Cuba and US conduct meetings in Washington on mutual security concerns

Cuban and US officials have held a series of meetings in Washington to discuss co-operation on security issues and penal matters. In three separate meetings the two sides discussed preventing and combating terrorism, issues relating to the exchange of information on criminal investigations, and taking forward existing counter narcotics co-operation.

The meetings held in the week of January 15 form a part of the dialogue on law implementation and enforcement agreed bilaterally in November 2015 with the Obama administration, which continue despite the policy changes towards Cuba announced by the Trump administration.

According to Cuba’s Foreign Ministry, the meeting on penal issues considered establishing mechanisms that will allow the two nations to act more effectively against criminals through the rapid exchange of information on investigations and related issues. In separate announcements it said that with respect to exchanges on counter narcotics co-operation and in discussions on terrorism related issues, further technical exchanges were envisaged.

The meetings followed another on January 12, also in Washington, where representatives from the two countries discussed cyber security (Cuba Briefing January 15, 2018).

Recent reports in the Cuban media suggest that the Cuban government is becoming increasingly concerned about the growing size and incidence of narcotics seizures, and attempts by organised crime to develop a market in Cuba.

According to a recent report in Granma, more than 4.5 tons of narcotics were seized by the Cuban authorities between January and October 2017. Shipments principally consisted of marijuana and were not destined for the island, but were seized in coastal waters while in transit to the US.

However, Granma has also reported that other attempts through the country’s airports have involved organised criminal networks attempting to introduce narcotics into the country. The official
publication attributed the increase in seizures to Cuba's geographic proximity to the US and increased production, supply and consumption.

The Brazil-based Igarapé Institute, a think tank, has recently suggested that changing socioeconomic conditions in Cuba may cause the country to revamp its counter narcotics policy. A December 2017 report ‘Will Cuba Update its Drug Policy for the Twenty First Century?’, suggested that while Cuba's commitment to a multifaceted approach to narcotics control had helped it avoid the high levels of drug trade-related violence and narcotics consumption that have plagued other Latin nations, this may not continue.

The reports suggested that as the island’s economic isolation diminishes, and tourism and disposable income increases, socioeconomic shifts will likely require a change in the country’s counter narcotic activities.

The report warns that if Cuba continues to grow and diversify its foreign trade and move towards a mixed-market model, a series of economic and social transformations could follow that would increase the presence of narcotics on the island.

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**Cuba**

- **Granma gives belated coverage to remarks by Machado Ventura.** Following the transfer and reburial of the remains of 33 combatants in the country's 1953-59 revolution on January 11, Granma gave extensive coverage of the event and a speech made that day by Miguel Díaz-Canel, the country's First Vice President ([Cuba Briefing January 15, 2018](#)). However, only four days later did Granma then give extensive coverage to another speech made at the same event by the Second Secretary of the Party, Jose Machado Ventura.

  In an unusual departure, and quoting the incorrect dates, the publication wrote ‘The newspaper Granma, aware of the importance for history of the Homeland of what happened this Saturday, reproduces the speech delivered by comrade José Ramón Machado Ventura, Second Secretary of the Central Committee, and Vice President of the Councils of State and Council of Ministers .... on January 13, 2018’. It then went on to publish Mr Machado Ventura’s speech in full alongside pictures of him speaking.

  The delayed publication follows a report in December by the news agency EFE which stated the previous editor of Granma, Pelayo Terry Cuervo, was relieved of his post for errors which included a failure to publish in full Mr Machado Ventura's speech marking the anniversary of the Russian revolution.

  In Granma’s first report of the January 11 event, Mr Díaz-Canel's remarks were published in full alongside pictures of him speaking in the presence of the country's historic political leadership including Mr Machado Ventura.
• **Universities to play a bigger role in auditing state enterprises.** Vice President Gladys Bejerano, the Comptroller General, has said that she wants to establish closer links with Cuban universities to attract graduates that are able to enhance the audit of state enterprises and the other oversight functions her office performs. Speaking at a provincial meeting, she said that she hoped that at an International Auditing Workshop to be held in May, students and professors will present papers suggesting ways of improving Cuba's audit systems. "We feel that it is a social duty and we believe that it will improve our work a lot", she said. She emphasised the need to incorporate students from various engineering specialties so that audits involve interdisciplinary teams and become more efficient. Cuban media reports of her comments said that the involvement of students from the Universities of Holguín and Moa had already detected significant deficiencies in audited enterprises which had resulted in significant losses in sectors such as gastronomy, commerce and agriculture. According to Juventud Rebelde, Mrs Bejerano said that that such 'results show that administrative leaders still have to work critically and responsibly against bureaucracy, insensitivity and indifference to problems'.

