HAVANA. The Cuban tourism industry is doing very well so far this year in terms of international market and environmental protection, with statistics and examples that corroborate such assertion.

The recently closed 35th International Tourism Fair, FITCuba 2015, proved to be an example for this rising trend.

With the new foreign investment law, Cuban tourism has received a major boost in a moment that could not have been better, after the year 2014 closed with more than three million foreign arrivals, and with the winter season (November-April) recording an upward trend.

Local authorities said that last year the country registered a record figure in the number of foreign visitors, which accounted for a 5.3 percent increase compared to 2013.

However, as many as 3,200,000 tourists are expected to come to the island this year, according to estimates by the Cuban Tourism Ministry.

The first quarter of 2015 far exceeded the estimated plan with 106.9 percent of arrivals, representing 14.9 percent more than in the same period in 2014. Out of the total visitors of the 2015 quarter, 1,116,113 were tourists, 20,835 were excursionists, and 8,272 came aboard cruise ships.

The main issuing markets of tourists to the island are Canada, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, with others such as Venezuela, Mexico, and Chile beginning to feature as well.

With over 400,000 visitors, March reached the record of the highest number of arrivals in one month.

STATISTICS CORROBORATE THE UPWARD TREND

According to the National Statistics and Information Office report, travelers can be classified into different categories: tourists, who stay in a foreign place for at least one night but less than one year, and excursionists, who visit for less than 24 hours.

First on the list of foreign visitors in the first quarter of 2015 were citizens from Canada with 551,773 arrivals representing 48.5 percent of the total, followed by Germany with 52,904 (4.7 percent), France (44,319 and 3.9 percent), the United Kingdom (43,222 and 3.8 percent) and Italy (39,177 and 3.4 percent).

CAYO COCO. Canada will be the guest of honor at the 36th Cuban International Tourism Fair (FITCuba) in 2016.

At the closing of the recent FITCuba-2015, María del Carmen Orellana, the Ministry of Tourism’s commercial director, said that the choice reflected the recognition of Canada as the principal source of tourists for Cuba over past years, having sent a million visitors in 2014 alone.

The official added that next year Cuba’s greatest tourism event, to be held in Havana, will be dedicated to the promotion of Cuban culture.

In reference to the recently concluded fair, she said that it had exceeded all expectations as it counted with 1,800 participants from 53 countries.

She added that during the three working days – May 5th to 7th – in the Melia Jardines de Rey hotel, important contracts aimed at increasing the number of visitors and the opening of new hotels and other facilities were signed.

Minister for Tourism Manuel Marrero said at the opening of FITCuba2015 – dedicated to Italy and nautical activities – that the island currently finds itself in a prime moment as last year it has passed the three million incoming tourist record.

In his address to delegates, including 120 tour operators, travel agents, and business representatives from the U.S, Marrero commented that with the goal of surpassing the 5.3 percent increase in arrivals and the 2.7 billion dollars tourists spent that marked last year’s record, Cuba is working on 53 projects for the provision of an additional 5,492 four and five star hotel rooms.

The majority of these new hotels, built by joint venture firms, will be run by famous hotel chains such as the Spanish Iberostar and Melia that have been operating in Cuba for decades, in conjunction with Gaviota, Cubanacán and others Cuban businesses.

The 18 international foreign companies that presently have 35,682 rooms on offer – 57 percent of the country’s total – will very soon be joined by others from China, Colombia, Spain, France, Singapore, and Switzerland.

With 11,500 registered guest houses and more than 1,500 restaurants – known as “paladares” – the incipient Cuban private sector is becoming an increasingly important factor for tourism development in the country.
**Santiago de Cuba: Five Centuries of Urban Development Revealed**

By Martha CABRALES

SANTIAGO DE CUBA. As the Conservator Office’s first cultural activity in honor of the city’s 500th anniversary, the 24 panels with maps, recordings and photographs included in the Cartography and Landscapes of Santiago de Cuba exhibition on display at the Arte Soy gallery, bring the viewer back in time and space.

The graphic collection also celebrates the 498 years that have passed since the granting of the city title on April 28, 1522 and the 18 years since the creation of the City’s Conservator Office (CCO).

At the opening, Dr. Maria Elena Orozco, of the Oriente University, noted that the project uncovers the passing of time and the progressive building of the city from the 16th to the 20th century, affirming its identity and confirming its cultural importance.

The expert considered that each unit on show is a sequential tale, a clever play on an urban landscape that is sensed and latent, and one that is visible thanks to the minute detail of each of the chosen plans that compliment the photos and recordings in a dialogue between space, time, utopia, and essence.

She classified the maps and documents as jewels of the historic memories of the people of Santiago, with authentic urban landscapes such as those of Baltasar Diaz Priego from 1751 and of Luis Francisco Delmes from 1840, 1845, 1857, and 1861.

Orozco said that the exhibition marked a before and after in the history of Santiago de Cuba, as a city tour in which nature, although seeming to negate everything, remains defiantly ever present in the same site since foundation, offering a dignified resistance to natural imponderables.

The Art History specialist highlighted that “this is a project for the future that will simultaneously allow new generations to safeguard heritage values and allow those involved in decision-making regarding citizen progress to develop an urban vision that protects this secular legacy and fairly evaluate future interventions, extensions, and projections.”

As part of the exhibit, a placard alludes to a special plan for the revitalization of the historic city that refers to project collaboration between the municipal government and the Galician Council of Spain.

