

Cuban Forces Abroad: Update 2007

By Mark Piper

The field of Cuban forces postal history has been the subject of dedicated research and study by a number of prominent collectors such as Jesús del Valle Rodríguez, Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga, and Héctor Juárez Figueredo. This group of philatelists over time coalesced into the informally dubbed Cuban Forces Working Group. Each collector has brought new material and information to the group while I have worked with a number of collectors in Cuba, South Africa, Europe and the US in the compilation and dissemination of this research. I have also contributed to this study with exhibits at TEXPEX 2003 and WESTPEX 2005 and articles in *The American Philatelist*, *The Cuban Philatelist*, and *The South African Philatelist*.

The mission statement of this working group is education with the collaboration of all interested parties. At WESTPEX 2005 I presented a five-frame exhibit covering the history of Cuban forces mail in Angola, a Cold War site of a substantial Cuban presence in the years 1975-1991. As time passes, new items come into the philatelic arena adding new dimensions to this study. Since 1998 the Cuban government greatly expanded participations abroad with the *Programa Integral de Salud*, this time with medical personnel sent to underdeveloped nations of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This opens a new chapter in the study of the postal history of the Cuban forces abroad. This short review highlights items which have come to light since 2005 that add to this study.

In 1979, Maurice Bishop led a coup and took over the governance of the Caribbean island of Grenada. The new Bishop government quickly sought to ally itself with the Soviet sphere – diplomatic relations with Cuba were established on 14 April 1979, and soon after Cuban personnel were dispatched to Grenada. One notable Cuban project in Grenada was the construction of an international size airfield at Point Salines, coordinated with Cuban government construction contractor UNECA (Unión de Empresas de Construcción del Caribe). Grenada became a concern to the Reagan administration in the US that saw the Bishop regime as an inroad by communism in the Latin American/Caribbean sphere; the airfield project was seen as providing a potential transit point for Cuba and the USSR for their support of leftist insurgencies in the Americas.

The activities of the Bishop regime were carefully monitored in Washington, and when a coup in October 1983 ended with the assassination of Bishop, the Reagan administration used the opportunity to effect regime change in Grenada. Operation Urgent Fury, with an invasion force of 6,000 US paratroopers supported by a task force of six US Navy ships, quickly routed the coup. Cuban personnel initially tried to resist the invasion. The new regime in Grenada quickly allied itself with the US and requested the

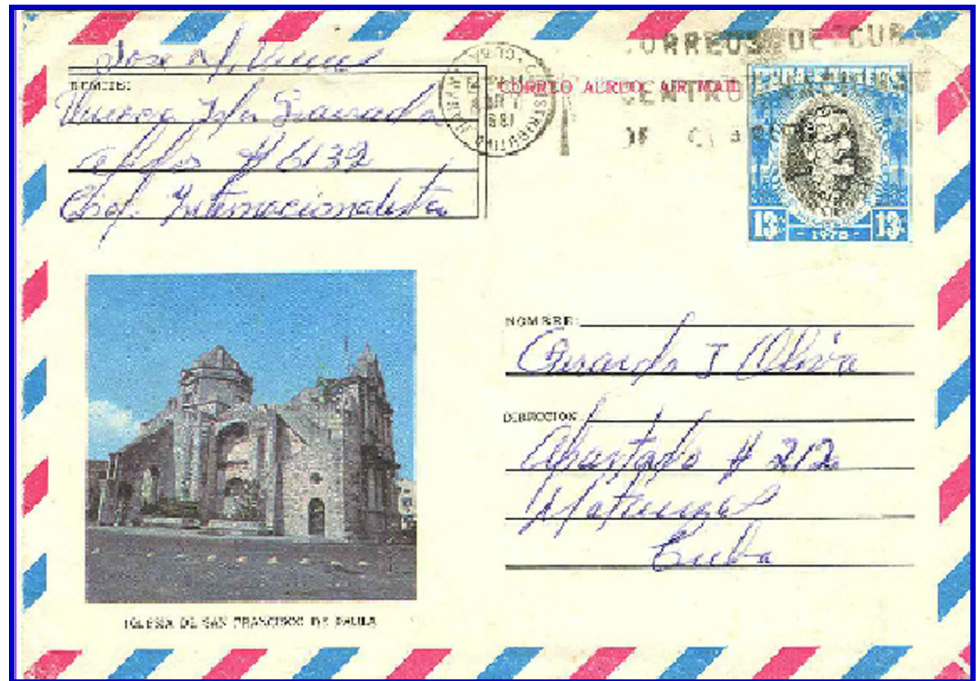


Figure 1 – Cuban PSE posted April 1981 to Matanzas by a Cuban cooperante with the UNECA construction enterprise, stationed on the island of Grenada.

