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Statement by the President of the Councils of State and Ministers Army General Raúl Castro Ruz



Declaration by Army General Raúl Castro on the occasion of the first anniversary of the announcements made on December 17, 2014, regarding the decision to reestablish diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States. ([Read the complete article](#))

US Airstrike Takes Out Battalion of Iraqi Troops Who Were Battling ISIS

ISIS terrorists have often lamented, "if only we had an air force to provide air cover when we are fighting in the field." Yesterday they got their wish (again). ([Read the complete article](#))



Cuba

Statement by the President of the Councils of State and Ministers Army General Raúl Castro Ruz



December 18, 2015

Declaration by Army General Raúl Castro on the occasion of the first anniversary of the announcements made on December 17, 2014, regarding the decision to reestablish diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States

One year has gone by since the simultaneous announcements made on December 17, 2014, by the presidents of Cuba and the United States to re-establish diplomatic relations between both countries and work to improve our relations.

One year ago, on a day like yesterday, as part of the agreements reached to find a solution to issues of interest for both countries, we were able to announce, to the great joy of all of our people, the return to our homeland of Gerardo, Ramón and Antonio, with which we made true the promise made by Fidel who had asserted that

our Five Heroes would return.

On that same date, in accordance with our reiterated disposition to hold a respectful dialogue with the Government of the United States, on the basis of sovereign equality, to discuss a wide variety of issues in a reciprocal way, without any detriment to our people's national independence and self-determination, we agreed to take mutual steps to improve the bilateral atmosphere and move on towards the normalization of relations between the two countries.

It could be said that, since then, we have achieved some results, particularly in the political, diplomatic and cooperation spheres:

- Diplomatic relations were re-established and the embassies in both countries were re-opened. These actions were preceded by the rectification of the unjust designation of Cuba as a State sponsor of terrorism.
- High level meetings and visits have taken place.
- The already existing cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as aviation safety and security as well as the combat against drug-trafficking, illegal migration, alien smuggling and migration fraud has been expanded. The regular and respectful meetings between the military commands of Cuba and the United States in the perimeter of the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo have continued.
- New possibilities for bilateral cooperation have opened up in areas of mutual benefit, such as environmental protection, law enforcement, maritime and port security and health.
- New dialogues have been initiated on bilateral and multilateral topics of interest, such as climate change, mutual compensations, traffic in persons and human rights, this latter being the one on which we have profound diffe-

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rences and about which we are having an exchange on the basis of respect and reciprocity.

- We have signed agreements on environmental protection and the re-establishment of direct postal services.

All of this has been achieved through a professional and respectful dialogue based on equality and reciprocity.

Quite on the contrary, this year we have not made any progress in the solution of those issues which are essential for Cuba to be able to have normal relations with the United States.

Although President Obama has repeatedly stated his opposition to the economic, commercial and financial blockade and has urged Congress to lift it, this policy remains in force. The persecution of Cuba's legitimate financial transactions as well as the extraterritorial impact of the blockade, which causes damages and hardships to our people and is the main obstacle to the development of the Cuban economy, have been tightened.

The steps taken so far by President Obama, although positive, have proved to be limited in scope, which has prevented their implementation. By using his executive prerogatives, the President could expand the scope of the steps that have already been taken and take new steps that would substantially modify the implementation of the blockade.

Despite Cuba's repeated claim for the return of the territory illegally occupied by the Guantánamo Naval Base, the Government of the United States has stated that it has no intention to change the status of that enclave.

The U.S. Government is still implementing programs that are harmful to Cuba's sovereignty, such as the projects aimed at bringing about changes in our political, economic and social order and the illegal radio and television broadcasts, for which they continue to allocate millions of dollars in funds.

A preferential migration policy continues to be applied to Cuban citizens, which is evidenced by the enforcement of the wet foot/dry foot policy, the Medical Professional Parole Program and the Cuban Adjustment Act, which encourage an illegal, unsafe, disorderly and irregular migration, foment human smuggling and other related crimes and create problems to other countries.

The Government of Cuba will continue to reiterate that, in order to normalize relations, it is imperative for the U.S. Government to derogate all these policies that date from the past, which affect the Cuban people and nation and are not in tune with the present bilateral context and the will expressed by both countries to re-establish diplomatic relations and develop respectful and cooperative relations between both peoples and governments.

No one should expect that, in order to normalize relations with the United States, Cuba will renounce the principles and ideals for which several generations of Cubans have struggled throughout more than half a century. The right of every State to choose the economic, political and social system it wishes, without any interference whatsoever, should be respected.

The Government of Cuba is fully willing to continue advancing in the construction of a kind of relation with the United States that is different from the one that has existed throughout its prior history, that is based on mutual respect for sovereignty and independence, that is beneficial to both countries and peoples and that is nurtured by the historical, cultural and family links that have existed between Cubans and Americans.

Cuba, in fully exercising its sovereignty and with the majority support of its

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people, will continue to be engaged in the process of transformations to update its economic and social model, in the interest of moving forward in the development of the country, improving the wellbeing of the people and consolidating the achievements attained by the Socialist Revolution.

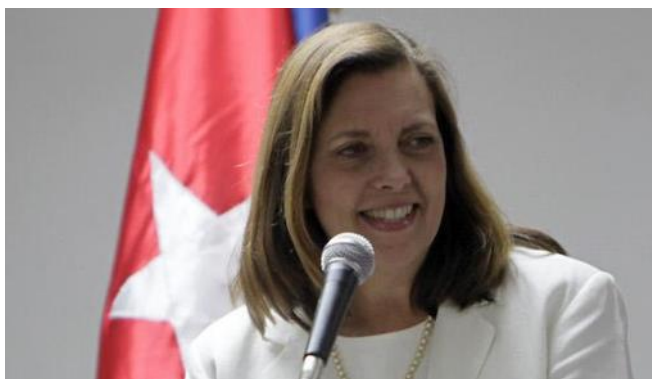
Thank you.