In recent times, the Arte Soy gallery has occupied an old building that was renovated and revamped by the CCO in an area adjacent to what was once the Moncada Barracks -- now a Museum and the 26th of July School Complex -- and the second military fortress in the country, attacked by young revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro on that same date in 1953.

The display forms part of preparations underway in the city to celebrate, this July 25th and 26th, the 500th anniversary of the foundation of this historic settlement and the 62nd of the historic event that marked the beginning of the definitive end of the Cuban struggle for independence.

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**National Crafts Fair for All Ages**

By Reina MAGDARIAGA

HAVANA. The 11th National “Art for Mothers” Crafts Fair, which exhibits the resources of the Cuban Cultural Goods Fund (CCGF) at the capital’s Pabexpo exhibition ground, has something to offer for everyone.

According to the CCGF director, Jorge Alfonso, the event, running until the 27th of May, stands out for its national products and designs that replace imports on the island.

He said that amid such products, both national and foreign visitors to the fair can appreciate footwear, office clothing, and ceramic restoration materials.

The public can also find ceramic objects, fabrics, wooden handicrafts, horse-riding equipment, dolls, ornamental plants, and fine arts.

In halls A, B, and C of the Pabexpo in Havana’s municipality of Playa, 261 individuals are exhibiting finely manufactured quality products at 19 different stands.

Artemex, Egrem, Icaic, Genesis, Coral Negro, and National Book Distribution companies, among other institutions, are also present at the fair.

Alfonso highlighted the ever improving quality of products and the creators’ ability to come up with worthy solutions in spite of the scarcity of material.

Additional to the “Art for Mothers” craft fair celebrated during the month of May, these works are also shown at other events every year such as the International Craft Fair and the annual summer “Arte en la Rampa” festival.

All these crafts-related events reaffirm the important role of Cuban crafts in the socialization of artistic goods.
Training Human Resources for Health Care Remains a Priority

By Vivian COLLAZO

HAVANA. The training of human resources is presently a priority in order to meet the demands of both the system’s domestic universal coverage and Cuba’s international medical collaboration.

Jorge González, rector of the University of Medical Sciences of Havana (UMSH), said that this institution is dedicated to the education and training of Cuban and foreign students in a range of health specialties.

Dr. González commented during a meeting with the press that the UMSH substantially increased enrolment: we are among the universities that offer most career opportunities to pre-university level graduates.

He said that for the forthcoming 2015-2016 course, starting next September, the institution offers 700 medicine, 200 dentistry, 147 nursing license and 495 health technology places.

González highlighted that at present the university has a record number of almost 5,000 residents studying diverse specialties; it has been many years since the last time the university has hosted so many students.

This, he stressed, is an important response regarding specialists. This is a much needed response to the necessities of the system set not only by the requirements of the country, but also by the international demand, in order to satisfy the needs of contracts abroad and Cuba’s solidarity missions of free medical treatments in other countries.

He said that this is a growing, self-sufficient activity with almost 3,000 students presently paying for their medical training in Cuba. The island has become an important educational center. Over 700 students, mainly from Mexico and Colombia, have chosen to do their medical training in Cuba. The island has become an important educational center.

More than 2,000 – mostly African – young people from 11 countries are studying the language and basic sciences prior to the start of the school term, he said. He stressed that rigorous international sanitary control standards are applied to every student arriving from whatever part of the world.

González added that this implied an obligatory period of quarantine to avoid the arrival of a person with an illness that might pose a health related risk to national security.

INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL COLLABORATION

Deputy Minister of Public Health Marcia Cobas said that there were 50,663 Cubans working in 67 different countries engaged in a range of mostly solidarity based collaboration modalities.

“We are working in 32 countries under the integral health program, in 14 countries with “Operación Milagro” (ophthalmology program) in 3 African nations with the Henry Reeve Brigade (emergencies) in 17 countries on remunerated technical service contracts, and in 16 with Cuban medical services,” Cobas outlined.

“Solidarity remains predominant over contract-work. We export services, not doctors, because our doctors have, in addition to their salaries and their social security, guaranteed work placements in Cuba.”

She said that it is still possible to amplify existing contracts despite the language and human resource limitations.

Cobas explained that, in this regard, certain actions were being undertaken, such as the strengthening of undergraduate foreign language courses (English, French, and Portuguese.)

Proficiency in these languages is also encouraged due to an anticipated growth in the so-called Cuban Health-Tourism sector. The plan is to boost this line of business over the coming three years which would allow Cuba to enter the competitive international market for these kinds of health services, she said.

The deputy minister added that the number of foreign students applying to study medicine and other specialties in this discipline as well as for short and summer courses is increasing every year.
Cuban Art Nurtures Respect for Mother Earth

By Martha SANCHEZ

HAVANA... With the intention of creating awareness among the population through the medium of art in order to live in greater harmony with the earth and its ecosystems, Osmeal Francis Turner is promoting the International Mother Earth Festival throughout all of Cuba.

The health activist and festival president told the Prensa Latina news agency that “the event running from April 1 to June 5 seeks, with art as an axis, to alter deeply instilled habits.”

He added that “small changes undertaken by everybody amount to enough to avert disaster.”

Turner was born with an aversion to animal cruelty and, as a result of a fright, he composed his first childhood song.

During his lecture “The Rights of the Elderly,” the expert explained that amid the many advantages of physical exercising is the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits and routines.

He also said that the practice of physical exercise by older adults enhances the sector’s socialization and that this has been shown to aid in the battle against diseases of both physical and neurological nature such as Parkinson and Alzheimer.

