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More Americans seeking to expand ties with Cuba

by Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, the United States, Feb. 26 (Xinhua) -- U.S.-Cuba relations are evolving rapidly as more U.S. organizations seek to boost various exchanges between the two countries.

In mid-January, U.S. President Barack Obama greenlighted some changes to his country's practices related with Cuba, including authorizing travels to Cuba by U.S. citizens for academic, educational, cultural and religious purposes.

Following the adjustment, Tampa International Airport (TIA) of this Florida city, which has a long history as a transportation hub to Cuba, has been trying to secure approval for operating charter flights to and from the island country.

Only three U.S. airports, respectively in Los Angeles, Miami and New York, are currently allowed to do so. Although Miami International Airport is the closest one to Cuba, flights to and from Cuba accounts for only two percent of its total business.

The first thing for TIA administrators to do is "acquire the landing rights in Cuba," said TIA spokeswoman Brenda Geoghagan, noting that U.S. and Cuban authorities are in negotiations to allow more U.S. flights into Cuba.

Meanwhile, the Cuba Academic Alliance (CAA) in Amherst, Massachusetts, among other academic groups, are calling for more academic and cultural exchange programs between the United States and Cuba, with which the United States has had no diplomatic relations for half a century.

"We have about 25 students who go to Cuba and study in four-month-long semesters. They study language and cultural programs," said Jerry Guidera, director of the Center for Cross Culture Study of the CAA.

However, although Cuba has an extraordinary culture that could be exported to the world for the Cubans' benefit, its cultural products are "underdeveloped," Guidera said.

An example of the richness of the Cuban culture is The Buena Vista Social Club, a group of Cuban musicians who achieved a huge international success in the late 1990s, Guidera added.

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Boxing's "Fight of the Century" remembered the month

By Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, the United States, March 10 (Xinhua) -- Boxing and sports fans are remembering this month a pivotal moment in athletic history -- the 1971 so-called "Fight of the Century" between boxers Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier for the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world.

Both pugilists were undefeated when they stepped into the boxing ring in New York City's Madison Square Garden (MSG). Frazier had 26 wins, zero loss, and 23 knockouts. Ali's record was 31 wins, zero loss, and 25 knockouts. The March 8, 1971 fight was scheduled for 15 rounds.

When the announcement was made in early December of 1970 that Ali and Frazier were to box for the heavyweight title, tickets for the fight immediately became a much valued commodity for the rich and the powerful.

Among those famous people of show business and other fields who attended the bout were Woody Allen and Diane Keaton, Michael Caine, Miles Davis, Sammy Davis Jr., the late U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy, painter LeRoy Neiman, who painted boxing action depictions of Ali and Frazier for the weekly sports magazine Sports Illustrated, Diana Ross, Barbara Streisand, U.S. astronaut Alan Shepard, and former boxing champions Jack Dempsey and Sugar Ray Robinson.

Frank Sinatra, who in his youth boxed before becoming an internationally recognized entertainer, only got into MSG that night by being employed as a special photographer for the now defunct Life Magazine. Movie actor Burt Lancaster was the boxing match's closed circuit television special commentator because he was a good friend of the bout's producer Jerry Perenchio.

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Boxing's "Fight of the Century" remembered the month

Currently Frazier, now 67 and battling diabetes and high blood pressure, lives in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area and still occasionally trains younger boxers. Ali, 69, has Parkinson's Disease and is based in Arizona.

Frazier attended a NBA basketball game on Monday at MSG, but was not given much recognition in relation to the 40th anniversary of the Fight of the Century. Ali did not commemorate the "Fight of the Century" but Angelo Dundee, who was Ali's boxing trainer for decades, did participate in a live online discussion on www.ali.com, which is the web site controlled by those agents who have legal licensing rights to Ali's name.

At the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky, "We're always answering questions about the Fight of the Century. It's such an important part of Muhammad's legacy," said spokeswoman Jeanie Kahnke.

Ali was born Cassius Clay in Louisville in January of 1942. In 1964, in unison with his decision to become a Muslim, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

Boxing themed magazines and Internet web sites plan to commemorate the "Fight of the Century" all month long with stories. One of boxing's most famous magazines is The Ring, which has been publishing for 90 years.