<http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2015-12-21/declaracion-del-presidente-de-los-consejos-de-estado-y-de-ministros-general-de-ejercito-raul-castro-ruz-18-12-2015-14-12-55>

Source: Granma

Cuba

Josefina Vidal Assures That Cuba and the U.S. Have Made Progress



December 17, 2015

By Sergio Alejandro Gómez

"It is safe to say that Cuba and the United States have made progress in their relations, compared to the previous stage", Josefina Vidal Ferreiro, Ministry of Foreign Relations director general for the United States, stated this Wednesday,

December 16, in Havana.

Vidal announced that the delegations from the two countries meeting in Washington since December 14 to negotiate issues regarding civil aviation, have made significant progress and are close to reaching a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of regular flights.

Should this new agreement come to be it would add to those already reached regarding environmental protection, marine protected areas, and direct mail.

Shortly before the first anniversary of the announcements made on December 17, 2014, by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro regarding the decision to restore relations, Vidal said that there has been important progress in the political and diplomatic fields.

She referred to the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, the reopening of embassies and the removal of the island from the unilateral list of countries sponsoring terrorism. She also highlighted the personal meetings between the leaders of Cuba and the United States as well as that of Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Vidal noted that already existing cooperation in traditional areas has been expanded, such as search and rescue and the fight against drug trafficking and migration; while new areas have opened up such as port maritime security, application and enforcement of the law and health.

The Cuban diplomat preferred not to reveal anything regarding the upcoming

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Josefina Vidal Assures That Cuba and the U.S. Have Made Progress

topics to be discussed, but said there was a "wide range" of options and many plans for the following year.

"The key to the success of this process is respect and treatment as equals," Vidal stressed.

A LOT MORE TO DO

The Cuban diplomat noted that in the economic-commercial area, the results are barely visible. Many of the measures implemented so far in this field are positive but are limited in scope. They also include elements that make their implementation impossible.

She recalled that the U.S president has broad powers to change the situation and could "expand the scope of these measures or take others."

She specifically noted that Obama could allow Cuba to use the dollar in international transactions, access private credit and permit trade in both directions, and not unilaterally as has been the case to date.

She added that no progress has been made this year on key issues for normalized relations, such as an end to the blockade, the return of the territory illegally occupied in Guantánamo, the end of subversive programs and illegal broadcasting, and the continued preferential migratory policy toward Cubans that encourages illegal migration.

Regarding the context within the U.S. Congress during the past year, she noted the visible existence of bipartisan support for change, as expressed by the delegations that have visited Cuba in increasing numbers.

Vidal highlighted that this Wednesday, December 16, a working group composed of Democrats and Republicans to advance the rapprochement with Cuba was created, with a dozen members.

A MODEL FOR CIVILIZED COEXISTENCE

In response to a question from the press, Vidal also referred to recent statements by Barack Obama to Yahoo News regarding a possible trip to the island before the end of his term in office.

"The day the president decides to come to Cuba, he will be welcome," she said.

However, she added that Cuba has always been clear that issues inherent to the domestic law of the country are not up for negotiation in exchange for the normalization of relations with Washington.

We do not demand that things we do not like about the United States be changed in order for us to speak with or visit the country.

Countries may have differing opinions about what happens in the other, but that can not be used as leverage to achieve certain changes, she stressed.

Vidal concluded that "even with the differences that exist between our countries, better links will only bring benefits to both countries and their peoples. We really believe that a model of civilized coexistence is the best contribution that we can leave the present and future generations of Cuba, the U.S. and the entire region."

<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2015-12-17/josefina-vidal-assures-that-cuba-and-the-us-have-made-progress>

Source: Granma

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Middle East

US Airstrike Takes Out Battalion of Iraqi Troops Who Were Battling ISIS

December 19, 2015

ISIS terrorists have often lamented, "if only we had an air force to provide air cover when we are fighting in the field." Yesterday they got their wish (again).

The dubious US-led 'Anti-ISIL Coalition' continues to spiral out of control. As Iraqi soldiers closed in on

ISIS terrorists on the ground, a US airstrike struck their column – killing approximately 20 Iraqi soldiers and injuring at least 30 more (see full report below). Addition casualty reports could rise over the coming days.

According to Hakim al-Zamili, head of the Iraqi Parliament's Security and Defense Committee, this latest incident is said to have occurred near Al-Naimiya in the Fallujah province, after the Iraqi troops freed "a strategically important area" from ISIS.

What was the US reaction to this dangerous move? Washington's answer: "We're looking into it."

According to Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov:

"If they were not involved in that airstrike, than why are the Pentagon's representatives, as leaders of the anti-ISIS coalition, hushing up the presence of their allies' aircraft in the Deir ez-Zor region on December 6? Isn't it because the [anti-ISIS] coalition air force gets all the information on Islamic State targets in Syria from the Pentagon?" he asked.

This is not the first time the US Air Force has targeted legal military forces fighting against ISIS and al Qaeda on the ground. Two weeks ago, the US did the same thing in Syria. RT Internationalreports:

Earlier, the Russian Defense Ministry said four Western coalition warplanes had been spotted over the Deir ez-Zor area in Syria on December 6, when a Syrian Army camp came under attack. An airstrike on a field camp of the 168th Brigade of the 7th Division of the Syrian Army left four servicemen dead and 12 injured. It also destroyed three APCs and four vehicles bearing 12.7mm heavy machine guns.