The methodologist said that his institution, in keeping with these policies, had undertaken a survey of 22,000 adults from seven national provinces, resulting in the creation of Cuban Guidelines for Physical Exercise for this sector, which are presently in the implementation stage.

Held under the slogan “How to live happily and healthily for 120 years or more,” the 13th International Longevity Seminar was attended by 200 delegates from Cuba, Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.
HAVANA. Since Cuban president Raúl Castro and his U.S. counterpart Barack Obama announced their decision to reestablish diplomatic relations last December 17, there has been an overflow of enthusiasm that encompassed almost the whole world.

After more than half a century of hostile policies towards the Caribbean island, including an economic, commercial and financial blockade that is still in force, both neighbors initiated a predictably long process towards the normalization of ties.

Most people who talk about the subject tend to think -- and express their views -- about what the advantages of such contacts mean for Cuba and hope, as the result of actions pending in the U.S. Congress, for the possible lifting of the punitive measures.

Nevertheless, these new relations will also bear fruit for the United States, not only in terms of business and trade with Cuba, including the return to a market that has been denied to them by their own successive governments.

Ordinary U.S. citizens will also benefit. A recent example of which arose during last April's visit by a business and political delegation led by the governor of the state of New York, Andrew Cuomo.

The occasion facilitated the signing by the Cuban Molecular Immunology Center and the Roswell Park Institute of the state of New York of an agreement to import a therapeutic cancer vaccine, developed on the Caribbean island, into the United States.

The director of the New York institution, Candace Johnson, said that "this contract means that we can start our own clinical trials" as she spoke of the results of the business delegation led by Governor Cuomo.

There are other Cuban pharmaceutical and biotechnological products and services that could also be of benefit to the U.S. The Cuban medication Heberprot-P, the only of its kind in the world for the treatment of diabetic foot ulcers and that significantly reduces the risk of amputation, is one such example.

Renowned U.S. scientists have showed interest in the positive impact of this product in Cuba and in other countries. These U.S. experts are keen to acquire it because it is recognized as offering real hope for a reduction in the present number of mellitus diabetes-related amputations in their nation.

Heberprot-P is now licensed in 26 countries, where it has been applied to 160,000 patients with significant results.

For this and other reasons, the new prospects for Cuba-U.S. relations are also positive for the U.S., given that they will gain access to certain goods and services that, despite development levels in their country, are not presently available.

Nevertheless, as dawned on Governor Cuomo himself and everybody else on the long list of personalities that have visited the island in recent months, the mutually advantageous exploitation of the results of the bilateral rapprochement will only be possible if the U.S. Congress fully lifts the blockade against Cuba, which has been in place for over 50 years.

However, as the lung cancer vaccine contract demonstrates, there are some small steps than can be implemented in the short run, considering president Obama’s broad executive powers which he could employ to bypass the blockade by issuing licenses and other means.

Notwithstanding the decision taken by the White House chief to embark on a new course in ties with Cuba, he has to date not used such prerogatives to any significant degree other than to circumscribe flexibility on travel restrictions for a dozen categories of U.S. citizens and other actions of minor consequence.

There are many other aspects in this and other sectors in which Obama could implement new initiatives without waiting for legislators to decide to lift the blockade. Under the latter, for example, U.S. tourism to Cuba is still prohibited by law; the repeal of which would be yet another positive result for both the U.S. and Cuba.

CUBA-US
Relations Beneficial to Both Sides
By RobertoGARCIA

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING EVENTS

- 19th International Craft Fair, Pabexpo exhibition center, Havana, December.
Havana, a Huge Art Gallery

By Martha SANCHEZ

HAVANA._ More than one hundred artists from 44 countries have taken on the challenge posed by the 12th Art Biennale of Havana to give free rein to their imagination and transform urban spaces in the capital with their art.

As usual, the Biennale allows artists from different regions to exchange viewpoints and gives voice to those whose work is sometimes disregarded in their own countries, said the director of the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center, Jorge Fernández.

The organizer of Cuba’s most important visual arts events explained that the May 22-June 22 biennale will have no specific headquarters because it will be held in many places of the capital at the same time, so that the artists are able to create according to the place and the urban context.

The main idea is to turn Havana into the world’s largest gallery for one whole month, he commented.

Fernández expressed satisfaction for the amount of European artists that have participated in the latest editions, not with individual purposes but to fully engage in the biennials message.

The theme for this edition is Between Idea and Experience, “because the idea we have of art tends to be quite different from the artist’s true experience,” he noted.

One of the event’s main objectives is to shape the creation processes in art, which are currently marked by cooperation. Hence, the biennale will involve scientists, musicians, architects, dancers, designers, photographers, and professionals from different specialties.

Cuba’s National Council of Performing Arts has organized a parallel program with such artistic manifestations as dance, music, theater, film and literature, based on their own semantic richness and the relations among them.

In keeping with contemporary creative processes in art, the biennale combines multiple fields of knowledge, including workshops on curatorship and meetings on architecture, city planning and other topics.

This edition provides a space for educative projects and the presentation of research works that allow participants and the community to reflect on arts.

“The city’s energy is important for us,” said Fernández, who invited the communities to participate in the projects and turn them into social spaces.

Movie-theaters, parks, plazas, museums, buildings, corners will feature structures of different sizes as part of the event’s intention to foster a dialogue between art and the urban environment. Fernández also hopes that the works on display generate questions about the places where they are created or erected.

According to the president of the National Plastic Arts Council, Rubén del Valle, the biennale should make art accessible to the most diverse viewers. The list of participants is completed with more than 20 Cuban artists, who bring new and experimental proposals.

