

# FOCAL SUMMARY OF NEWS ITEMS REPORTED ON CUBA January-December 2005

*This resource is a compilation of news items on Cuba listed  
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## TERRORISM

### CAMP DELTA

**January 6:** The US defence department has announced a new investigation into allegations of prisoner abuse at the Guantanamo Bay detention centre. The Pentagon says prisoners are treated humanely, but has promised to investigate all credible allegations of abuse. The new investigation has been ordered by General Bantz Craddock, the head of US southern command which has responsibility for Guantanamo Bay. The inquiry is to be led by US Army Brigadier General John Forlow. (*BBCNews*, 6/1/05)

**February 7:** Nearly a dozen detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp contend they were wrongly imprisoned after repeated abuse by US troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including beatings with chains, electric shock and sodomy, their lawyer said. "These are classic stories of men who ended up in Guantanamo by mistake," charged attorney Tom Wilner, who represents 11 Kuwaiti prisoners held in the detention center at the US Navy base in eastern Cuba. Most of his clients say they falsely confessed to belonging to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime or the al-Qaida terror network as a way to stop the abuse, Wilner said. He said one is too angry over his treatment to discuss details of his case, but all argue their detentions are unjustified. (*The New York Times*, 8/2/05)

**February 9:** Lawyers for a Canadian detainee at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, who was captured in Afghanistan when he was 15 years old asserted in a document that he was repeatedly abused by his American jailers. Mr. Khadr's situation has received considerable attention, especially in Canada, where his lawyers held a news conference to criticize the Canadian government for what they said was its failure to press for his release. (*The New York Times*, 9/2/05)

**February 12:** The US military dismissed concerns expressed by a UN rights investigator about allegations of prisoner abuse in Afghanistan, saying an internal investigation had found that detainees were treated humanely. A UN independent expert said in a statement after a visit to Afghanistan that he was "gravely concerned" by allegations of mistreatment and even torture of local people by foreign forces in the country. (*Reuters*, 12/2/05)

**March 11:** The US is seeking to cut the number of Guantanamo Bay detainees by more than half by transferring them to jails in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Yemen. Hundreds of terror suspects could be handed over, according to senior officials quoted in the New York Times. There are currently about 540 detainees in Guantanamo. (*BBC*, 11/3/05)

**March 21:** Video footage of the treatment of prisoners by the US military at Guantanamo Bay would reveal many cases of substantial abuse as "explosive as anything from Abu Ghraib", a lawyer said. Adelaide lawyer Stephen Kenny, who represented Australian David Hicks during the early part of his detention at the military prison in Cuba, told a law conference today 500 hours of videotape of prisoners at the US base existed. Mr Kenny said the full story of abuse at Guantanamo Bay would not be told until the tapes were released, but they could be as damaging as the images of Iraqi prisoners being abused by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. (*The Australian*, 21/3/05)

**April 14:** Cuba, only hours after being formally criticized by the UN Commission on Human Rights for its lack of respect for individual liberties, presented a resolution of its own calling for an investigation into treatment of detainees at the US naval base on the southeastern coast of the island. Cuban ambassador Jorge Ivan Mora said the resolution asks that a representative of the UN commission be sent to the base at Guantanamo, sovereignty over which is exercised by Washington, to investigate treatment of the more than 500 people the United States has been holding there without trial, some for more than three years. Washington contends that the prisoners, some of whom reportedly have been subjected to deprivations and interrogation techniques tantamount to torture, are "enemy combatants" and suspected Islamic fundamentalist terrorists bereft of most legal rights. The Cuban-proposed measure notes that the European Parliament called last October for "an independent and impartial investigation" into allegations of abuse of detainees at the base. (*EFE*, 14/4/05)