Figura 1 – Sobre entero postal ilustrado de Cuba enviado en abril de 1981 a Matanzas por un cooperante cubano con la empresa de construcción UNECA estacionado en la isla de Grenada.

withdrawal of the Cuban personnel. The US invasion forces quickly rounded up the 800 Cuban personnel on Grenada and arranged for their repatriation to Cuba.

The cover in **Figure 1** was located by Cuban collector Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga. It is a 1978 Cuban airmail PSE, posted by a Cuban member of the Cuban construction concern (UNECA) on the island of Grenada. The sender identifies himself as an internationalist collaborator and uses post office box 6132 at Havana's Plaza de la Revolución post office as his return address. A number of such post office boxes were set up in Havana after 1975 as conduits for mail to and from Cuban MINFAR and non-military personnel abroad. The cover traveled from the UNECA office at the Cuban Embassy in St. George's via diplomatic pouch from Grenada to Havana. At UNECA headquarters in Havana, the cover was posted in the domestic mail stream, cancelled in transit on 7 April 1981 at the Centro Distributivo Nacional (National [Postal] Distribution Center) in Havana, and forwarded for delivery to the recipient in Matanzas. This is the first example known for mail from the Cuban personnel in Grenada.

Scarcity of material has been a deficiency for the Cuban Forces Working Group in the study of the postal history

of the Cuban forces in Angola. This was also the case for the 1989 provisional MINFAR/ TELCOR (Telecommunications Corps of the Cuban Ministry of Armed Forces) free frank envelopes. Until recently, only a group of mint envelopes with the military TELCOR markings in a variety of colors were known. This group of envelopes originally came from Havana collector Leandro Rico Alvarez, though he did not

provide any provenance. Unfortunately the known examples do not provide any time chronology or transit markings to verify usage in Angola. Thus some questions remained as to the authenticity of the 1989 provisional envelopes and their exclusive use for the Cuban forces in Angola. Curiously no examples of these envelopes in domestic usage have been reported to date. (continued)

Fuerzas Cubanas en el Extranjero: Actualización al 2007

El campo de la historia postal de las fuerzas cubanas ha sido motivo de intenso estudio e investigación por una serie de coleccionistas prominentes tales como Jesús del Valle Rodríguez, Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga y Héctor Juárez Figueredo. Este grupo de filatelistas gradualmente se ha transformado en lo que se conoce informalmente como el Grupo de Trabajo de las Fuerzas Cubanas. Cada coleccionista ha contrubuido nuevo material e información al grupo mientras que yo he trabajado con una serie de coleccionistas en Cuba, Sur Africa, Europa y los Estados Unidos en la compilación y diseminación de esta investigación. También he contribuido a este estudio con exhibiciones en TEXPEX 2003 y WESTPEX 2005, y artículos en *The American Philatelist*, *The Cuban Philatelist* y *The South African Philatelist*.

La misión de este grupo de trabajo es la educación con la colaboración de todas las partes interesadas. En WESTPEX 2005 yo presenté una exhibición de cinco marcos acerca de la historia de correo de las fuerzas cubanas en Angola, un escenario de la Guerra Fría con una presencia cubana sustancial en los años 1975-1991. A medida que pasa el tiempo, nuevas piezas aparecen en el mercado filatélico que brindan nueva dimensiones a este estudio. Desde 1998 el gobierno cubano expandió grandemente su participación en el extranjero con el Programa Integral de Salud, en esta ocasión con personal médico enviado a países subdesarrollados en América Latina, Asia y Africa. Esto abre un nuevo capítulo en el estudio de la historia postal de las fuerza cubanas en el extranjero. Esta breve actualización resume las piezas más sobresalientes que han saldo a la luz desde el 2005 que se añaden a este estudio.

En 1979, Maurice Bishop llevó a cabo un golpe de estado y tomó las riendas del gobierno de la isla caribeña de Grenada. El Nuevo gobierno de Bishop rápidamente se alineó con la esfera soviética – estableciendo relaciones diplomáticas con Cuba el 14 de abril de 1979, y poco después personal cubano fue enviado a Grenada. Un proyecto cubano notable en Grenada fue la construcción de un aeropuerto internacional en Punta Salines, coordinado con el contratista de construcción del gobierno cubano UNECA (Unión de Empresas de Construcción del Caribe). La situación en Grenada preocupó a la administración americana de Reagan que vio al régimen de Bishop como un portal de entrada del comunismo en la region de

latinoamérica y el Caribe. Este proyecto fue visto como un punto de escala potencial de Cuba y la URSS para los insurgentes izquierdistas en América.