Havana Poetic Flair at the Venice Biennial

By Martha MARTINEZ

HAVANA._ Cuba is livening up the Art Biennale of Venice, Italy, with great poetry.

The president of the National Plastic Arts Council, Rubén del Valle, is convinced that the pieces chosen are good bets for art as a space that defies market rules, plainness, and semantic emptiness.

According to the official, the Cuban proposals during the two previous editions as well as the current one adopt the same approach of Havana’s Art Biennale. The latter emerged as an alternative to the Venetian one as it was ruled and organized by the countries’ purchasing power.

“The curatorial concepts advocated so far by Jorge Fernández (director of the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center) keep on with the tradition of choosing the crème de la crème of the Havana Biennale, as the decision is made by talented and experimental artists of Cuba’s artistic avant-garde, regardless of their age, who praise intelligence and poetry,” del Valle highlighted.

For the Cuban exhibition area in Venice, Fernández has chosen works that portray the relation between the artist’s individuality and the context.

“The harsh, dramatic element or euphoria that may result from the Cuban context, almost always determines how Cuban artists and their work are viewed and analyzed. Even though the context is always important for any creator, it is not the only determining factor. Sensitivity has many nuances, and I think that there has been a lot of opportunism when it comes to criticism. That is why many of the conferences at the Havana Biennale will be given by artists, and not theoreticians, because it is necessary to bring out the artist’s personality even more in the contemporary art scene,” said Fernández, the main organizer of Havana’s Biennale or Cuba’s largest and most important plastic arts events.

The artists representing Cuba at the world’s oldest art biennial in Venice include Grettel Rasúa with De la Permanencia y Otras Necesidades (About Permanence and Other Needs), Luis Gómez with La Revolución Somos Nosotros (We are the Revolution), Celia and Yunior with Apuntes en Hielo (Notes on Ice) and Susana Pilar with Dominio Inmaterial (Immaterial Authority.)

“Rasúa will show her work as an installation because having her licking a cactus is not something that can be done on a daily basis. However, the audiovisual technology helps her recreate a performance that conveys a dialogue between the human being and painful personal affairs.

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Cultural Complex, the event’s largest exhibition is entitled “Zona Franca” (Duty-Free Zone), while the Pabellón Cuba exhibition site will host the project “Entre, dentro, fuera” (Between, Inside, Outside), which involves artists from the United States, Bulgaria, Canada, and Cuba.

Another attractive proposal will be “Estado sólido” (Solid State), a work done by a group of artists including Cuban filmmaker Fernando Pérez (2007 National Film Prize laureate).

Meanwhile, Gómez’s work revolves around power relations in art, not with regard to artistic production but with the artist and his works.

“I do not have as much money as other European artists but here are my cards,” he said after explaining that the symbolic piece he is presenting in Venice is composed of half a million of his business cards.

“We have to deal with hard things in life and have to do it the best we can because, otherwise, they only get worse,” the young artist and professor at the San Alejandro Plastic Arts School said.

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MUSIC

*Note: theater companies are in parentheses

Centro Cultural Bertolt Brecht
Calle 13 esquina a I. Vedado.
Tel: 7 832-9359. Fri. May. 22, 29 and Sat. 23, 30 (8:30 pm): “La Plañidera” (Hired Mourner) by (Estación Habana).

Teatro Taquel Revuelta
Línea esq a B. Vedado. Tel: 7 833-0225. Fri. May. 22, 29, Sat. 23, 30 (8:30 pm) and Sun. 24, 31 (6:30 pm): “El sexo desconocido” (Unknown Sex) by (Maniobras Teatro).

Sala Adolfo Llauradó
Calle 11 e/ D y E. Vedado. Tel: 7 832-5373. Tue. May. 26, Wed. 27 and Thu. 28 (6 pm): “El Baile” (The Dance) by (Teatro de Dos). Sala Osvaldo Dragún.

Teatro Trianón
Calle Línea e/ Paseo y A. Vedado. Tel: 7 830-9648. Fri. May. 29, Sat. 30 (8:30 pm) and Sun. 31 (5 pm): The Decameron Tales by (Teatro El Público).

Centro Cultural Fresa y Chocolate

Basilica Menor San Francisco de Asís

Oratorio San Felipe Neri

MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. (National Museum of Fine Arts)

Museo Castillo de La Real Fuerza
Calle Reina e/ Avenida del Puerto y Tacón. La Habana Vieja. Tel: 7 864-4490. Through Sep. 30: Exhibit “Modelismo en acción IV” (Model-making in Action 4) by students from José Martí Secondary School in Old Havana.

Casa natal José Martí
(House where José Martí was born)

Asociación Yoruba de Cuba

Casa de Africa (House of Africa)
Obra Pía e/ San Ignacio y Mercaderes. Habana Vieja. Tel: 7 861-3778. Through May: Exhibit “Sé un pintor atrevido” (Be a Bold Painter) by 14 visual artists from Artemisa province.
GETTING AROUND

Nikhil Chopra (India).


DANCE


Cine Teatro Miramar Calle Sta y 94. Miramar. Tel: 203-7676. Sat. May. 30 (8:30 pm) and Sun. 31 (5 pm): Workshop on Spanish dance by the Irene Rodríguez Dance Company.


Main venues: Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center, Cuba’s Photographic Library, Center for the Development of Visual Arts. International Music Festival “Cubadisco 2015”

Date: May 18-26

Venues: Teatro Nacional, Teatro Karl Marx, Sala Avellaneda, Casa del Alba Cultural (cultural center).