"Was it the best fight of the century? Probably not," opined Nigel Collins, editor of The ring. "Still, the name fits because it captured the imagination of people around the world and pitted two of the very best heavyweights of the era. Moreover, I can't tell you how many people have told me that it was that fight that first perked their interest in boxing."

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Boxing's "Fight of the Century" remembered the month

Richard Mancuso, writer for the sports web site BoxingInsider.com, concurred.

"Yes, I really believe it was the Fight of the Century. Forty years later, we're still talking about it and you can't say that about many fights. A lot of that has to do with Muhammad Ali, both his persona and his incredible boxing talents. I really don't think we'll ever see such a dramatic heavyweight championship fight like that again."

On April 28, 1967, Ali was stripped of both his boxing license and also the heavyweight championship title due to his refusal to be inducted into the U.S. Army. At the time, the U.S. had extensive military operations in Vietnam. Ali's attorneys filed an appeal and in June of 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court, which had previously agreed to hear the case, ruled in Ali's favor. That legal ruling allowed Ali to try to win back the heavyweight championship title from Joe Frazier, who had won it in 1970.

Yet Ali had stayed out of boxing for 42 months, due to the 1967 ruling. While he stayed in good physical shape, his body was not toned to fight in boxing matches. Ali spent much of those 42 months travelling around the U.S., telling audiences in school gymnasiums or auditoriums of his innocence and his desire to return to competitive boxing.

"The Fight of the Century" is important in athletic history for another reason -- it was the first major heavyweight championship match to be broadcast on closed-circuit television. Now, in this Age of the computer, the "Fight of the Century" can be watched on YouTube.

Collins stated: "I recall watching the fight at the Philadelphia Arena on closed circuit TV. Even though Frazier lived and fought out of Philadelphia, Ali was the favorite of the capacity crowd. When the decision went in Frazier's favor, the fans got very upset, even though it was a fair verdict. It was a bit scary for a few minutes but, other than a few thrown chairs, no damage was done."

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Boxing's "Fight of the Century" remembered the month

Ali and Frazier were each paid 2.5 million U.S. dollars to box in the "Fight of the Century". Ali's financial advisors invested his money in different ventures but Frazier, since his retirement from boxing, has had a number of businesses that he has started failed.

Mancuso gave two main reasons why the sporting world will never again see such an epic and titanic bout for the heavyweight championship of the world -- an emphasis on safety in boxing, and the fact that numerous boxing organizations now exist.

"These days, many championship bouts are only 12 rounds and boxing administrators did that to stress the fact that they are giving strict attention to the safety of the boxers. When a fight is 15 rounds, that gives enough time for both boxers to develop a pace to the match and to develop their skills to the maximum levels. Also, back then in 1971 you only had one legitimate, sanctioned boxing division. Now you have five or six. Half of the time, the average boxing fan doesn't even know who the heavyweight champion of all of those divisions are," said Mancuso.

Frazier won the "Fight of the Century" by a unanimous decision.

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U.S. Santa Claus schools help generate joy, business in Christmas season

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by Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, United States, Dec. 21 (Xinhua) -- For Holly Valent and her husband Tom Valent, Christmas is always the busiest yet happiest time of the year: they have been portraying Santa Claus in every Christmas season in the past three decades.

Now as owners of the oldest Santa Claus school in Midland, Michigan, the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School, the Valentis are also training every year more than 100 Santas, who will go to various public places and malls to help bring more joy and business in the biggest holiday season of the year.

"We're the oldest Santa Claus school in the country and have been around since 1937," said Holly Valent, who along with her husband Tom Valent owns and operates the Charles W. Howard Santa Claus School in Midland, one of the three major Santa Claus schools.

"Our graduating class of this year was 120 and we could have easily had many more," stated Holly. "My husband and I love the whole idea, the whole concept of Christmas, and we can't imagine doing anything else."

Sometimes called the "Harvard of Santa Schools," the Howard school was formally founded by the American actor and teacher Charles W. Howard, who for 17 years (from 1948 to 1965) portrayed Santa Claus in the annual Macy's department store sponsored parade in Manhattan in New York.

For 400 U.S. dollars, students attend a three-day training class and activities to learn to properly play Santa Claus. Holly said that she has heard many reasons from students as to why they want to play Santa Claus.