**April 19:** The United States should allow UN human rights monitors, including the special rapporteur on torture, to visit detainees held at Guantánamo Bay, Human Rights Watch said. Cuba put forward a resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights demanding such access for the rights monitor. Cuba should permit the UN rapporteurs to visit detainees in its own prisons as well. "The international community should get commitments from both the United States and Cuba to grant UN investigators access to detainees on all parts of the island," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "The European Union put its weight behind this effort." (*HRW Press Release*, 19/4/05)

**April 20:** The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) concluded discussion of agenda items, although the European Union dodged the Cuban proposal concerning prisoners of the US in Guantánamo. Several participants in the Commission have already said their farewells, although one burning issue remains - the answer to the Cuban initiative concerning the situation of the persons being held by the United States in the military base it illegally occupies in Guantánamo. The proposal has already been through three sessions of consultations, during which the Cuban mission considered opinions proffered, and modified the document accordingly. (*Prensa Latina*, 20/4/05)

**April 20:** The UN Human Rights Commissioner rejected Cuba's attempt to force an investigation into the treatment of detainees at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay. The vote on Cuba's resolution was 22-8, with 23 other nations abstaining. The other nations supporting Cuba were China, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Sudan, Malaysia, Guatemala and

Mexico. The resolution, which noted the "serious concern" expressed by UN experts about the conditions for detainees at Guantanamo, would have asked the United States "to authorize an impartial and independent fact-finding mission" to the centre. (*AP*, 21/4/05)

**June 8:** US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said that the Bush administration was not considering shutting down the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and he defended the treatment of its prisoners by their American military guards and interrogators as humane. During a visit to Norway before a meeting with NATO defense ministers in Brussels, Mr. Rumsfeld responded to criticisms that the detention center should be closed after reports that the Koran had been mishandled and prisoners mistreated. "I know of no one in the US Government, in the executive branch, that is considering closing Guantánamo," he said at a news conference. (*The New York Times*, 9/6/05)

**June 8:** US President George W. Bush left open the possibility that the US prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, could be shut down following mounting criticism from former President Jimmy Carter and others. "We're exploring all alternatives as to how best to do the main objective, which is to protect America," Bush said when asked in an interview with Fox News Channel's Neil Cavuto in Washington if he would close the detention centre. Amnesty International also recently called for Guantanamo's closure, saying the facility was the "the gulag of our time" – a characterisation Bush dismissed again. "It's just absurd to equate Gitmo and Guantanamo with a Soviet gulag," he said. "Just not even close." Bush said the Guantanamo Bay detainees were being treated in accordance with international standards and that any allegations of mistreatment were fully investigated. He also defended the policy of holding enemy combatants. (*The Scotsman*, 8/6/05)

**June 10:** Senator Mel Martinez of Florida said that the Bush administration should consider closing the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Mr. Martinez is the first high-profile Republican to make the suggestion. "It's become an icon for bad stories, and at some point you wonder the cost-benefit ratio," Mr. Martinez said at the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors/Florida Press Association convention. "How much do you get out of having that facility there? Is it serving all the purposes you thought it would serve when initially you began it, or can this be done some other way a little better?" (*The New York Times*, 11/6/05)

**June 13:** US Vice President Dick Cheney said he doesn't believe revelations about the treatment of prisoners at the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay have become an image problem for the United States and that the facility should not be shut down. "Those who most urgently advocate that we shut down Guantanamo probably don't agree with our policy anyway," the vice president said after presenting the Gerald R. Ford Foundation journalism awards at the National Press Club. Given all the facts, he said, "Our policy is the correct one." (*CNN*, 13/6/05)

**June 14:** The detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, will be needed for years to come, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld suggested. Mr. Rumsfeld said at a news conference at the Pentagon that there was no alternative site to hold and question the suspected terrorists there. "I don't know any place where we have infrastructure that's appropriate for that sizable group of people," he said. "The United States government, let alone the US military, does not want to be in the position of holding suspected terrorists any longer than is absolutely necessary. But as long as there remains a need to keep terrorists from striking again, a facility will continue to be needed." (*The New York Times*, 15/6/05)