Since the US-led Anti-ISIS Coalition began 15 months ago, Washington claims to have been waging war against ISIS, but clearly that has not been the case – as the US-led effort has actually coincided with a massive increase in ISIS-held territory in both Iraq and Syria. One can only conclude here that the real US agenda was never to defeat ISIS and al Qaeda/al Nusra on the ground, but rather to facilitate their growth. The facts on the ground lead to this conclusion. It was only after Russia legally entered the Syrian Conflict on the side of the Syrian government and its army – that ISIS and al Qaeda positions began to rapidly recede in Syria. The facts on the ground lead to that conclusion as well.

It's already confirmed – beyond any doubt – that US and NATO allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are arming and funding al Qaeda (al Nusra) in Syria



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US Airstrike Takes Out Battalion of Iraqi Troops Who Were Battling ISIS

– this with the full knowledge and endorsement of Washington DC.

In addition, despite Washington's denial of the facts, US lethal weapons and support are making it into the hands of ISIS and al Qaeda in Syria, and US ally Israel is also aiding terrorist fighters in Syria too.

Sadly, statements by US officials continue to languish in an imaginary zone of suspended disbelief and outright deception regarding Syria, and terrorist militants on the ground who are benefiting from the so-called US-led 'Coalition'...

A least 20 Iraqi soldiers have been killed and 30 injured in an airstrike carried out by the US military, Hakim al-Zamili, head of the Iraqi Parliament's Security and Defense Committee, told Sputnik news agency.

"The 55th brigade [of the Iraqi Army] was hit by the US aviation. More than 20 soldiers were killed and over 30 servicemen were wounded as a result of the airstrike," Zamili said.

The incident occurred near the town of Al-Naimiya in the Fallujah province after the Iraqi troops had freed "a strategically important area" from the Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) militants, he added.

According to the official, who visited the site of the attack and personally talked to commanders and soldiers of the 55th brigade, the death toll may well rise, as many Iraqi soldiers were heavily injured.

The Americans carry out airstrikes with 100% precision... How could have they mistaken by kilometers?" he wondered.

Zamili said "it's very dangerous" that the Iraqi forces are being hit by airstrikes and that the country "won't allow it" to happen again.

The MP called upon the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, to carry out an immediate investigation into the airstrike.

According to the official, Iraq is going to go to court over the incident as "this crime mustn't go unpunished."

However, the Iraqi Army's Command Centre in Baghdad, the capital, said the air the strike had caused fewer casualties and happened due to miscommunication and bad weather.

"We [Iraqi Forces Command] had demanded aerial support from the international coalition air force. The airstrike was launched without an update on the advance of the Iraqi forces and the coalition forces were unable to distinguish between the fighters on the ground due to bad weather," it said.

According to the Iraqi military, one Iraqi army commander was killed and nine servicemen were injured in the airstrike.

A Pentagon representative told RIA Novosti they are looking into the report.

Earlier, the Russian Defense Ministry said four Western coalition warplanes had been spotted over the Deir ez-Zor area in Syria on December 6, when a Syrian Army camp came under attack.

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The information about two pairs of warplanes, members of the US-led international anti-ISIS coalition, which were operating in the Deir ez-Zor area on the day of the attack, was announced by Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov.

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The US has been bombing IS positions in Iraq since August 2014. However, according to Iraq's former PM Nouri al-Maliki, this campaign has been "unbelievably" ineffective in fighting the terror group.

"It's unbelievable and unacceptable that more than 60 nations comprising this coalition that have the most modern aircraft and weapons at their disposal have been conducting their campaign in Iraq for 14 months and IS still remains in the country," he told RT's Arabic-language sister-channel Rusiya Al-Yaum in November.

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-air-force-us-airstrike-takes-out-battalion-of-iraqi-troops-who-were-battling-isis/5496826>

Source: Global Research

Middle East

Israel Wary after Jaramana Strike, Waiting for Hezbollah Response

December 19, 2015

Local Editor

It's clear that the Israel can't bear to officially claim responsibility for the strike which killed the Dean of the freed detainees from the Israeli prisons, Samir Kuntar late on Saturday. However, the Israeli media didn't hesitate to praise the strike, in an obvious admission that Tel Aviv had carried out the raid.



Hasan Hijazi, the editor of the Israeli affairs at al-Manar, said that Tel Aviv declined to officially comment on the strike in order to avoid a harsh retaliation by the resistance, noting that the Israeli eye now is on Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah's response.

"The Israeli commentators said that Tel Aviv will be passing through some days of concern, waiting for the stance of (Sayyed) Nasrallah over the nature of Hezbollah's retaliation."

"The Israeli authorities are avoiding the direct claim of responsibility, in a bid to give the other side (the resistance) a chance to mull its retaliation choices and in order for this retaliation to be deliberate and well-calculated," Hijazi said during a live coverage on al-Manar.

"According to Israeli commentators, Israel now is denying any involvement because the direct claim of responsibility would lead to strong and justified retaliation (by the resistance)."

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Israel Wary after Jaramana Strike, Waiting for Hezbollah Response

"According to the Zionists, Kuntar represents the Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian struggle against Israel. He is well-recognized for his participation in Nahariya operation in 1979. He is well known because he was freed despite the 33-day Israeli war on Lebanon which took place after the resistance captured two Israeli soldiers and killed other eight. He is well recognized for his alleged role in opening a new front in Golan against the Zionist entity. Samir Kuntar represents the path of resistance."

Israeli Media 'Praising' Kuntar Assassination

"Israeli officials Samir Kuntar raised the reported killing of Lebanese militant leader Samir Kuntar," Israeli daily, Jerusalem Post said on Sunday.

It quoted Israeli Construction and Housing Minister Yoav Gallant as talking to Israel Radio that "It is good that people like Samir Qantar will not be part of our world."

Asked if Tel Aviv carried out the strike, Gallant said: "I am not confirming or denying anything to do with this matter." Other Israeli officials, including military spokesmen, declined comment.