"Some are older gentlemen with no family and want to stay involved in the Christmas season. Some are grandfathers with big families who can't get enough of the Christmas spirit and want to share it with as many children as possible. Some like helping the ill and handicapped because our trained Santas work with ill, handicapped, and even dying children. The list (of reasons) is endless," she told Xinhua in an interview.

The Valentis, who are the parents of five children themselves, have portrayed Santa and Mrs. Claus for over 30 years at all sorts of activities, events, and places.

Holly said she just loves portraying Santa Claus because that brings limitless joy to the children, "who just can't take their eyes off of Santa and sometimes they can't even talk. "That look on their faces is priceless," she said.

It has been a long tradition for many U.S. businesses, from malls to zoos, to hire someone to portray Santa Claus, the most popular Christmas icon, during the Christmas season. They aim at bringing not only more visitors and business, but also more joy for their patrons.

"We've had Santa visit children, and also had photographers take pictures of these children with Santa, for years," said Mary Ellen Collins, marketing director for the Westfield Citrus Park Mall in Tampa. "It's always one of the most popular things that we do."

The Denver Zoo in Colorado usually hires Santas from the Professional Santa Claus School in Denver. "The easiest thing about children seeing Santa is having a professional Santa on hand that we know we can count on to be here when we need him here," said Leslie Chenaille, special events assistant for the Denver Zoo.

Graduate Santas of the school have also appeared on military bases, at ice skating parties, bowling events, charity fund-raisers, and especially hospital visits.

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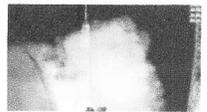


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"Children are mesmerized by the magic and power of the belief (of Santa). That is why we love watching children at Christmas time. We remember when our hearts were that pure and open to the magic," said Susen Mesco, who runs the school.

Kids have all sorts of dreams for the Christmas gift, which they imagine will be brought to them by Santa Claus on the Christmas night.

At the Westfield Citrus Park Mall in Tampa, Benjamin Anderson, 4, was very particular when he told Santa that "I want a Buzz Lightyear (action figure) with a black suit and a blue belt." Prodded by his mother, Colton Reed, 3, told Santa that he wanted a bicycle for Christmas.

But Mesco said that "all of our Santas are trained never to promise anything specific (i.e., a gift) to any child: rich, poor, or in between. Santa treats all children with the same warmth and love."

As for the International University of Santa Claus based in southern California, which is also known as "Schools4Santas," fun and entertainment are key. Graduates of the school, which celebrated its 2,000 registrations in 2011, automatically become alumni class members of an organization known as the Red Suit Society.

"We also hope that they (graduates) will use the knowledge they have gained to bring even more joy and happiness to the many thousands of children and families that they visit and serve," the school said in a website statement.

How does one become a successful Santa? Holly said one "has to have attention to detail and also know the history of Santa Claus. You have to know your stuff."

"We have children ask 'What kind of Christmas trees grow at (Santa's legendary home of) the North Pole?' The correct answer is none, because the North Pole is mostly a frozen tundra," she said.

Editor: Yamei Wang

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News Analysis: Florida primary crucial for Romney's bid for GOP nomination

English.news.cn 2012-01-29 05:39:35



by Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, the United States, Jan. 28 (Xinhua) -- A win of the Republican Party's next primary, to be held on Tuesday in the sunshine state of Florida, by leading contender and former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney could help him secure the nomination to become the GOP (Grand Old Party) presidential candidate, some U.S. political analysts have said.

Romney is poised to secure such a win according to a latest poll released on Friday by the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, which showed Romney in a nine-point lead over another top contender Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Romney was said to have 38 percent support from likely GOP voters, compared with 29 percent for Gingrich, who just won the Jan. 21 South Carolina primary.

The two remaining GOP contenders, U.S. Rep. Ron Paul of Texas and former U.S. senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, were well behind in polling of Republicans in Florida, and neither of them is expected to win the Jan. 31 Florida primary.

Florida has 4.1 million registered Republicans and the contenders are fighting to win the state's 50 Republican delegates.

"The Florida primary is hugely important. It has the largest Republican electorate of the early contests. It will likely have more votes than Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina combined," said Andrew Rugg of the political think tank American Enterprise Institute, in an interview with Xinhua.