**June 16:** US Senators considered imposing new limits on the treatment of so-called enemy combatants as the Bush administration defended the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In an often-confrontational hearing, members of the Senate Judiciary Committee grilled administration officials on the status of about 520 prisoners, mostly from the war in Afghanistan, being held at the military prison on a US-occupied sliver of Cuba. Lawmakers clashed sharply, with Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat-Vermont, calling the offshore prison compound "an international embarrassment," while Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican-Alabama, said some of the detainees should be executed. (*Los Angeles Times*, 16/6/05)

**June 17:** The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hit back at a US Republican report which questioned its impartiality, dismissing the accusations as false and unsubstantiated. ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger vowed the Swiss-based agency would stick to its principles of neutrality and expressed confidence the United States would remain its top donor. A policy adviser for the US Senate Republican majority said this week the ICRC had lost its impartiality and was advocating positions at odds with US interests. (*The New York Times*, 17/6/05)

**June 18:** Amnesty International and human rights activists of different nationalities condemned continued human rights abuse against detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, calling for greater transparency from the United States on inmates' conditions and for the closure of the detention center. The demands came during a conference organized by the human rights and freedom organization (HOOD) and Amnesty International, and attended by lawyers from Washington, Britain, Europe and Middle East countries. (*The Daily Chew*, 19/6/05)

**June 20:** Former President Bill Clinton has said the United States should either "close down or clean up" the Guantánamo Bay prison for foreign terrorism suspects. In an interview with the Financial Times, Clinton said American or British troops would be at much greater risk if they had a reputation for abusing people. "Well, it either needs to be closed down or cleaned up," Clinton said when asked whether the camp on Cuba should close. "If we get a reputation for abusing people, it puts our own soldiers much more at risk," Clinton said. (*The New York Times*, 20/6/05)

**June 23:** UN human rights experts said they have reliable accounts of detainees being tortured at the US base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The experts also said Washington had not responded to their latest request to check on the conditions of terror suspects at the facility in eastern Cuba. The experts, who report to UN bodies on different human rights issues, said their request for a visit was "based on information, from reliable sources, of serious allegations of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees, arbitrary detention, violations of their right to health and their due process rights." US officials so far have allowed only the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Guantanamo detainees. (*The New York Times*, 23/6/05)

**June 25:** During a tour of the US prison for suspected terrorists in Guantanamo, House Republicans and Democrats, including one who has advocated closing the facility, said the United States has made progress in improving conditions and protecting detainees' rights. The US lawmakers witnessed interrogations, toured cellblocks and ate the same lunch given to detainees on the first congressional visit to the prison for suspected terrorists since criticism of it intensified in the spring. "The Guantanamo we saw today is not the Guantanamo we heard

about a few years ago," said Representative Ellen Tauscher, Democrat-California. (*AP*, 26/6/05)

**July 3:** The United States must close its Guantanamo Bay prison, says a new report by a top European body. The treatment of about 500 terrorism suspects at the prison has encouraged hatred towards the West and bolstered membership of the al-Qaida network, the report by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded. The OSCE commissioned the report from its human rights representative, Belgian senate president Anne-Marie Lizin. (*AlJazeera*, 3/7/05)

**July 13:** Military investigators found evidence of degrading and abusive treatment by interrogators at the prison for terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee said. Senator Carl Levin said their investigation, which looked into FBI allegations of abuse of prisoners, shows that the purpose of the abuses recorded by investigators was to gather intelligence -- and indicated that the problem was not an isolated one. "It is clear from the report that detainee mistreatment was not simply the product of a few rogue military police in a night shift," said Levin, Democrat-Michigan. (*CNN*, 13/7/05)