Meanwhile on Sunday, Israeli justice minister Ayelet Shaked welcomed the assassination of Kuntar but did not claim credit for the air strike.

<http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=245826&frid=23&cid=23&fromval=1&seccatid=18>

Source: Al Manar

Middle East

Hungry Warrior: The Untold Story of Hana Shalabi



December 15, 2015

By Ramzy Baroud

Throughout her hunger strike, that of exactly 47 days, Hana Shalabi never slept consistently for a number of hours. In the first few days of her strike, she would doze off only to wake up with the sudden fear that someone was trying to hurt her.

But after the first week of the hunger strike, having nothing but a few sips of water a day, her body simply

ceased to function in any normal way. So, instead of sleeping, she would fall into a state of delirium, overtaken by frenzied hallucination where memories and persisting future fears coalesced into a sonata of night terror.

I interviewed Hana recently, through a series of discussions that extended for hours, trying to understand what compelled her to risk her life to obtain conditional freedom in Gaza, and to present her story as a showcase for the phenomena of hunger strikes as a form of political struggle inside Israeli prisons. Currently over 7,000 Palestinian prisoners are held in Israeli prisons, over 500 of them without trial.

Hana was born on the 7th of February, 1982, the same year that Palestinian

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factions were driven out from Lebanon and the refugees of the Sabra and Shatila Camps were slaughtered en-masse. When her father, Yahya, and her mother, Badia, were finished with having children, the final tally was ten. Of the six females, Hana was somewhere in the middle, after Najah, Salam and Huda, and before Wafa and Zahira. Samir was the youngest of the brothers, and only two years older than Hana.

Hana's family originally came from Haifa. They were exiled from that beautiful port city, along with hundreds of thousands who today constitute the bulk of Palestinian refugees. After a relatively brief but arduous journey, they settled in the village of Burqin, not from away from Safad in the north, and adjacent to the town and refugee camp of Jenin.

Burqin, tucked gently near the Marj Ibn Amer Valley, offered the Shalabis a temporary respite from an otherwise harsh existence. But that relief was rudely interrupted when Hana was still a child. She was eight years old, chewing on a hearty sandwich of Za'tar and eggs when a boy named Mohammed, from the neighbourhood, dashed towards her as fast as he could.

He fell on his knees and whispered to her for the last time, "Please help me." She stood motionless. When he finally collapsed, a large hole in the back of his head revealed itself. He had been shot by the Israeli army moments earlier. That took place during the first uprising, and the boy was one of many who were killed in Burqin. Hana joined the rebellion by collecting rocks for the boys who confronted soldiers as they raided the village almost daily.

Hana, now 33, speaks of these memories with the same purity of a child who was swept with the euphoria of a revolution, which she barely comprehended in any articulate sense. She was angry at the death of Mohammed, and that was that.

She grew up angry, a rage that was reflected in many people all around her. Her brother, Omar, had joined the Black Panthers, whose members were all sons of peasants and cheap Arab labourers in Israel. They met in caves deep in the mountains and used to hide there for days before descending upon the villages, masked and armed, to declare strikes and to mobilize the people to rebel. But when Omar was injured during a nightly skirmish with the soldiers, the secret became known to everyone, including her livid father, Yahya, who realized that his constant attempts to keep his kids out of trouble had failed horribly.

The story of Omar was repeated, time and again, among her other siblings, who were almost all involved in the Resistance in various capacities. Huda, the older sister, was jailed for allegedly attempting to stab a soldier, soon after her fiancé was ambushed and killed by the Israeli army. His name was Mohammed al-Sadi. He was killed while on his way to officially propose. Huda learned of his murder on the radio.

Samir was the youngest of the boys. Soldiers, who raided the Shalabi family home often, terrified him. He hid under the bed as they destroyed everything in the house, tore his school books and urinated in their olive oil containers. At 13, he left school and, a few years later, he brandished a gun and joined the Resistance, living mostly in the mountains. When the Israeli army killed him, he was one of 17 others marked for death, all fighters with various factions. He was killed, along with a comrade of his, near the valley where Samir spent many of his days playing as a boy and helping his father care for their land.

Samir was an avid horseman, and Hana grew up to love horses, as well. However, she resisted her father's incessant attempt at persuading her to become a veterinarian. She wanted to study law in Tunisia, a dream that is yet

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to be fulfilled.

Samir was her best friends. They shared secrets, and just before he marched off to his last battle, he had asked her to make sure that his coffin was covered with flowers, especially red Hanoun, that grew wild all around Burgin. She kept her promise.

Later, the Israelis arrested her. They kept her in an underground dungeon and subjected her to months of relentless physical and psychological torture. When this, too, failed, they sentenced her to six months of administrative detention that was renewed several times. After spending years in captivity, she was freed on 18th of October, 2011 from HaSharon Prison. Her release, and that of hundreds of others, was the outcome of an agreement between Hamas and Israel, after which an Israeli soldier, who was captured by the Resistance years ago, was also set free.

The celebration lasted for months; when it subsided, she was arrested again and thrown in jail. Her latest experience was even more humiliating, details of which are divulged reservedly by Hana. On the day of her second arrest, on the 16th of February 2012, her jailors were particularly brutal, but she was also exceptionally determined. Israeli newspaper, 'Yediot Ahronot' claimed that Hana was plotting to kidnap a soldier, but Hana had no patience to engage her interrogators in a discussion. Instead, she went on a hunger strike that lasted for 47 days. Her main demand was her freedom.

In the latter stage of her strike, when death was looming, she opened her eyes in an Israeli hospital where her arms and legs were chained to the bed. She was in Haifa, a discovery that brought a smile on her lips. "This is the land from which my family came," she said softly as her smile grew wider. Her declaration was communicated to the guards and, in turn, to the prison authority, which immediately ordered her removal to outside Haifa. Hana had never visited Haifa and, for a fleeting moment, had settled with the joyful idea of dying there.

