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SUBJECT: CARTAS DE CUBA: EARLY SUMMER EDITION

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Classified By: COM Michael Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) This edition of "Cartas" features the following items:

-- Paras 2-4 Medical Malpractice -- 5-8 Baseball, Music and Racism -- 9-11 China Syndrome -- 12-19 Diplomatic Corps Reflections -- 20-22 Bracing for the NAM

MEDICAL MALPRACTICE

¶2. (U) NEWS: USINT is always looking for human interest stories and other news that shatters the myth of Cuban medical prowess, which has become a key feature of the regime's foreign policy and its self-congratulatory propaganda. Two articles appeared this week in our roundup of news about Cuba that we collect and disseminate daily:

--Dateline 31 May: Jamaican Dr. Albert Lue has publicly denounced Cuban medical incompetency in handling Jamaican patients who traveled to Cuba for eye surgery. Of 60 such patients he surveyed, 3 were left permanently blind and another 14 returned to Jamaica with permanent cornea damage.

--Dateline 1 June: 14,000 Bolivian doctors are on strike to protest the 600 Cuban doctors who have been shipped into the country, with no concern as to displacement or unemployment among

the Bolivian doctors, or qualifications of the Cubans.

¶3. (U) In a recent appearance on Miami Cable TV station 41's "A Mano Limpia" interview show, Cuban doctor and former Director of Family Medicine in the Ministry of Health, Alcides Lorenzo, slammed the Cuban medical system for being overly politicized. Lorenzo had just defected to the USA via Mexico, where he missed his connecting flight from Cancun to Havana, on the way back from an international conference in Peru. According to Lorenzo, Cuban doctors spend two-thirds of their time going to political meetings, as opposed to treating patients. Lorenzo also said that Cuban medical care was grossly understaffed and underfunded at home as a result of the "medical missions" overseas, particularly to Venezuela. Unfortunately for Lorenzo, or any other Cuban doctor who considers defecting from a "mission" overseas, his family is held hostage in Cuba and will not be permitted to leave the island.

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Baseball, Music and Racism:

¶5. (C) COM and several USINT colleagues went to the Industriales-Santiago (World Series equivalent) baseball game at Latinoamericano stadium in Havana. It was a great, hard-fought game. (In the end, Industriales won, coming back from a 4-2 deficit to go ahead 8-4, and eventually finishing 10-7.) What was striking at the game, however, was not on the field but rather in the stands. First thing: The Industriales crowd was visibly "criollo," i.e., of Spanish descent, with very few black faces on their side of the field. The Santiago supporters, on the other hand, were heavily black. Their music, played in the stands, was entirely of an Afro-Cuban beat. There were also ample dashes of santero flavor among the SdC followers. What really highlighted the racial split, however, was the chants among the Industriales fans. If a Santiago pitcher was working on

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an intentional walk, the fans would yell, "Pitch, mommy, pitch!" That then evolved into "Pitch, guajira, pitch!" Then came allusions to the pitcher lacking all of his manhood, again with clear racial overtones.

¶6. (C) Cubans told COM that the catcalls, chants and aggressive behavior are not new. They did say that there has been a marked increase in such racially-overtone slurs in recent years. One devoted baseball fan remarked that the regime encourages such aggressive behavior in order to take folks' minds off where the real problem lies.

¶7. (C) The following morning, COM and Mrs. Parmly strolled over to the Callejon de Hamel, a tourist trap in downtown Havana set up a few years ago by popular artists. All the artists there were black, and were very much into accentuating their race in their

art, in their dress and hairstyles, and in their behavior. The alleyway hosted an impromptu concert of Afro-Cuban and even pure Afro rhythms, with both musicians and many black Cubans in the crowd singing along. The show was put on partly to address foreign tourists: The alleyway is listed in tourist guides, and there was a Havanatur bus right outside the street, which disgorged mainly Canadian tourists. Still, the artists and musicians were "into their own thing" for the most part. There was surprisingly little panhandling or otherwise pitching to the foreigners in the public.