**July 30:** Former US President Jimmy Carter said the detention of terror suspects at the Guantánamo Bay Naval base was an embarrassment and had given extremists an excuse to attack the United States. Mr. Carter also criticized the US-led war in Iraq as "unnecessary and unjust." "I think what's going on in Guantanamo Bay and other places is a disgrace to the USA," he told a news conference at the Baptist World Alliance's centenary conference in Birmingham, England. "I wouldn't say it's the cause of terrorism, but it has given impetus and excuses to potential terrorists to lash out at our country and justify their despicable acts." (*The New York Times*, 30/7/05)

**August 5:** In a few years, Pentagon officials said, the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, will have undergone a radical transformation. The sprawling detention site known as Camp Delta, with its watchtowers, double-wide trailers housing rows of steel cells and interrogation rooms will be mostly demolished. Instead, a sharply reduced inmate population of those the military considers the most hard-core will inhabit two nearby hard-walled modern prisons. The newest of those, which is still under construction, is modeled on a modern county jail in Michigan and is designed to counter international criticism of Guantánamo as inhumane and, to some, a symbol of American arrogance. The population will be reduced to 320, the capacity of the permanent prison buildings. (*The New York Times*, 6/8/05)

**September 13:** The number of Guantanamo Bay detainees taking part in a hunger strike has swelled to about a quarter of the prison population over the past month, according to Pentagon officials. Since August 8, the number of detainees refusing food has slowly increased from several dozen to 128, according to the Pentagon. Pentagon officials said the detainees are protesting their continued detention, but past detainee protests have occurred because of perceived treatment of the Quran by prison guards and treatment of the detainees by guards. (*CNN*, 13/9/05)

**October 7:** The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that prisoners were on hunger strike at the US Guantanamo Bay prison camp and that the situation there was serious. The humanitarian agency, which last visited the US naval base in Cuba in late

September, was in contact with US authorities about the situation, ICRC chief spokeswoman Antonella Notari said. "There is a hunger strike, the situation is serious, and we are following it with concern," Notari told the press. (*Reuters*, 11/10/05)

**October 7:** The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that prisoners were on hunger strike at the US Guantanamo Bay prison camp and that the situation there was serious. The humanitarian agency, which last visited the US naval base in Cuba in late September, was in contact with US authorities about the situation, ICRC chief spokeswoman Antonella Notari said. "There is a hunger strike, the situation is serious, and we are following it with concern," Notari told the press. (*Reuters*, 11/10/05)

**December 7:** A group of 25 American Catholic peace activists, defying a US travel ban to Cuba, set out from the Communist island on a 50-mile (80.5-km) trek to the US Guantanamo Navel Base aiming to protest conditions for terrorism suspects. The priests, nuns and academics belonging to the organization "Witness Against Torture" apparently arrived in Cuba as tourists from a third country, breaking US restrictions on travel to the Caribbean island. The group plans to leave from eastern Santiago de Cuba and arrive at the base on December 10, International Human Rights Day, and demand to see prisoners on a hunger strike. The Cuban military rarely if ever allows any civilians near the enclave it claims as its own and which has been held by the United States for over a century. Cuba has mined its side of the enclave. Cuban authorities had no comment on the planned protest. But at least one official indicated the group had not asked for permission to enter the country and march on the base. (*The New York Times*, 6/12/05)

**December 11:** American Catholic peace activists arrived at the perimeter of the US Naval Base in Guantanamo, Cuba, to begin a three-day vigil and fast protesting conditions for terrorism suspects held there. "We want permission to see the prisoners and justice for them," said spokesman Mike McGuire by telephone from the United States, from where he was tracking the activists' progress. The group of 25 Roman Catholic activists, including a nun and a priest, defied US travel restrictions to Cuba. The protesters, from the "Witness Against Torture" organization, carried banners reading "torture no" and "close the US naval base" as they marched some 50 miles (80 km) over four days to reach the small town of Glorieta, some four miles from the Guantanamo prison. "The Cubans were at first apprehensive about us, but after days of talking and marching they have decided to accept us and will escort us to the base entrance if we get permission to see the prisoners," McGuire said. (*Reuters*, 11/12/05)