Following a deal signed under suspicious conditions, she ended her hunger strike in exchange for her freedom, but only to be deported to the Gaza Strip. The agreement stated that Hana was to be repatriated to the West Bank three years later, but she never did.

Hana insists on embracing life, even within the confines of war-torn and besieged Gaza. "If I don't, the Israelis win. I cannot give them that satisfaction," she told me. "Resistance is insisting on living and thriving, despite the pain."

She still dreams of having the opportunity to travel and explore life beyond the familiar horizon of life under siege.

(This article is based on a chapter entitled: Death Note, in my forthcoming book on people's history of Palestine.)

– Dr. Ramzy Baroud has been writing about the Middle East for over 20 years. He is an internationally-syndicated columnist, a media consultant, an author of several books and the founder of PalestineChronicle.com. His books include 'Searching Jenin', 'The Second Palestinian Intifada' and his latest 'My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story'. His website is: www.ramzybaroud.net.

<http://www.ramzybaroud.net/hungry-warrior-the-untold-story-of-hana-shalabi/>

Source: Politics for the People

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Argentina

Argentina is Heating Up: Dollar Rises, Prices Rise, Salaries Drop

December 17, 2015

By: Tomás Lukin

The market sets the price of the dollar, even though the government will push it above 14 pesos. To accelerate the elimination of the restraints in operations in US dollars, the government will go into debt with banks, dollarize the swap with China and produce a strong currency transference to cereal exporters.



Minister of Finance, Prat-Gay showed confidence: "rest assured, none of the doom prophecies made [by the opposition] during the electoral campaign will become true". "I come to announce the end of the restraints on exchange. Anyone who wants to buy dollars will be able to do so without restrictions". With this formula, Prat-Gay announced the dismantling of the administration scheme of exchange market in Argentina, where, since 2011, the government of Cristina Kirchner had restricted the acquisition of dollars through several dispositions, and a black market had originated.

The measures announced by the Macri administration will be accompanied by a devaluation of the Argentine peso. Prat-Gay claimed not to know how much the exchange rate between dollars and pesos will grow, and he avoided specifying the value that the government desires but he offered an estimate: "fourteen and something". "Today, the conditions are apt for eliminating the restrictions, and we have done it as fast as we could", the head of the Finance Palace indicated when he talked about the promises of currency income the party had made to the agro-export sector and the proposals of financing from international banks that they are negotiating to guarantee the availability of currency.

Once banks implement these changes, the only limitation for people and companies with pesos available to buy foreign currency will be the monthly maximum —restored to its former value— of two million dollars. The rest of the tools created over the last four years will be eliminated: the requisite of pre-approval by the Federal Administration of Public Revenues (AFIP) will disappear, as will the taxes added to the Income Tax for purchases outside the country and for savings.

With the goal of renewing the unrestricted flow of dollars for importers, Minister Prat-Gay indicated that companies that accumulate pending payments for shipped imports will have two options: they will be able to either buy currency according to a pre-established schedule, or use mechanisms with government bonds to meet those payments in advance.

Additionally, the new economic team announced the flexibilization of the controls for the income of speculative capitals that were in force since 2005.

"I wish we could know how much is the dollar going to cost. There is no magic number, let's not get confused. This is returning to normalcy", said Prat-Gay yesterday when asked about the price in pesos that the dollar will reach. He was accompanied by Vice Minister Pedro Lacoste and Secretary of Finance Luis Caputo. The new economic team is convinced that there won't be an im-

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Argentina is Heating Up: Dollar Rises, Prices Rise, Salaries Drop

portant impact of the jump in the exchange rate on inflation, and they think this is a kickstart for the reactivation of economic growth.

From their perspective, devaluation is already present in the prices paid by the businessmen, and any raise in prices for the population will be responsibility of the previous administration. The dynamic in the supermarkets and the historic experience contradict this premise and allow to predict a contraction in the real value of salaries. "The logic behind this announcement is that we are eliminating obstacles for you workers, micro-entrepreneurs, creatives, teachers, to do what you have to do without a State that tells you what you can and can't do", was the liberal maxim that Prat-Gay, former head of the Central Bank between 2002 and 2004, used to explain the measures.

"The exchange rate will fluctuate, but the Central Bank will have the tools to buy if it thinks the price dropped too much or sell if it went too far up", promised Prat-Gay.

Green promises

"We discussed that we needed an additional income of 10,000 million dollars to confidently eliminate the restrictions on exchange. Agro-industrial exporters committed to bring to the country 400 million a day for three weeks, which totals 8,400 million dollars. This effort in international reserves will be complemented, according to Prat-Gay, with a contingent financing operation by a group of foreign banks, for approximately 8,000 million dollars. This mechanism will be implemented through the Central Banks to bypass the extortive actions of the vulture funds.

The third part of the plan is the negotiation with the Bank of the Popular Republic of China to convert a part of the yuans of the swap agreement made last year to dollars. The Central Bank informed that 3,100 dollars will be available for different operations. "It is with that security that we dare to eliminate the restrictions, had the case been different, of course we would have not been able to do so", affirmed the Minister.

Importers

"The goal is that imports and exports can be freed", expressed the Finance Minister. The system of anticipated sworn declarations of imports will be eliminated, and the exchange market for payments of goods imports and services will be liberalized. This is a new step in the process of the economic opening of the country planned by the new government. They will probably have no difficulties in accessing the currencies of those who must do "payments for previous imports endorsed by credit cards of local banks or official credit organisms". From the Central Bank it was announced that, in order to regularize pending payments for shipped imports, which amounts to approximately 5,000 million dollars, a schedule will be made to pay until the middle of next year. As an alternative, mechanisms via government securities will be implemented to meet those payments in advance. "The greater goal is to get the wheel to start spinning again. No one has full certainty. This is a work in progress that we will measure step by step", concluded Prat-Gay.