International Ernest Hemingway Colloquium

Date: June 18-21 at “Finca Vigía,” Ernest Hemingway’s former residence in Havana.
Cuba’s Book Institute for Closer Ties with Africa

By Reina MAGDARIAGA

HAVANA... Convinced that integration is the key to progress, people from across the world are joining a process that involves every sphere of society, with a special focus on literature.

In line with this process, the Cuban Book Institute (CBI) intends to strengthen relations with African countries that have diplomatic missions in Havana.

The CBI president, Zuleica Romay, said that one of the objectives of Cuba’s editorial policy is to disseminate the kind of literature that, due to its emancipating nature, is ignored by big transnationals as they regard books as just another commodity.

“That is why we would like to expand our ties with African cultural institutions that have a significant literary production, not in terms of numbers but in terms of their authors and the quality of their works,” Romay noted.

She also praised Havana’s 2013 International Book Fair which was dedicated to Angola and allowed for updated information on Angolan literature.

“However, we are still indebted to other African countries,” the CBI president regretted. Literary works by internationally renowned African authors are not widely available in Cuba, if at all. In spite of that reality, it is worth highlighting the work done by the Arte y Literatura publishing house in printing works by prestigious African authors.

ARTE Y LITERATURA PUBLISHER AND AFRICA

Some of the books by African authors that have been printed by this publisher are El balcón del frangipani (Under the Frangipani) by Mozambican Mia Couto, Jaime Bunda, agente secreto (Jaime Bunda, Secret Agent) by Angolan Artur Pestana, as well as an anthology of Angolan tales.

Also included on the list are the following works in the English language: Magical Intervals, and a compilation of Anonymous African Poetry, an anthology by Rogelio Martínez Furé, the most important Cuban researcher and specialist in AfroCuban culture.

At the meeting with African diplomats, the publishing house’s director, Víctor Malagón, recognized that much remains to be done in order to make more African books available in Cuba.

For this purpose, an initiative that could motivate African writers, academics, and researchers is the meeting on slavery announced by the CBI president.

INITIATIVE FOR CLOSER TIES WITH AFRICA

As a means for facilitating closer ties with Africa, Romay proposed holding an international meeting on slavery during Havana’s next International Book Fair, which would allow for reflection on the origins and development of that practice.

“In Latin America and the Caribbean there is still a lot of confusion and doubt surrounding that terrible chapter. I believe that the event will be a good opportunity to exchange viewpoints between academics from our region and Africa,” she noted.

The announcement awakened the interest of African diplomats who met at the Cuban cultural institution. The consul for the embassy of Guinea-Bissau, Paulo Armando, suggested that the analysis take into account the process as seen from the slave trader countries: Spain, Portugal, and France.

Meanwhile, the first secretary of Benin’s embassy in Havana, Nicolas Sidokpohou, expressed his country’s interest in attending the meeting and in strengthening relations with the Cuban Book Institute.

The representatives from the embassies of South Africa and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic made similar remarks as well.

Cuba and South Africa Bound by Dance

By Deisy FRANCIS

PRETORIA... The presence of ballet stars from Cuba, China and the United States at the Joburg Ballet (JB) of South Africa during the recent production of Swan Lake was something marvelous, said Dirk Badenhorst, director of this independent South African ballet company.

The April 17-May 3 program included performances by Cuban lead dancer Viengsay Valdés, who has traveled to this country three times, and by Brooklyn Mack, lead dancer of the Washington Ballet Company.

In an interview with The Havana Reporter, Badenhorst admitted that it was a huge challenge for his company to make a production involving dancers from so many different ballet schools, and referred to the Cuban-South Africa ties in this field.

The director recalled that the 2013 visit to the JB headquarters by the founder of Cuba’s National Ballet Company (BNC), Alicia Alonso, was of utmost importance.

That visit represented the main drive for the consolidation of ties between the two sides, stressed Badenhorst, who noted that the Cuban methodology “has helped us train professors, dancers, and young students from underprivileged communities here in South Africa.”

The links between the South African and Cuban ballet companies, however, go as far back as 2008, when Badenhorst implemented a program involving Cuban dance institutions.

The first project of this exchange program bore fruit one year later, in 2009, when young Cuban dancers, including a group of students from Cuba’s National School of Ballet and some of their professors, made a tour of South Africa.

In Cape Town, they organized workshops for ballet dancers and professors, as well as for children from communities that have historically lacked opportunities.

In 2010, two groups of dancers from Cuba’s National School of Ballet arrived in South Africa to work with Mzansi Productions.

The training project continued throughout 2011 involving Cuban professors and that same year, in coordination with the Department for Arts and Culture, 17 dancers, three professors, and a costume designer traveled to South Africa for the joint staging of the classical ballet piece Don Quixote.

Dancers from five Cuban ballet companies (the Ballet Company of Santiago de Cuba, the Ballet of Camaguey, the Laura Alonso Ballet Company, Cuba’s National School of Ballet, and the Ballet School of Camaguey), took part in the project.

At the beginning of 2012, six Cuban dancers (three professional dancers and three senior students) joined Mzansi Productions for a long stay.

Likewise, in 2014 three dancers from the Joburg Ballet (Burnise Silvius, Linde Wessels and Jonathan Rodrigues) were invited to participate at Havana’s International Ballet Festival.

The participation of Cuban dancers has made ballet in South Africa even more attractive, critics wrote in the Sowetan newspaper, which highlighted: “There was a time when classical dances such as ballet were connected with the privileged classes in the country, especially well-off families, excluding the poor.”