**December 12:** American activists camping out at a Cuban military checkpoint outside the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay started their first day of a water-only fast to protest the treatment of suspected terrorists detained at the base. Members of the largely Christian group Witness Against Torture are demanding access to the prisoner camp to meet with inmates. The activists arrived at the checkpoint, which is about five miles from the US base, after a five-day march from the eastern Cuban city of Santiago. "We can see the windmills of the US base, we can see some lights off in the distance," Frida Berrigan, 31, said on her cell phone. "We're not right next door, but we are closer to these prisoners than their family members have been since they were arrested." During their 66-mile march from Santiago, the activists slept in Cubans' backyards and at farms. Response from local citizens has been positive so far, Berrigan said. (*The New York Times*, 13/12/05)

**December 14:** US activists camping at a Cuban military checkpoint outside the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay were rebuffed in their bid to gain access to terror suspects held at the facility. A Connecticut woman and other members of the Christian-oriented Witness Against Torture began a hunger strike at the checkpoint after a five-day march from the eastern Cuban city of Santiago. They said they have not received a reply to their formal request to gain access to the base. One of the activists, Gary Ashbeck, called the base on a cell phone, only to have communication cut off after a brief exchange with an operator. "We demand that prisoners at Guantanamo be treated with dignity," the group said in a statement read to reporters. (*AP*, 14/12/05)

**December 16:** American anti-torture activists who protest the detention of terror suspects at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay ended a vigil they initiated five miles away the US base and went back home. Cuba's Communist government did not allow the 25 members of the Catholic Worker movement to march to the gates of the US military enclave and demand access to the prisoners. Instead of jumping at the chance to embarrass its foe, Cuba preferred to avoid an incident in the no-man's land of barbed wire and mines surrounding the 45-square-mile (117-sq-km) base. "It's a very sensitive zone where two enemy armies have faced each other for four decades," a Cuban official said. On the ground, the Cuban and American military cooperate through daily telephone contacts in securing the perimeter of the base. "The Cuban military is just loath to have any kind of incidents on that trench line that could result in a heated event," said Brian Latell, a former CIA analyst for Latin America. "They do not want to challenge the United States military." "Where Fidel's instincts would be to confront and antagonize the United States, Raúl's instinct [Raúl Castro, minister of Armed Forces] is to reduce tensions," Latell said in a telephone interview. "We don't hear Raúl and the generals talking about a concentration camp in Guantanamo." (*Reuters, AFP*, 16,18/12/05)

**December 29:** The number of Guantanamo Bay prisoners taking part in a hunger strike that began nearly five months ago has surged to 84 since Christmas Day, the US military said. Forty-six detainees at the prison for foreign terrorism suspects at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, joined the protest on the Christian holiday, said Army Lt. Col. Jeremy Martin, a military spokesman. The prisoner population, which the Pentagon says numbers about 500, is believed to be uniformly Muslim. Only nine have been charged with any crime. (*The New York Times*, 30/12/05)

## GENERAL

**May 30:** Cuba has announced plans to stage an international meeting against terrorism in June. The official news agency Prensa Latina said the meeting would be attended by hundreds of intellectuals, artists, union and social leaders, congressmen and political leaders. The two-day event will be held under the theme "Against terrorism, for truth and justice". Cuban authorities have been critical of the position adopted by the United States with regards to the request by Havana and Venezuela for Luis Posada Carriles to be extradited on charges related to the 1976 bombing of the Cubana airline, which claimed the lives of 73 people. (*CMC*, 30/5/05)

**June 1:** Testimonies of state sponsored terrorism imposed on Latin America by successive US administrations were the subject of discussion on Cuban TV and radio program "The Round Table." Guest panelists from the region recounted how the US government supported