• **Process to nominate Provincial and National Assembly candidates begins.** Cuba's Municipal Assemblies are to hold special sessions on January 21 to nominate the candidates who will be elected as Provincial Assembly delegates and National Assembly deputies. The process will lead to a meeting of the National Assembly in April that will appoint a new Council of State and President. To be appointed to superior bodies candidates must receive more than 50% support. Cuba TV said that it is expected that those nominated will carry out a tour of municipalities, between January 22 and March 10, to exchange views with citizens.

• **Move to improve quality and quantity of foodstuffs.** The Cuban government is aiming to improve the quality and variety of domestically produced foodstuffs this year. Reports in the state media additionally noted the need to ensure that production levels guaranteed the availability of the country's basic consumer food basket. The reports, which reviewed food production in several provinces, suggested that new strategies were being adopted to improve agricultural practice to maintain productivity levels for items such as milk, vegetables and grain. These included the timely delivery of foodstuffs and improvements in the supply of inputs required by farmers.

• **ETECSA reiterates that all cloned cell phones will stop working in May.** ETECSA, the state telecommunications company, has reiterated that as of May 2018 all cell phones whose IMEI (International Mobile Equipment Identity number) has been cloned will stop working. An article in Juventud Rebelde has said that many are still in doubt about how to check if their phones' IMEI is authentic or not, and urged them to visit an ETECSA website to check. The announcement of the ending of the widespread use of cloned numbers goes back to 2016, when a Ministry of Communications resolution informed those in such situations about this year's deadline.

• **Statistics show most young Cubans have IT access.** According to reports in the Cuban media, 94% of Cuban adolescents and young people have access to some form of computer technology, with the most widespread being mobile telephones. A related survey by the Centre for Youth Studies (CESJ), involving a sample of 1,897 youths between 12 and 34 years old from around the country is expected to be used to draw up future policies and work strategies.

• **New land taxes aim to encourage better use.** Taxes on idle agricultural lands and forests are to be introduced this year in the provinces of Pinar del Río and Cienfuegos, before being extended to other areas. Reports in the Cuban media have quoted Vladimir Regueiro, the Director of Income Policy of the Ministry of Finance and Prices, as saying that that the new measures are an
instrument to encourage more efficient exploitation of the land. They will also, he said, require the creation of new controls and forms of assessment of idle lands and their future productive capacity. According to Mr Regueiro, the payment of a fixed tax per hectare is planned for non-use and will correspond to one of four categories defined according to the quality of the soil. The reports said that the payment of the tax will be required from the moment the owners of idle land are notified. The tax is not deductible from income tax. The new tax will predominantly apply to private farmers and non-state cooperatives.

• **Increasing numbers of Cubans travelling abroad.** At least 819,749 Cubans living in Cuba have travelled abroad for personal reasons in the last five years, according to the Cuban state media. The reports said that since the updating of the country's migration legislation in January 2013 which enabled most Cubans to be able to travel freely, some 2.6m overseas visits have occurred.

• **Media appearance upgrades and interactivity aimed at younger generation.** Granma, as a part of its presentational upgrading, has introduced three interactive sections online to make it more attractive to a younger audience. The new content offers audio visual links. It coincides with changes to layout, colour and the greater use of larger pictures and infographics in the print edition of the newspaper. Juventud Rebelde is also undergoing radical changes to its appearance. Granma's three new interactive sections are 'Learn', 'Today in History' and the 'Direct Thread', which involves special reports produced for the web.

The new approach variously involves links to old coverage of events in national life, videos and image galleries extracted from the Granma archive.

Recent reports of meetings of the Cuban Journalists Union (UPEC) have noted the need for the Cuban media to respond to the computerisation of Cuban society. One recent meeting involving journalists, members of the Central Committee and officials from its ideological department suggested that in view of the widespread consumption of social media, journalists should become more proactive in rejecting on-line what were described as ‘lies about our country and the work of the Revolution’ and ‘to continue defending them with arguments and with objective information’. The same reports also noted journalists as expressing concern at ‘the material situation of the sector and the low salary, especially of the professionals of the written press’.

• **Concern expressed about contamination response by state entities.** A meeting of technical specialists from the Environmental Regulation and Nuclear Security Office (ORASEN) in Havana has heard that only 55% of the 189 entities inspected in 2017 have decontamination contingency plans. Speaking at a meeting on January 17, the Director General of ORASEN, Jorge Alvarez, urged improvements to address environmental violations, technological and occupational security, and to reduce contamination. Reports in the Cuban media said that he observed that in many cases the environmental risks were only addressed in the case of work violations or following disciplinary measures rather than as a part of a plan. His remarks addressed violations ranging from fines on private workers, to visits to mining projects risking contamination to the public water supply. He also reportedly spoke about problems with entities that generate dangerous wastes and failures in some cases to comply with labour codes relating to radiology and biological security.