<http://www.thedawn-news.org/2015/12/18/argentina-is-heating-up-dollar-raises-prices-raise-salaries-drop/>

Source: The Dawn

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Spain

Spanish Elections: Who's Who?



December 19, 2015

Spain is headed to elections on Sunday and two new political players are posing a serious challenge to the dominance of the country's two leading parties, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the conservative Popular Party (PP).

Since the end of the Franco dictatorship, the PSOE and PP have jostled it out between themselves

to lead the country. However, they now face stiff competition from two new parties who emerged as players from the days of the 2008 financial crisis.

Spain's protracted economic crisis spawned the left-wing Podemos (We Can), fronted by the charismatic Pablo Iglesias, who claims to have already made irreversible changes to the country's "political map."

"With #CaravanaPP media who are covering my electoral campaign. Thanks for joining us in these very intense days."

Meanwhile, the Catalan-based Ciudadanos (Citizens), dubbed the "Podemos of the right" by the media, recently made the resounding leap from regional to national politics.

Formerly known as the Ciutadans, the party is expected to attract votes from the traditional bases of the more established PSOE and PP with its conservative manifesto and savvy use of social media.

Although the latest opinion polls show the incumbent Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and the PP are frontrunners, the votes are fragmented between all four parties, meaning a coalition government of competing rivals will be the likely outcome of the election.

And with voter turnout expected to reach a high of 80 percent, it is clear that this election will mark the beginning of a new era in Spanish politics.

teleSUR takes a look at the main political parties battling it out this weekend.

Popular Party (PP)

The conservative PP ousted the PSOE from power in 2011 by winning 44.64 percent of the votes and 186 seats in the Congress of Deputies. It was the party's largest ever majority but such an emphatic victory appears to be way off the cards for the 60-year-old Rajoy this time round, with the electorate seemingly discontent with the nation's faltering economic recovery. Unemployment levels across the country still remain above 20 percent, as they were in 2013, and forecasts suggest this figure is likely to decrease only minimally by 2020 under the current government.

Rajoy's case for re-election was further hindered last year by corruption scandals that rocked the party, with a judge ruling that a PP official had kept a secret slush of campaign money for 18 years that "drew on various sources of funding outside the legal economic sphere." However, having been a minister from 1996 to 2003, Rajoy boasts a long political career and the inexperience of his competition is a caveat he plays on. He has said his competition was formed "a quarter of an hour ago" and has shunned invitations to participate

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in recent four-way debates, saying he will only debate with the “main opposition leader.”

Socialist Party (PSOE)

After the crushing defeat in the 2011 elections, the centre-left PSOE turned to 43-year-old Pedro Sanchez. Like Rajoy, Sanchez is playing on the inexperience of Podemos and Ciudadanos and argues that the PSOE are the only credible alternative to the PP. In his election campaign, Sanchez has cited the party's previous achievements while in government such as the passing of landmark legislation including the abortion law, the disability law and the same-sex marriage law. However, the party remains associated with the economic turmoil Spain found itself in the last time they were in power. Spain's once buoyant economy crashed under the leadership of ex-Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero while the party is also struggling to shake off the image that it only serves the country's elite.

Podemos

Having formed in January 2014 Podemos' rise has been nothing short of meteoric and the party threatens to change the shape of Spanish politics on Dec. 20. The party burst onto the scene in 2014 with the goal of translating Spain's indignados protest movement into a more structured citizen-led political formation. Five months after forming, they won five seats in the European Parliament and now hold more than 100 seats in regional parliaments, while candidates associated with the movement have also won mayorships in Madrid. Podemos' platform emphasizes public control, poverty reduction and social reform. They also propose more taxes on the rich, a referendum on King Felipe as head of state as well as a referendum on whether the Catalan region should remain part of Spain. However, Pablo Iglesias—the party's 37-year-old leader—has distanced himself from some of the party's more radical measures and the party has lost significant ground in recent opinion polls.

<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/Spanish-Elections-Whos-Who--20151216-0020.html>

Source: teleSUR

Venezuela

Venezuela Proposes to Consolidate Alliances for Productive Economy at Mercosur's Council

December 21, 2015

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez proposed on Sunday at the council of ministers of the Common Market of the South (Mercosur), held in Asuncion, Paraguay, to strengthen partnerships with regional and emerging blocks to boost productive economies at the service of the nations.



She noted that Venezuela calls for the formation of a complementary economic zone with countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and BRICS consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

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At the Mercosur Council of Ministers, she said that new bases "of productive integration of our economies, our models, our countries, our peoples" should emerge from this meeting.

"Mercosur is one of the world's major economies, even ahead of countries with developed economies," said the minister in her speech, according to the Twitter account of the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry @vencancilleria.

Given the sharp drop in oil prices, Rodriguez reiterated the importance of integration and politics to avoid falling into what she calls "pragmatic despair".

"We need to think about how to engage and articulate Mercosur in this time of global economic difficulty," she said.

Therefore, she reiterated the proposal to establish Mercosur alliances with blocs like ALBA, CARICOM and the powerful emerging bloc, BRICS.

The foreign minister also stressed that South America is a land of peace, which is essential for the consolidation of alliances.

"We have to take care of this land of peace in a completely troubled world," she urged.

She also welcomed Argentina's chancellor Susana Malcorra, who after the electoral victory of Mauricio Macri, joins the group of foreign ministers of Mercosur.

The meeting of foreign ministers takes place prior to what will be this Monday, the 49th Summit of Heads of State of Mercosur, which will address issues of common interest.

The meetings on the eve of this summit started last December 17 with the participation of social organizations, who discussed advances and challenges of public policies related to economic, social, cultural and environmental rights.