Operation Condor, a conspiracy undertaken by Latin American military dictatorships to eliminate all opposition to their rule during the 1970's and 80's. (*Radio Habana Cuba*, 1/6/05)

**June 2:** Fidel Castro presided over the International Meeting against Terrorism, for Truth and Justice, at the International Conference Center in the Cuban capital with the participation of more than 300 Cuban and foreign delegates. Left-wing politicians and intellectuals attending the conference accused the US government of harboring a Cuban exile blamed for the bombing of an airliner in 1976. They said the Bush administration had a double standard in its post-9/11 war on terror because it refused to extradite former CIA operative Luis Posada Carriles to Venezuela to stand trial for the downing of a Cuban plane that killed 73 people. The meeting at Havana's convention center, was called to press for Posada's extradition by the United States, where he was arrested last month for illegal entry while seeking asylum. "Not extraditing him to Venezuela would be an act of great hypocrisy by the US government and President George W. Bush, and evidence that he does not care about other people's pain," said Michael Avery, associate professor at the Suffolk Law School in Boston and a conference participant. Piero Gleijeses, professor of American Foreign Policy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, said the US bears responsibility for the killing of 200,000 people in Guatemala and the work of death squads in El Salvador, but history is being rewritten today to show the United States as a champion of democracy in the region. Conference delegates included some of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, mothers of leftists who disappeared in Argentina's "dirty war" in the 1970's, Andean peasant leaders and members of Communist Parties of Portugal and Brazil. (*Radio Habana Cuba, Reuters*, 2/6/05)

**September 9:** The Cuban government is willing to facilitate peace talks between Colombian authorities and guerrillas if the nation requests it, Cuban Ambassador in Colombia, Luis Hernández Ojeda said in Bogotá. "Of that, there should be no doubt," the diplomat told RCN radio, adding that Cuba would also consider serving as "guarantor" if asked. "That is how we have behaved vis a vis peace processes in other countries," Hernández Ojeda said. Cuba provided its territory for peace talks between the Colombian government and National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrillas in 2002 and 2003. (*EFE*, 10/9/05)

**September 10:** Cuba's foreign minister honored the victims of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States, but blasted Washington's "hypocrisy" in setting standards on who is a terrorist. In a statement made public, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque expressed opposition to "all kinds of terrorism" as he remembered "the terrible death of thousands of innocent people in the attack on the Twin Towers, for which we offer a tribute in their memory." September 11 "is a day in which Cuba ratifies its opposition to all forms of terrorism," Pérez Roque said. He remembered Felix García, a Cuban diplomat with Havana's UN mission murdered in New York on September 11, 1981, allegedly by a hit squad of anti-communist Cuban exiles. Pérez Roque then blasted "Washington's hypocrisy" for refusing to extradite Luis Posada Carriles. (*AFP*, 10/9/05)

## **IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY**

**January 30:** The Cuban wife of Niall Connolly, one of the Colombia Three fugitives, has said that he is not in Cuba and she has not heard from him since he went on the run last month. After the three IRA suspects were sentenced in their absence to 17 years for aiding terrorists from the left-wing FARC group, it was speculated that they might have fled to Cuba, where



Connolly had his base as Sinn Fein's official representative in Latin America. Connolly's wife Odalys, a doctor, is living at the couple's home in the beach-front city of Marianao. Asked about Connolly she said: "He is not here, he's not in Cuba. I can't give you any news about my husband, because I don't know anything. I don't know where he is." (*Times Online*, 30/1/05)

**July 9:** Interpol suspects three Irish men sentenced to 15 years in prison for training guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and who disappeared a year ago, might be hiding out in Cuba. " We have intelligence reports to that effect. Consequently the Colombian Secret Service (DAS), through Interpol, has requested its Cuban counterpart" to take pertinent action, Victor Cruz, Interpol's Director in Bogotá, told local Caracol Television. (*AFP*, 9/7/05)