¶8. (C) Comment: These two snapshots were a window into a part of Cuban life with a dynamic all its own. They underline the existence of at least two Cubas, and explain why so many regime supporters and sympathizers are obsessed with the notion of unity, precisely because they know how hard that unity will be to maintain when change becomes more openly energized.

China Syndrome:

¶9. (C) A couple of weeks ago, there was a concert at Amadeo Roldan theater that featured a Chinese conductor as guest of the National Symphony. It was part of the normal Sunday afternoon series. The Chinese Embassy made a big deal out of the Chinese guest conductor, turning out a pretty much full house of Cubans and others (presumably a large Chinese contingent), and most importantly, the visiting Chinese Vice Minister of Culture, who was in town on an official visit.

¶10. (C) After the concert, several officials got up to speak. Leading the Cuban cohort was Abel Prieto, Minister of Culture, who had the usual things to say about the depth and strength of Cuban-Chinese ties. All the speakers got the usual polite applause. Then the Chinese Vice Minister got up. Rather than just respond with counter-inanities, he launched into a speech on the success of the Chinese economic model, including noting the degree to which openness to the world, encouraging private initiative and letting individual creativity have free rein were key to economic progress. The audience went cold. Not a clap, not a peep when the Minister finished speaking.

¶11. (C) Chinese Appliances: Cubans who visit USINT tell us frequently that new, supposedly energy-saving appliances made in China are of very poor quality. The small refrigerators have earned the nickname of "underarms," because they break quickly and are seen on the streets carried under the arms of their unhappy owners to the repair facilities (which of course are understocked with spare parts). The new Chinese-made ovens have a blue plastic thermostat button which users say melts when the ovens are heated up to normal baking temperatures.

Diplomatic Corps Reflections:

¶12. (C) Spanish Ambassador Alonso (May 26) described the fight within the "nomenklatura" for the soul of the future Cuban regime. Fidel, with his railings against "Forbes" magazine and his narcissistic rollout of Ignacio Ramonet,s

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book, is "present for now," but not for the future. According to Alonso, there is a deep split within the government circles that can be summarized as Consumption vs. Investment. Alonso portrayed the split with anecdotes. Everyone knows the infrastructure is collapsing. Look at the transport network, Alonso said. Cuba got from China 12 shiny new locomotives, which were presented/rolled out with great fanfare by Fidel and others. That was several months ago. They have still not entered into service. Reason: The locomotives are designed to work at peak efficiency at speeds far in excess of what the rickety Cuban rail network will allow, unless the regime is willing to risk derailment, which it is not.

¶13. (C) So, Alonso continued, the regime comes back to its choice: Does it put what money it has in repairing the rail (and bus) network, or in continuing to subsidize tariffs for the average consumer? For some time, the urban transport system has needed to decide on a fare hike, but there are those within the ruling circles who say such an increase would trigger a strong negative popular response. The new Chinese Yutong buses have been put into use on inter-urban lines, accompanied by steep fare hikes. (Comment: These have already been announced in "Granma" and "Juventud Rebelde;" the papers talked of hikes of 100 to 250 percent in most inter-urban fares. End Comment.) However, it is quite another thing, Alonso noted, to raise intra-urban fares.

¶14. (C) The regime sounds confident in its public statements. Fidel especially sounds boisterous and bombastic. Just below him, Alonso concluded, the officials responsible for keeping the machinery running are much more uncomfortable, because they realize how narrow their margin of maneuver is. Analyzing Fidel,s reaction to Forbes, Alonso came up with two explanations: Latin America and his anti-corruption campaign. Alonso argued that Fidel,s primary target was fellow Latin leaders. Whether of left or right, most Latin political leaders are leery of Fidel, who returns the suspicion. By trying to highlight how little money he personally possesses, Fidel was telling his fellow Latin politicians to beware of forces below them. (Comment: Alonso implied, but did not state, that Fidel was threatening his fellow Latins with popular rebellion if they did not hew to the ALBA line. End Comment.)