Furthermore, this Saturday at the Special Meeting of the Mercosur group, representatives of member countries addressed norms related to trade negotiations, strengthening of economies and common relations.

Mercosur was created in March 1991 when Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay joined to form a block of regional integration to foster a common economic space. In 2012, Venezuela became a full member with the proposal to build a social Mercosur, with a development approach comprising the inclusion of peoples.

<http://www.avn.info.ve/contenido/venezuela-proposes-consolidate-alliances-productive-economy-mercotur-summit>

Source: Venezuelan News Agency

United States

Why African Americans Should Stand with Muslims and Arabs

December 16, 2015

By BAR editor and columnist Ajamu Baraka

"The lack of concern for the human rights of Arabs and Muslims reflects the fact that their lives, like the lives of black people, don't really matter."

It's been a sad and pathetic spectacle: Muslim



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and Arab spokespersons summoned to examination by a new Christian inquisition. This time, however, the grand inquisitors are the members of the corporate media who force the beleaguered spokespersons to defend their communities while simultaneously proclaiming their loyalty to the idea of “America.”

The inquisitors questioned them with authentic incredulousness on their effort to stem the radicalization of members of their communities and lecture them on the need for their communities to be even more obsequious, even as their communities face escalating violence and police state intimidation. The obvious contradiction between the supposed American values of tolerance, freedom of religion, individual rights and non-discrimination and the demand that the spokespersons surrender those rights in order to prove loyalty is lost on the inquisitors and the audience who have come to expect members of minority communities to perform humiliating rituals for the psychological comfort of the majority.

The consequences of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiments have been dramatic, infecting the whole culture and all sectors of the population.

Even in the African American communities anti-Muslim sentiments are increasingly voiced, which is particularly interesting because until recently African Americans made up the largest and oldest Muslim population in the country. There are comments about the “A-rabs” and Muslims exploiting black people and some have even gone so far as to give support to the social discrimination and governmental monitoring of Muslims by state authorities.

“The de-valuation of Arab and Muslim lives has been an operative principle of U.S. policies in the Middle-East since it became the hegemonic power in the region.”

Individuals who hold those views don’t quite understand that calls for more monitoring, control and curtailment of the rights of Muslims on the part of the state is no more than the “niggerization” of these communities. What this means is that, if accepted and normalized, it only increases the certainty that repression in black communities will continue to intensify as we are also increasingly identified as a “radicalized” internal enemy.

When Muslims and Arabs are de-humanized and reduced to a distorted figment of the national imagery, Guantanamo gulags, drone strikes, torture, mass surveillance, social exclusion and national destruction by the military apparatus and national security state are the appropriate and even expected responses demanded by the public to the Muslim “threat.”

That is why the hypocrisy of political leaders in the U.S. is so galling. The de-valuation of Arab and Muslim lives has been an operative principle of U.S. policies in the Middle-East since it became the hegemonic power in the region.

There is not much space between Hillary Clinton’s joke about the murder of Muammar Gaddafi – “We came, we saw, he died” – which of course took place during a murderous NATO assault on Libya that by conservative estimates killed tens of thousands, and the positions of various governors on the issue of Syrian refugees and even with Donald Trump’s latest proposal to temporarily ban Muslim immigration.

Yet we are supposed to believe that these leaders are now outraged about Trump’s comments.

What African Americans must remember is that before the post-9/11 criminalization of Arab and Muslim communities, the playbook for how to police and

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repress a captured community was written in our communities.

“Calls for more monitoring, control and curtailment of the rights of Muslims on the part of the state is no more than the “niggerization” of these communities.”

Before the registration of young Arab and Muslim students after 9/11, local police forces compiled massive biographical databases of young African Americans as a means of monitoring so-called gangs and controlling crime. Stop and Frisk, mass incarceration, police executions, torture, governmental infiltration of our organizations, raids, house to house searches, were perfected and normalized in our communities.

The systematic state terrorism being carried out in Muslim communities in France today under their state of emergency and the criminalization, social ostracism, violence and official discrimination directed at Muslims in the U.S. today will be most certainly directed at black activists and our communities tomorrow when the state and public opinion turns against the latest expressions of black opposition popularly characterized as the black lives matter movement.

That is the terrible reality that we know is coming our way. And those of us who will maintain an unrelenting critique of this sick society and the oppressive apparatus will be labeled as the “radicalizers” of this black opposition.

What was once labeled as racist demagoguery in the short liberal post-war period has now been rehabilitated and given a new respectability in relationship to Muslims and Arabs. Since the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, individual Muslims have been assaulted, mosques firebombed and threats sent to Muslim community and civic organizations with almost no coverage from the corporate press.

This lack of concern for the human rights of Arabs and Muslims reflects the fact that their lives, like the lives of black people, don't really matter. Is there any other way to explain the still overwhelming support for Israel and even the dismissal of Bernie Sanders commitment to continue Obama's drone terror program even though it is clear that thousands of non-white innocents have lost their lives as a result?

We must have no illusions.

“We should reach out to Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. to share with them our experiences surviving racial totalitarianism, so that we both can learn and survive together.”

The “orientalist” construction of the Arab that occupies the consciousness of Westerners as blood-thirsty, violent, irrational with a strange sexist religion is just the flip side of the racist colonialist coin in which global anti-blackness is on the other. Both constructions make the Arab-Muslim and the black “killable.” And when you are both black and Muslim, it is a deadly combination that can end up in a situation that Iman Luqman Abdullah faced in Detroit when he was murdered by FBI agents.

Totalitarianism applied to specific peoples can exist side by side with the current practices of liberal democracy especially when the majority is unaware, silent or both. Like the Palestinians who reached out to the resisters in Ferguson to counsel them on how to deal with the Israeli trained police forces, we can and should reach out to Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. to share with them our experiences surviving racial totalitarianism, so that we both can learn and survive together.