**August 6:** Colombia is demanding that Ireland hand over three Irish Republican Army-linked fugitives convicted of supporting terrorism in this South American country. The trio unexpectedly turned up in Ireland after eight months on the run. Niall Connolly, Martin McCauley and James Monaghan disappeared in December after a Colombian appeals court reversed an earlier acquittal and sentenced the men to 17 years in prison for training guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. It had been thought they were hiding in Cuba or Venezuela. (*AP*, 6/8/05)

## **PEACE TALKS BETWEEN THE COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE ELN**

**December 6:** Havana will be the site of a "formal exploratory meeting" between Colombia's second-biggest leftist insurgency and representatives of the government on the possibility of starting a peace process, Colombian authorities said. "The Colombian government and the ELN (National Liberation Army) thank the Cuban government and people for their hospitality in providing their territory to make possible this effort for peace," President Alvaro Uribe's office said in a brief statement. The communique was signed by Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo and by Gerardo Bermúdez, an ELN chief known as Francisco Galán who was released from prison in September to explore possibilities of beginning negotiations. A few hours before issuing the official communiqué, the Venezuelan government offered to "facilitate" the peace talk negotiations. Venezuelan Ambassador to Bogotá, Carlos Rodolfo Santiago, reiterated Hugo Chavez' offer to initiate a process that could lead to a reconciliation agreement between the Colombian government and the ELN. (*EFE*, 6/12/05)

**December 13:** Members of Colombia's second-largest rebel group have arrived in the Cuban capital to hold preliminary peace talks with the Colombian government. A spokesman for the left-wing ELN said the meeting in Havana represented a big step in the search for peace. The aim of the talks is to pave the way for a fully-fledged process to end the long-running conflict in Colombia. A similar attempt in Cuba two years ago collapsed after a failure to agree on a framework for negotiations. Rebel representatives from the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Colombian authorities will hold several preparatory meetings throughout the week, ahead of the opening of formal exploratory talks on December 16. Diplomats from Spain, Norway and Sweden are expected to attend. (*BBC*, 13/12/05)

**December 14:** The military commander of Colombia's second largest rebel group said he was optimistic that efforts to reach peace with the Colombian government will be more fruitful than

failed attempts in the past. Antonio Garcia of the National Liberation Army acknowledged there were many obstacles, but that he was hopeful solutions would be found. "The road is filled with multiple paths," Garcia told reporters at a hotel on the outskirts of the Cuban capital. He said those involved in conflicts "must know how to choose the right paths at the right time, without mistakes." "We always look for the right way, but we don't always find it. This time, I hope we do," he added. Cuban officials said they were just providing a meeting place for the talks and would not take part. "We want to help once again so that hopefully peace can be reached in Colombia," National Assembly Speaker Ricardo Alarcón said. (*AP, Reuters*, 14/12/05)

**December 15:** Colombia's best-known writer, 1982 Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, hosted at his home in Cuba the military chief of a leftist guerrilla army beginning "exploratory" peace talks with the Colombian government, local media reported. The Bogota daily *El Tiempo* said on its Web page that the novelist, a longtime friend of Fidel Castro who has a home in Cuba and is on the island for a film festival, talked at his residence in Havana's Laguito neighborhood with Antonio Garcia, the top military commander of the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN). In a dispatch from the Cuban capital, the paper's correspondent said the interview was seen as an effort by the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to contribute to eventual success of the talks. (*EFE, AP*, 15/12/05)

**December 21:** Colombia and the country's second largest Marxist rebel group moved a step closer to negotiating the end to a brutal 41-year insurgency by agreeing to work on an agenda for peace talks in January. Leaders of the 5,000-strong National Liberation Army, or ELN, and negotiators from President Alvaro Uribe's government ended five days of what they termed "frank and cordial" exploratory talks in an optimistic mood. They will meet again in Havana at the end of January to start thrashing out a peace agenda, they said in a joint statement issued in Havana, which is hosting the talks. (*CNN*, 21/12/05)