• **Tourism offering to expand in Ciego de Avila.** Cuba’s Tourism Ministry is expanding the range of attractions for visitors to Jardines de Rey in Ciego de Avila. A new initiative involves the creation
of a Jardines del Rey Carnivals each March with floats, dance groups, street theatre performances and other cultural events. Also planned are evening fiestas, trova music, and bike tours.

- **Drought officially over.** The drought conditions affecting Cuba since 2016 have officially come to an end. Granma said that over the period the national rainfall average was 1,527 mm, or equivalent to 114% of the annual historic level. The publications said that a remarkable recovery had taken place in dams, which by late 2017 at 7,532bn cubic meters of water represented 83% of total capacity, the highest figure for several years.

- **Dissident ‘attacked by common criminals’.** The Cuban American media have reported that Eduardo Cardet, the leader of the dissident group the Christian Liberation Movement, has been stabbed and beaten in jail in what the dissident group said was a surprise attack by common criminals. Mr Cardet is serving a three-year jail sentence. Amnesty International recognise him as a prisoner of conscience.

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**Europe**

- **More Cubans seek asylum in Netherlands.** The Netherlands national immigration service, IND, has said that there has been a sharp rise in asylum applications from Cubans. It noted in a report on overall asylum requests that the annual total in 2017 was 256 applications compared with just 23 applications in 2016. IND said it had no explanation for the sudden rise.

- **Globalia increases its hotel management presence.** The Spanish group Globalia is to manage a further three hotels in Cuba under its Be Live Hotels brand. Two of its new acquisitions are located on Varadero Beach, where the group already has five properties under management, and a third will be in Havana, where the group already manages one.

- **Spanish tourism says Cuba safest country.** Cuba has been awarded a prize as the safest country for tourism at Spain’s 38th International Tourism Fair held in Madrid last week. The award came weeks after the US State Department issued a warning to US citizens to reconsider traveling to Cuba, following allegations of ‘attacks’ of unknown origin on its some of its diplomats.

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**China**

- **GAC Motor hoping to be long term supplier of high end vehicles.** The Chinese car maker, Guangzhou Automobile Group (GAC Motor), has formally handed over the first of 90 vehicles it is supplying to the Cuban state car-rental company Transtur. Speaking at an event to mark the occasion, Fu Jinhai, the Assistant General Manager of GAC Motor, said that the company hoped that the first delivery would be just a beginning. The vehicles are mainly high-end models. Between 60-65% of Transtur’s fleet of 8,500 vehicles are Chinese made.

- **Senior Communist Party figure visits.** Song Tao, the Head of the department of International Relations of the Chinese Communist Party arrived in Cuba on January 21 to present, on behalf of the Chinese President Xi Jinping, the results of its recent Congress, according to reports in the Cuba media.
The Americas

- **Venezuela alleges bomb plot against Cuban embassy.** Venezuela’s First Vice President, Diosdado Cabello, has said that the Cuban Embassy in Caracas was to have been the target of a car bomb. Speaking on the television programme, Con el Mazo Dando, broadcast by VTV, Mr Cabello said that Oscar Pérez, a renegade helicopter pilot who was killed in a nine-hour siege on January 15 near Caracas, was behind the plot. The same day President Maduro had told the National Constituent Assembly that a cell, led by Mr Pérez, was planning an attack “against the Embassy of a dear and prestigious country which has its representation here”. In June 2017, Mr Pérez threw grenades at government buildings from a helicopter.

- **Cuba takes big delegation to CELAC.** Cuba’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bruno Rodriguez has led a significant Cuban delegation to the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) meeting being held in Santiago, Chile on January 21/22. A meeting of the CELAC-China Forum is to take place at the same time. CELAC groups together all of the countries of the Americas other than the US, Canada and Europe’s overseas territories and is seen as an alternative hemispheric political entity by Cuba to the Organisation of American States (OAS).

Rest of the World

- **Ramaphosa proposes closer trade relations with Cuba.** The new President of South Africa’s ruling African National Congress (ANC), Cyril Ramaphosa, speaking in Port Elizabeth, has proposed that the South African government increase its trade with Cuba as part of the ‘reinforcement’ of its solidarity. He also called for an end to the US embargo. His remarks came in a wide-ranging address on the future goals of the ANC and its domestic priorities mainly linked to the fight against corruption and the economic advance of South Africa.