Today, however, “the country is changing (…) and opportunities have opened up in artistic disciplines and spaces traditionally dominated by the white, as is the case with ballet.”
HAVANA... The swimming pool demonstrations made by members of the community-based elderly project “Accumulated Youth” constituted one of the most attractive moments of the 13th International Congress on Longevity recently held here.

This project involves a group of seniors aged 65 to 96, from the municipality of Playa, who, despite their old age, are still able to perform amazing physical activities in the water.

The project’s coordinator, Diana Águila, told the Prensa Latina news agency that ever since it was launched 15 years ago, Accumulated Youth and its members have participated in several national and international competitions.

The coordinator mentioned that among its most outstanding results is the first place awarded to the project at during the 1st International Festival of the Elderly held in Havana.

At that time, the project members defeated the Colombian teams in all swimming styles, recalled Águila.

The participants perform physical activity every day and, even though they all have a health condition – such as respiratory or heart diseases – these afflictions have eased significantly ever since they started exercising, the coordinator noted.

Accumulated Youth not only involves different swimming styles but aquatic choreographies and aerobic workouts as well.
Ecuador Aims to Eradicate Extreme Poverty

By Judith DÍAZ

QUITO. Ecuador is one of the Latin American countries with the greatest decline in poverty. If the goals of the Citizens’ Revolution are met, poverty will have been reduced to 3 percent by 2017.

By the end of 2014, the consumption poverty index in Ecuador had fallen to 25.8 percent. President Rafael Correa has frequently reiterated in various scenarios that the country aspires to further reductions through the implementation of public policies.

On finding out the latest results of the Survey of Living Conditions (SLC), Correa, an economist, described the parameters as promising, noting that extreme poverty conditions in the country had fallen to 5.7 percent.

He described this as good news on his Twitter account and noted that this survey is undertaken every four years for which a nationwide total of 900,000 persons from 28,000 homes are consulted.

Correa commented that the SLC, carried out between November 2013 and the same month of the following year, offers the most comprehensive results available from the National Institute of Statistics and Census, affiliated to the National Planning and Development Department (NPDD).

The president explained that governmental programs had ensured that thousands of Ecuadorian families experienced an improved quality of life.

He recalled that the Amazonian region, despite accounting for only 5 percent of Ecuador’s 16 million inhabitants, was most vulnerable due to the marginalization suffered under successive administrations with poverty rates reaching 22 percent.

Correa believes that poverty can be eradicated in this zone, specifically because of the feasibility of reaching inhabitants through development and inclusive socioeconomic programs.

The Teenage Mothers of Paraguay

By Javier RODRÍGUEZ

ASUNCION. Surveys, analyses and concern have continued to increase in Paraguay over the rising number of girls and adolescents who get pregnant at a very early age and end up becoming mothers while still being children themselves.

Studies by international and non-governmental organizations that defend the rights of children and adolescents have raised alarm about this situation which the Paraguayan government has admitted to be out of control.

Latest statistics show the drama – yet sometimes not the whole picture, according to experts – lived by many of the girls known as the “teenage mothers” of Paraguay, with its consequent social, economic, and psychological impact, as well as its effects on large sectors of the society.

According to the latest official statistics, one in four pregnant women in Paraguay is an adolescent between the ages of 15 to 19, while women aged 20 to 23 have been pregnant at least once in their life-time.

Paraguay registers the highest teenage pregnancy rate with 63 births for every 1,000 women, and 38 percent of these new mothers give birth before turning 20 years old, according to the UN Population Fund.

Meanwhile, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) warned about this ever increasing situation among Paraguayan girls and adolescents, noting that integrated public policies are imperative to cope with the resulting social and economic consequences, in order to avoid the regrettable panorama that can be seen in rural areas and cities alike, as well as Asuncion, the capital.

The early pregnancy rate in Paraguay is reaching high numbers with some 600 childbirths recorded every year among girls aged 10 to 14. According to Adriane Salinas, UN officer for Sexual and Reproductive Health in Paraguay, sexual abuse is the main cause for early pregnancy in the country.

As many as 20,000 births are reported annually among adolescents aged 15 to 19. The vastness of the “teenage mom” phenomenon is becoming a social and economic problem with direct consequences on this already vulnerable sector as well as on Paraguayan society as a whole.

To a large extent, the newborns of teenage mothers have a high mortality rate due to being underweight at birth; a consequence of the mother’s young biological condition and the extreme poverty they usually find themselves in, with scarce living conditions and unreliable access to safe drinking water.

Additionally, most teenage mothers do not have a stable partner and raise the child as a single mother, which makes it impossible for them to finish their education as they are forced to find a decent job – not always successfully – in order to support themselves and their children.

Abortion is illegal in Paraguay and, to make matters worse, a very elevated number of rapes are reported annually for which women and girls are lacking legal resources to face this type of violence.

Paraguay is number one of 16 Latin American countries with the highest female mortality rate due to childbirth or other pregnancy-related causes.

If taking into consideration the lack of a proper sex education programs in public schools and other centers, it is clear why teenagers do not want to use contraception methods or simply lack the knowledge about them; an issue that can be solved and would make the “teenage mom” problem much less severe.
HAVANA. Central America is one of the regions with the highest rate of murdered women, generally attributed to a predominant patriarchal mindset, but also related to increased degrees of organized crime activity.

Even though the classification of such violent deaths vary, many concur that this social sector is one of the most vulnerable in the context of violence and inequality and have gone as far as to call it genocide.

According to Human Rights Commissioner Roberto Herrera, between 2002 and 2014, some 4,460 women were murdered in Honduras alone, 95 per cent of which remain unsolved cases.