¶15. (C) Corruption in Cuba is a fairly unique phenomenon, Alonso said. Fidel does not fear much the street accusing him of having stashes of cash for personal use. (Comment: Other diplomatic sources disagree, and report that the initial reaction of "the street" was precisely to ask where Castro keeps his funds. Mexican Ambassador Pina described what he heard in the following way: The average Cuban sees the Special Period having ended at

least five years ago and the Venezuelan largesse having started flowing several years ago. Still, however, Cubans note no rise whatsoever in their living standards. "Where is he putting the money?" those Cubans ask. End Comment.)

¶16. (C) Alonso said Cuban corruption is remarkable for its universality. Corruption is needed by all to survive. Alonso said that in most Latin countries, a corruption scandal consists of a person robbing 11 million dollars. In Cuba, it is 11 million Cubans each stealing one dollar. There are exceptional cases, such as Political Bureau member Robinson, who was summarily dismissed and imprisoned recently for alleged corrupt behavior. Fidel sent an equally powerful signal in dismissing his Minister of Auditing and Control, Lina Pedraza Rodriguez. (The press reported that Pedraza would be moved to other responsibilities). However, the bulk of the corruption behavior that Fidel talks about is simply cheating on a small scale in order to get by.

¶17. (C) Czech Charge Vit Korselt (May 30) said he had just come back from Prague, where he had arranged for the replacement of his DCM, who was recently expelled by the regime. The new assignee will be coming from Caracas, where he handles political and press issues. Korselt explored the documents released several weeks ago by Oswaldo Paya. He said he was surprised by Paya,s emphasis on outlawing the Communist Party. At least 50 percent of Cuban society is controlled by the Party, Korselt reasoned; he wondered how

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the next regime would be able to function with over half the population put outside the law. (Comment: That is not what Paya proposed. Rather, Paya,s formula is to outlaw the party but not necessarily ban all former party members from public life.) Korselt said he had engaged Paya several times on the point, but had been unable to persuade the dissident of the logic of the Czech way. Korselt allowed that the Czechs had been the exception, and that all the other East European countries had followed a path proposed by Paya in Cuba; i.e., of banning Communist Parties, even if substitute parties were subsequently accepted.

¶18. (C) Korselt also commented on corruption in Cuba. He is convinced there are numerous multi-millionaires on the island. He has seen too many signs -- fast cars and generous meals at restaurants, for example -- to think that everyone is living on 20 dollars a month. He thought this would be an explosive factor in post-Castro Cuba.

¶19. (C) The UK DCM said last week that the presence of lunatic fringe MP George Galloway in Havana put the British Embassy in an embarrassing situation. On the one hand, they wanted to at least go through the motions of offering assistance to an MP; on the other hand, they thought it better not to be seen or photographed next to Galloway, who had just released a statement saying that it would be just fine if somebody killed Tony Blair. Galloway

made two TV appearances with Castro, in the series of "Roundtables" that aimed to discredit "Forbes" magazine's article that ranked Castro seventh on a list of the world's richest kings, queens and dictators.

BRACING FOR THE NAM:

¶20. (C) As we get closer to September, when Cuba hosts the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, we will be ever more interested in factoids that demonstrate Cuban perfidy in NAM member countries, of which recent Cuban history is replete. For example, at a recent African embassy's national day reception, P/E Officer recommended to the Angolan Charge d'Affaires that he read (Air Force Defector, General) Rafael Del Pino's memoirs, which included a lot about Cuba's military involvement in Angola. Del Pino's main point was that the fighting was largely Cuban military massacring Africans, and that it was cruel and unjustified. The Angolan replied with the party line about Cuba helping defend Angola from South African aggression, that the assistance was to a sister socialist movement, etc., etc. The Charge d'Affaires, in keeping with his African socialist principles, then said he'd be spending his summer vacation at his investment home in Lisbon.

¶21. (C) It will be hard for us to witness the NAM first hand, but our protecting power, the Swiss Embassy, is applying to the current NAM Chairman, Malaysia, for observer status, which they enjoyed at the Kuala Lumpur Summit. A XXXXXXXXXXXX journalist has also applied for credentials to cover the NAM and was turned down. His offense: Referring to the GOC as "the regime" instead of "the government" in his last article about Cuba.

¶22. (C) We plan to feature more NAM-related items in our next installment; stay tuned. PARMLY