visa-holders per year.



Human trafficking is defined as the movement or harboring of people through abuse, coercion or fraud when forced labor is the end goal. Fueled by a nearly constant stream of people who are eager to cross into the United States, the trafficking industry along the border with Mexico transports between 5,000 and 8,000 people every year. Coyotes charge an average of \$1,500 per journey. Due to heightened security throughout most of the border region, migrants are trekking through the Sonoran Desert to Arizona, a treacherous passage which costs over 200 lives every year. Coyotes easily take advantage of their vulnerable clients once they arrive on the US side. More than 70 percent of these victims are women.

In 2005, Mexico and the United States entered into a bilateral agreement called the Operation Against Smuggling Initiative on Safety and Security (OASISS), with the objective of protecting migrants and prosecuting traffickers. Through the end of the 2007 fiscal year, OASISS facilitated the prosecution of 660 individuals in Mexico on smuggling or trafficking charges. In addition to its participation in OASISS, the US coordinates among several federal agencies to prevent human trafficking, prosecute traffickers and protect victims. Last year, the Trafficking in Persons report shows that US attorneys' offices opened 182 investigations, charged 89 individuals and obtained 103 convictions in cases involving human trafficking. In addition to federal measures, 33 US states now have anti-trafficking legislation. Mexico passed its own anti-trafficking legislation in November 2007.

Given the recent improved T visa provisions, the US record for protection of victims should advance in the coming year. However, until the social and economic push factors are addressed in Mexico, the desire to enter the US will continue to trump the risk involved in crossing the border. Each of the three categories of anti-trafficking efforts requires significant work. Though the 2008 reauthorization of the TVPA included a clause to assist unaccompanied minors along the border, implementation standards have yet to be formulated. On both sides of the border, further education campaigns, more intensive anti-corruption methods, and better police training are needed. While much progress has been made to protect victims, prevention is still sorely lacking. President Barack Obama should make curtailing human trafficking a high priority within future border security discussions with Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

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represent a new policy but simply a return to the Bush policy—albeit a tad 'lite.' Since this is not a new policy, there is no reason to expect that anyone would consider it such, including Cuban officials. Even if travel regulations were turned back by executive order to what existed prior to 2003, nobody could consider that a new policy either—because it wouldn't be. Should both of these occur, I expect Cuba to issue a polite and positive response, but based on my conversations in Havana, they would not consider it a real step. I do believe, however, that Cuban officials would accept any invitation for low-level direct talks about issues of mutual concern such as migration, drug enforcement and environment concerns. I think they would also consider Obama support for and signing of a Congressional bill to lift travel restrictions on all Americans as a real policy shift. But if any of these initiatives include US preconditions for Cuba to make internal changes, we have learned after almost 50 years that this would be 'dead on arrival.' Every head of state in Latin America has called for an end to the embargo. To be taken seriously as the 'new sheriff in town,' President Obama needs to have a really new policy when he speaks to those heads of state in April."

A **Guest Comment: Adolfo Franco:** "Although there are increasing calls for the US to 'improve relations' with the Castro regime by unilaterally relaxing sanctions, a decision to do so without requiring corresponding reforms will do little more than undermine the growing pressures on the dictatorship to relax its stranglehold on its long-oppressed subjects. The increased revenues resulting from a loosening of current restrictions on agricultural sales to Cuba, on travel, and on remittances to the island will only provide the regime with the resources it needs to maintain the vast apparatus of its police state intact. Decades of extensive trade and other contacts by Canadians, Europeans, and Latin Americans have resulted in no change to

Cuba's socialist economy and repressive rule but instead have helped enrich those in power. Moreover, a unilateral weakening of sanctions without any concessions from the regime would throw away valuable leverage while gaining nothing in return for ourselves or the Cuban people. Instead of appeasing the dictatorship, the Obama Administration should target the

“A unilateral weakening of sanctions ... would throw away valuable leverage.”

— *Adolfo Franco*

regime's repression. The Cuban people have no voice or representation in Cuba, dissent is not tolerated, and fear and brutality continue to be the basis of the regime's rule. The surest road to reform is to increase pressure on the regime, not to relax it. The first priority should be to redouble our efforts to overcome the information blockade that Castro has long imposed on his people, just as the United States did for decades with regard to the Soviet empire through Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Also, we must make the world aware of the massive violation of human rights that the regime perpetrates against its citizens every day."

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