About 531 (11.9 percent) cases of the total murders during that time were reported in 2014; a year that registered 1,250 sexual attacks, amounting to an average of 100 per month. Furthermore, around 14 cases of domestic violence were reported every day during that period.

According to the National Autonomous University of Honduras’ “Violence Watch,” more than 90 women were killed in the country in the first quarter of this year.

In Guatemala, the National Civil Police (NCP) and the Guatemalan National Forensic Science Institute reported that a total of 6,376 women died violently in the country between January 2005 and February 2015.

The NCP clarified that these deaths were caused by fire arms, bladed weapons, beatings, explosives, strangulation, and lynching, adding that the years during which most women died violently were 2009 with 720 cases, 2010 (695), and 2008 (687).

Nevertheless, of these reported cases, only 606 of the accused were convicted, 134 were found not guilty, and a further 5,636 were never brought to trial, meaning that a mere 11.6 percent of all cases were tried and 88.4 percent remain unresolved.

The National Civil Police in El Salvador recorded the murder of 292 women in 2014, marking a notable rise from the 215 cases in 2013.

Representatives of that police force said that between January and March of this year, 58 women were murdered nationwide; a toll they attribute more to gang and organized crime related violence than to hate crimes or domestic violence.

The Costa Rican Judicial Investigation Agency reported that during the past year every 18 hours and 36 minutes a deliberate homicide was carried out and that 22 women were victims of jealousy or possessiveness related femicide and sexual assault by men.

Even though this number is lower than the 42 reported cases in 2011, the figure surpasses the 26 cases in 2012 and the 18 in 2013.

The Costa Rican agency classifies “femicide” as crimes involving a husband or co-habitant and “feminicide” as those committed by an ex husband, ex boyfriend, former lover, family member, or any other person that is not directly related to the victim.

National Women’s Institute authorities consider that policies introduced in the country have produced results in terms of the reporting behavior, as there has been a rise from 411 in 2013 to 471 in 2014.

Violence against women is expressed every day, not only in terms of the thousands of deaths recorded every year, but also in terms of the physical, sexual, and psychological suffering and harm caused to them in both public and private spaces.

The failure to report, as well as official inaction, have a great impact on official data and statistic collection systems that could allow for a more precise indication of the magnitude of the problem and the possible implementation of adequate responses.

In almost all of Latin America, official figures — when such exist — are below those reported by civil groups due to a failure to understand the differences between common deaths and femicides, combined with the governments’ interest to understate the problem.
HAVANA... Having been in effect for almost a year, the new Cuban Foreign Investment Law and the current upgrading of the island's economic model offer new opportunities to diverse businesses.

The investment law, which undoubtedly constitutes a key element, has been described by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) as offering very clear definitions regarding the principal sectors earmarked for development.

ECLAC executive secretary Alicia Bárcena asserted that Cuba is living through a unique moment, unlike any other global experience, because it is endeavoring to update its model while retaining a firm commitment to preserve social gains achieved over the past 50 years.

Similar views were expressed by the president of the Andean Development Corporation (ADC), Enrique García, who said that his institution hopes for Cuba to become an affiliate on the basis of the Caribbean nation's demonstration of its efforts in pursuit of sustainable development.

García added that, in this regard, Cuba complies with two conditions that are fundamental to ADC's work: macroeconomic indicator stability and an active role adopted in support of Latin American and Caribbean integration.

Cuba's foreign investment policy aims to attract some 2.5 billion dollars annually needed to underpin national economic transformations without negatively impacting its broad social programs.

Attention is focused on 250 prioritized projects based on a portfolio of opportunities compiled by authorities.

Additionally, the normalization of relations process launched by the Cuban and U.S. governments late last year has also proven to be an incentive for international businesses aspiring to operate on the island.

In recent weeks Cuba's new economic agenda has shown results in the form of increasing numbers of business delegations from all over the world visiting the island; some of them even resulting in the signing of deals worth millions of dollars in various sectors.

A Cuba-U.K. business forum attended by 32 executives from the European country, for example, yielded deals for the construction of a golf course as well as other contracts in the agriculture and energy sectors worth 400 million dollars.

Meanwhile, during an official visit to Havana, Fumio Kishida, Japan's Foreign Minister, announced his government's intention to convene a joint committee to intensify investment and trade with Cuba.

A group of 17 companies from the Dutch Council for the Promotion of Trade that specialize in harbor dredging, deep water oil and gas exploitation support, transport, renewable energy, and the organic food industry, also visited Cuba.

Spain sent Jaime García-Legaz, Secretary of State for Trade, as head of a mission involving 45 companies as part of an effort to ratify their country's inclusion among Cuba's chief trading partners.

The extensive list also includes a notable business delegation from the State of New York led by Governor Andrew Cuomo, as well as one from France.
HAVANA. Of the 480 or so Cuban athletes who will compete in next July’s Pan American Games in Toronto, none would appear to be better prepared to truly leave his mark on the Canadian city than wrestler Mijaín López. Backed by five world (2005, 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2014) and two Olympic (Beijing-2008 and London-2012) titles and his more recent crowning as king of the 22nd Central American and Caribbean Games, this corpulent gladiator is now challenged to conquer his fourth continental gold medal.

López, who will celebrate his 30th birthday on next August 20, would not appear to have any rivals among the region’s super-heavy weight Greco-Roman wrestlers. Having already seen off all comers in his Santo Domingo-2003, Rio de Janeiro-2007 and Guardalajara-2011 bouts, he seems destined to extend his reign to the northern lands of Canada.