Because Santorum won the state of Iowa and Romney won the state of New Hampshire, "Florida will either re-establish Romney as the front-runner, or make it clear that he is perceived to be too moderate for the GOP electorate, and make Gingrich the new favorite" to become the GOP presidential candidate at the Republican National Convention scheduled for August in Tampa, said Aubrew Jewett, political science professor at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

For any of the GOP contenders to become the party's presidential candidate, he must win the votes of 1,144 delegates from across the country.

"If you look back to every presidential election year since 1980, the GOP candidate that has won the South Carolina primary has gone on to become the Republicans presidential candidate," said Republican Party political strategist Chris Ingram, who runs the political consulting company 411 Communications. "So, the Florida primary is very important. I really believe that if Romney loses here, then his presidential campaign is in real trouble."

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"If Gingrich goes on to win the Florida primary, he will have the momentum as we eventually go into March, as that is when the next heavy round of GOP state primaries will occur," Ingram told Xinhua.

Romney is trying, with noticeable effort, to make sure that he defeats Gingrich in the Florida primary. Romney has had U.S. Senator John McCain of Arizona, the 2008 GOP presidential candidate and a national politician who is very popular with Florida's large percentage of older people, make campaign "stump speeches" for him.

"A Romney victory in Florida would probably end Gingrich's momentum and allow Romney's superior organization and financing to win the nomination in the February primaries. A Gingrich win would open the race wide open by legitimizing Gingrich as the anti-Romney candidate, and elevating his profile among Republican voters as they go to the polls in February," Gregory Koger, associate political science professor at the University of Miami, told Xinhua.

When Democratic and Republican presidential candidates campaign in the 50 U.S. states, they have to be careful not to do or say anything that, after they secure their respective political parties' presidential candidacy, could hurt their chances at winning states in the November presidential election.

Rugg of the American Enterprise Institute believed that both Gingrich and Romney have already done so in Florida. In the Thursday evening debate in Jacksonville, Romney was much more aggressive in verbal confrontations with Gingrich as compared to the Monday evening debate in Tampa, often interrupting Gingrich when the former House speaker tried to belittle him.

Despite the promises by both Romney and Gingrich at the beginning of their respective campaigns that they would not run negative advertisements against their opponents, the number of negative print, radio, and television advertisements that both campaigns have produced and shown to Floridians is the greatest since the 2010 Florida gubernatorial Republican campaign between then Attorney General Bill McCollum and Rick Scott. The latter went on to win the 2010 state gubernatorial election.

"The negative primary campaign currently being waged in Florida has begun to turn independent voters off of both Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney," Rugg said. "Romney has seen his unfavorable ratings rise among independents not only nationally, but in Florida. If independents sour towards Romney, it could cost him the state in the general election. The same is true for Newt Gingrich."

There is more bad news for the Republicans: the latest Quinnipiac University poll showed that President Barack Obama's popularity among the Florida electorate has bounced upward compared to four months ago. Obama won the state in the 2008 election.

A random telephone poll of over 1,500 members of the Florida electorate had Obama and Romney in a dead-heat tie, each garnering 45 percent of the votes. Four months ago, Romney held a seven-point lead in the same type of Quinnipiac University telephone poll.

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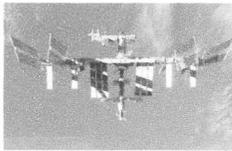
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U.S. civil rights Freedom Riders to be honored with documentary film

English news April 21, 2011

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by Mark Weisenmiller

TAMPA, the United States, April 20 (Xinhua) -- One of the pivotal aspects of the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is again being resurrected by multiple media outlets in 2011.

The Freedom Riders were 436 passengers, all of whom had pro civil-rights theories, who rode numerous Greyhound and Trailways buses which left from non-segregationist states and travelled into many of the pro-segregationist states of the American South.

Their primary purpose for doing this was to test the validity of the 1960 U.S. Supreme Court decision known as "Boynton v. Virginia," which ruled that all interstate transportation facilities were to be used by all citizens -- regardless of race.

The first Freedom Rides occurred in May of 1961 and the last took place in November of that same year. Contrary to popular belief, the more than 60 Freedom Rides were not specially designed bus routes. Rather, they were regularly scheduled bus routes by two bus companies.