But collective self-interest is not the main motivation for why African Ameri-

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cans should oppose the growing neo-fascist sentiments and legislative policies directed at Arabs and Muslims.

Opposing efforts that expand the repressive power of the state and undermine the fundamental human rights of individuals and groups is consistent with our history and principles. This stance represents the foundational principles of the black radical tradition. Opposition to all forms of individual and collective oppression is the mandatory call to action for this tradition and serves as the basis for attempting to establish relations of solidarity, even if that solidarity is not returned.

So in the face of the growing repression of this community, we must stand with our Arab and Muslim brothers and sisters. We know from our painful history that within the dark corners of the imagination of the racist settler-colonialist, Muslims are today's Native "savages" and rebellious niggers that are both feared and hated as an existential threat.

Ajamu Baraka is a human rights activist, organizer and geo-political analyst. Baraka is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington, D.C. and editor and contributing columnist for the Black Agenda Report. He is a contributor to "Killing Trayvons: An Anthology of American Violence" (Counterpunch Books, 2014). He can be reached at www.AjamuBaraka.com

http://www.blackagendareport.com/black_solidarity_muslims_arabs

Source: Black Agenda Report

United States

40 Years On, the Vietnam War Continues for Victims of Agent Orange

December 17, 2015

By Marjorie Cohn

The war in Vietnam resulted in the deaths of more than 58,000 Americans and more than 3 million Vietnamese. Twenty years ago, the United States and Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations in an effort to put the terrible legacy of the war behind them. But for the survivors—both Vietnamese and American—the war continues. About 5 million Vietnamese and many U.S. and allied soldiers were exposed to the toxic chemical dioxin from the spraying of Agent Orange. Many of them and their progeny continue to suffer its poisonous effects.

Agent Orange was a chemical, herbicidal weapon sprayed over 12 percent of Vietnam by the U.S. military from 1961 to 1971. The dioxin present in Agent Orange is one of the most toxic chemicals known to humanity.

Those exposed to Agent Orange during the war often have children and



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grandchildren with serious illnesses and disabilities. The international scientific community has identified an association between exposure to Agent Orange and some forms of cancers, reproductive abnormalities, immune and endocrine deficiencies and nervous system damage. Second- and third-generation victims continue to be born in Vietnam as well as to U.S. veterans and Vietnamese-Americans in this country.

There are 28 "hot spots" in Vietnam still contaminated by dioxin. These hot spots still affect the people who live there and eat the crops, land animals and fish.

On April 29, U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee introduced HR 2114, the Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2015. This bill would go a long way toward remedying the humanitarian crisis among both the Vietnamese and U.S. victims of Agent Orange.

Representatives of the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/ Dioxin (VAVA) have arrived in the U.S. to mark the official launch of HR 2114 on Thursday. VAVA is an organization of more than 365,000 Agent Orange victims and activists that works to achieve justice for the victims throughout the world.

One member of the VAVA delegation is Tr?n Th? Hoàn. Her mother was exposed to Agent Orange from a barrel of the chemical buried in her land during the war. Born without legs and with a seriously atrophied hand, Hoàn grew up in Peace Village II, the Agent Orange center at T? D? Hospital, Ho Chi Minh City. Hoàn is a college graduate and currently works as a computer science professional at the hospital.

In the U.S., VAVA's sister organization, the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign (VAORRC), is educating the public about the ongoing problems caused by spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam and working to pass legislation to remedy these problems. VAORRC believes that the U.S. and chemical manufacturers such as Dow and Monsanto must take responsibility for the use of these chemicals to redress the harm they have caused and to heal the wounds of war. VAVA advocates for and provides assistance to victims in Vietnam, but Agent Orange victims need even more help. Through the work of activists in the U.S., Vietnam and internationally, the U.S. government has allocated some money for the cleanup of one hot spot, but has done little to alleviate the suffering of Agent Orange victims in Vietnam or to clean up the remaining 27 hot spots.

The use of Agent Orange in Vietnam constituted prohibited chemical warfare, amounting to a war crime. Yet the U.S. is still using chemical weapons, including white phosphorus gas, in its wars abroad. In addition to taking responsibility for and rendering assistance to Agent Orange victims, the U.S. government must also provide compensation to victims of recent and current wars who suffer from exposure to chemicals used by its military.

HR 2114, which has 14 co-sponsors, would:

*Provide health care and social services for affected Vietnamese, including medical and chronic care services, nursing services, vocational employment training, medicines and medical equipment, custodial and home care, day-care programs, training programs for caregivers, physical and vocational rehabilitation and counseling and reconstructive surgery.

*Provide medical assistance and disability benefits to affected children of U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War. The veterans fought for and won benefits for their Agent-Orange-related health conditions, but only the children of female veterans were covered for most conditions. This bill will equalize bene-

40 Years On, the Vietnam War Continues for Victims of Agent Orange

fits to the children of both male and female American veterans.

*Provide health assessment, counseling and treatment for affected Vietnamese-Americans and their offspring through the establishment of health and treatment centers in Vietnamese-American communities.

*Clean up the lands and restore ecosystems contaminated by Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam.

*Conduct research into the health effects of Agent Orange/dioxin in the U.S. and Vietnam.

HR 2114 should be enacted into law. The refusal of the U.S. government to compensate the Vietnamese and U.S. victims of its chemical warfare would set a negative precedent for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who need similar help.

This piece first appeared at Truthdig.

Marjorie Cohn is a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law and former president of the National Lawyers Guild. She is co-author of "Cameras in the Courtroom: Television and the Pursuit of Justice." Her most recent book is "Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues."

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/12/17/40-years-on-the-vietnam-war-continues-for-victims-of-agent-orange/>

Source: Counterpunch

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