If the forecasts are correct, this natural fighter from Cuba’s westernmost province of Pinar del Río will equal the feats of two other Cuban gladiators, Juan Luis Marén and Héctor Milián. Marén won four Pan American gold medals in the 63kg division between 1991 and 2003 while Milián, also from Pinar del Río, triumphed three times (1987, 1991 and 1995) in the heavyweight division and once (1999) in the 130+kg division.

Shooter Eglys Cruz also has the possibility of bringing home a fourth continental title and in her case the competition may be less tough given the level of this sport in the region.

The Olympic bronze medalist has taken top of the podium twice for the 10m air rifle – in Santo Domingo-2003 and Rio-2007. She also showed her class in the Dominican Republic in the 50m three position event.

At last year’s 11th Americas Cup in Guadalajara, Eglys also became the first Cuban shooter to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympics.

TRACK AND FIELD TO TELL ANOTHER TALE

Two Cuban athletes who previously sampled the sweet taste of four Pan American track and field gold are the unforgettable Ana Fidelia Quirot and Adriana Muñoz. Quirot took the 400 and 800 meter titles in Indianapolis-1987 and Havana-1991 and Muñoz dominated in the two lap and 1,500m races in Santo Domingo-2003 and Guadalajara-2011.

Such laurels are beyond the grasp of the current legion of Cuban athletes, because a best case scenario is that some of them might attain a third title in their respective competitions.

The current javelin record holder (87.20m) Guillermo Martínez has won the last two continental titles as Misleydis González in shot-put and Yarelis Barrios – who has also thrown a new regional best for discus of 66.40m.

Cuba also has the possibility of triple championship wins in other sports such as judo and weightlifting. On the judo mats, Yanet Bermoy could clinch a third Pan American title, having already taken the 48kg division gold in Rio-2007 and the 52kg in Guadalajara-2011.

Middle weightlifters Iván Cambar and favorite Sergio Alvarez have also done something similar, the latter holding the overall 270kg record.

Either way, every one of these possible achievements fade somewhat when compared to the glorious history written by Cuban Erick León, who, as the continent’s premier gymnast, not only took four consecutive titles between 1991 and 2003 but who in the course of his prolific career won a total of 18 gold, 3 silver and one bronze medals at Pan American games.
HAVANA. For the first time in more than 50 years, four U.S. companies have been granted permission by the Federal Government to open ferry services between the United States and Cuba.

The decision, which has been the subject of a lot of media attention, has also aroused public interest; particularly in Florida from where the new services will depart.

The departments of Treasury and of Commerce communicated their decision to the Havana Ferry Partners in Fort Lauderdale, the Baja Ferries in Miami, the United Caribbean Lines Florida in Orlando and the Airline Brokers Company in Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Such sailings, however, can only carry Cuban-Americans or U.S. citizens travelling under the 12 authorized categories exempt from the license requirement to visit Cuba.

Among the services planned by these firms are the Havana Ferry Partners Cayo Hueso-Havana route, with an overnight Miami and Fort Lauderdale-Havana crossing to be launched at a later date.

Miami-based Baja Ferries USA intends to operate an overnight ferry between Florida and Havana three times a week.

Meanwhile, according to comments made by company president Bruce Nierenberg to the local press, United Caribbean Lines based in Orlando equally plans to operate from several ports to the Cuban capital.

This groundbreaking news has been welcomed by the ferry companies, their potential customers, and a good part of Florida’s media, as it certainly represents a step – albeit a small one – in the direction of increased contacts on all levels between the people of Cuba and the U.S.

Nevertheless, experts on the subject caution that this activity will face serious obstacles before being implemented. The main reason for this is the economic, commercial, and financial blockade Washington has maintained against Cuba for over half a century.

That policy, condemned annually by the U.N. General Assembly since 1992, has cost the island more than 1 trillion 112,534 million dollars.

Under these unilateral restrictions, the ferries are not allowed to carry U.S. citizens to Cuba as tourists. The prohibition of the latter to travel on normal tourist visas was instilled by the Congress’ anti-Cuban laws.

As a consequence, although initial Washington authorization exists, the actual operation of these ships will very likely be extensively limited by restrictions to be imposed by other agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and other federal agencies to the detriment of the project.

Many other details also need to be ironed out, such as the necessary agreements with Cuban authorities as well as the logistics such operations require on either side of the Florida Straits that will somehow have to find loopholes in order to bypass the unilateral sanctions.

For these, and indeed many other reasons; the idea of establishing such ferry lines was greeted with a degree of cautious optimism in the U.S. as many have seen previous business proposals with Cuba frustrated or curtailed by the ever-present blockade.

Nonetheless, these business-folk and the future passengers who will benefit from such services are not giving up on their hopes and sustain that they will do everything in their power to see them materialize. They know that the first thing they must do for their dreams to come true is to funnel all of their energy towards the lifting of the obsolete blockade.

Last December 17, Cuban president Raúl Castro and his U.S. counterpart Barack Obama announced their decision to reestablish diplomatic relations between their countries, to open embassies in Havana and Washington, and to start a process towards the normalization of bilateral ties.

Obama notified Congress on April 14 of his decision to remove Cuba from the list of nations that the Department of State alleges sponsor terrorism; a decision being considered by the legislature. The latter has a 45 day period – expiring at the end of May -- to announce their decision.

Cuban authorities have said that although the exclusion of their country from the list does not imply any significant change towards the removal of the blockade; it is a just decision, given that the Caribbean nation should have never been included on a list that they describe as illegal and spurious.