"That was sort of the point: that African-Americans could ride on buses that travelled in any state and talk with anybody that they wanted to. Frequently, they would talk with passengers about civil rights," explained Professor Ray Arsenault, who is the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History at the University of South Florida (USF)-St. Petersburg campus.

Arsenault spent eight years researching and writing his 2006 book "Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice." The book served as the catalyst for a new Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television documentary, to have it's first nationwide broadcast in May, entitled "Freedom Riders."

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U.S. civil rights Freedom Riders to be honored with documentary film

May of 2011 is the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides. In addition to the initial broadcast of "Freedom Riders," there will be a series of seminars and workshops about the topic held in mid-May in Chicago, Illinois.

The culmination of this "Season of the Freedom Riders" will happen next week when talk show host and entrepreneur Oprah Winfrey has 160 Freedom Riders in her Chicago TV studio for a special one-hour-long discussion about the matter on her syndicated TV talk show.

Recording of this program will happen on April 28 and the show will be broadcast on May 4. Afterwards, the show will be broadcast, at various times, in the over 100 countries which broadcasts Winfrey's TV program.

The 160 Freedom Riders, many of whom are now elderly, will be the largest gathering of the group in one location in years, according to Arsenault.

Once a year, the USF history professor also takes groups of college students on bus rides that take the same routes as those of the Freedom Rides.

Using the bus tour as a form of instruction, the Arsenault-led arsenal of mobile college students stop at various cities in the South and the professor shows the students where many showdowns between pro-segregationist mobs and pro-civil rights Freedom Riders took place.

The 2011 Arsenault-led Freedom Ride will leave Washington D.C. on May 8 and is scheduled to arrive in New Orleans, Louisiana on May 17. This Freedom Ride will be taking the same route as the very first of 1961, which began on May 4.

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U.S. civil rights Freedom Riders to be honored with documentary film

Two organizations were the primary subsidizers of the 1961 Freedom Rides: the Congress of Racial Equality (better known by its acronym of CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, which was pronounced "snick").

The first Freedom Ride was scheduled to travel through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and finish in New Orleans. Thirteen riders were on the first of these bus rides -- but they never completed their trip.

When the first Freedom Ride bus crossed into Alabama, it was attacked by a mob in the rural town of Anniston. The pro-segregationist mob attacked the bus and slashed the Greyhound buses tires but somehow the bus kept moving.

When the bus finally did stop due to the slashed tires, it was immediately firebombed by the mob, whose members had been following the bus in a parade of cars. The bomb exploded, the bus began to burn, and the mob encircled the bus. They managed to keep the buses doors shut, with the intention of having the 13 Freedom Riders inside burned to death.

To this day, it is unclear whether the explosion of one of the bus fuel tanks, or an undercover Alabama law enforcement officer showing the mob a loaded revolver and threatening to use it on the mob members, was the main reason why the crowd dispersed. When the 13 Freedom Riders finally did rush off of the bus, they were viciously beaten by mob members.

One of the most famous unanswered questions about the 1961 Freedom Rides is why the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. -- the famous Baptist clergyman and civil rights leader who in 1964 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for leading the civil rights crusade -- did not participate in the Freedom Rides.

Arsenault and another internationally famous college professor who has written books about the civil rights campaign disagree as to the main answer to that question.

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U.S. civil rights Freedom Riders to be honored with documentary film

"The record is clear that he (King Jr.) was worried about then being on probation in Georgia and he was concerned that he would be arrested on a Freedom Ride and imprisoned," said Professor David J. Garrow, who is a Fellow of Homerton College at the University of Cambridge, England.

"King could be indecisive to the point of inaction and that is what happened here (i.e., he not participating in the Freedom Rides)," added Garrow, who has published three books about the civil rights era and was awarded the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Biography for his book "Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference."

Professor Arsenault is of the supposition that "King didn't take part in the Freedom Rides because his staff didn't want him to, and they also realized that he could be much more effective on the speech-making trail, raising money for the Freedom Riders -- which he did."

The concept of Freedom Rides is not restricted to U.S. history. In 1964 and 1965, a number of Freedom Rides were made by Australian Aborigines, who rode buses into numerous New South Wales towns which were noted for their residents' anti-indigenous Australian beliefs. Organizers of the Australian Freedom Rides said they used the 1961 U.S. Freedom Rides as a model for their particular version of pro-civil rights, non-violent protest.

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