Las actividades del régimen de Bishop fueron seguidas muy de cerca en Washington, y cuando otro golpe de octubre de 1983 culminó con el asesinato de Bishop, la administración de Reagan utilizó esta oportunidad para efectuar un cambio de régimen en Grenada. La operación "Urgent Fury," con una fuerza de invasión de 6,000 paracaidistas americanos apoyados por seis barcos de guerra, rápidamente puso fin al golpe. El personal cubano inicialmente intentó resistir la invasión. El nuevo régimen en Grenada enseguida se alineó con los EE.UU. y pidió la retirada de los cubanos. Las fuerzas de invasión americanas rápidamente rodearon a los 800 cubanos en Grenada y se encargaron de su repatriación a Cuba.

La cubierta de la **Figura 1** fue encontrada por el coleccionista cubano Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga. Es un sobre entero postal cubano de correo aéreo de 1978 enviado por un cubano miembro de la UNECA en Grenada. El remitente se identifica como un colaborador internacionalista y utiliza el apartado postal 6132 en el correo de la Plaza de la Revolución en La Habana como su dirección. Varios apartados de este tipo fueron establecidos en La Habana a partir de 1975 para el manejo de la correspondencia del personal cubano del MINFAR y demás personal no militar en el extranjero. El sobre viajó de la oficina de la UNECA en la Embajada Cubana en St. George's dentro de una valija diplomática desde Grenada a La Habana. El sobre se puso en el correo doméstico en la oficina central de la UNECA en La Habana el 7 abril de 1981 donde fue matasellado en el Centro Distributivo Nacional de la capital y enviado al destinatario en Matanzas. Este es el primer ejemplar conocido de correspondencia del personal cubano en Grenada.

La escasez de material ha sido el problema principal que ha tenido el Grupo de Trabajo de las Fuerzas Cubanas que estudia la historia postal de las fuerzas cubanas en Angola. Lo mismo pasó con los sobres de franquicia postal provisionales del MINFAR/ TELCOR (Cuerpo de Telecomunicaciones del Ministerio Cubano de las Fuerzas Armadas) de 1989. Hasta hace poco sólo se conocían un grupo de sobres sin usar con las marcas militares del TELCOR en varios colores. Este grupo de sobres provino del coleccionista habanero Leandro Rico

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Recently I received two examples that confirm the usage of the MINFAR/TELCOR provisional envelopes in Angola in 1989. **Figure 2** shows a MINFAR/TELCOR PSE posted to Matanzas by a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6963, using post office box 6079-20, stationed at Menongue, Angola with a transit marking dated 20 February 1989 from the *Centro Distributivo Nacional* in Havana. **Figure 3** shows a MINFAR/TELCOR PSE posted to Santiago by a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6299-8-Z, stationed at Cabinda, Angola with a transit marking on the reverse dated 2 May 1989 from the main Santiago de Cuba post office. The MINFAR/TELCOR PSE shown here were posted from the field and dispatched via the Cuban MINFAR post office at the Cuban Embassy in Luanda and transported to Cuba via diplomatic pouch. The locations of the MINFAR post office boxes were determined from research drawn from MINFAR archives in Havana provided by Havana collector Jesús del Valle Rodríguez.

The MINFAR/TELCOR PSE were produced on bagasse paper (50 percent sugar cane fiber and 50 percent bleached tree fiber) paper measuring 160 x 115 mm with a stamped MINFAR/TELCOR free frank marking in the upper right hand corner measuring 38 x 29 mm. The impression on **Figure 2** was stamped in black, and in cranberry on **Figure 3**. The bagasse envelopes used are a type of unstamped envelopes sold at Cuban post offices. The stamped boxed winged star and bolts symbol is the logo of the MINFAR/TELCOR with the text PORTE PAGADO (postage paid) over the logo. This marking, produced by rubber hand stamps distributed for franking to the political commissars of military units in the field responsible for mail, was introduced originally in late 1981 in Angola, Cuba and Ethiopia (the site of another Cuban MINFAR presence). The marking was withdrawn from use after 1984, most likely as part of a centralization of Cuban postal services abroad in March 1985. The withdrawn MINFAR/TELCOR rubber stamps were applied by hand, producing provisional PSE with mostly blurred impressions. The 1989 provisional PSE were likely produced locally by hand by MINFAR/TELCOR staff in Luanda to provide postal stationery to Cuban forces stationed in Angola. The number of PSE prepared is unknown, but because of their small ratio in comparison to the hundreds of covers known for the Cuban participation in Angola, it is likely the envelopes were produced on a one-time basis in limited quantity and distributed in Angola exclusively.

Cuban forces were in Angola since late 1975, in support of the ruling MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), which remained under attack from rival insurgent guerrilla groups. In the spring of 1988, a force of 50,000 Cuban forces was brought in to end a stalemated conflict between the ruling forces of the MPLA and the South African supported UNITA forces. Menongue was the site of an important military airfield for the Cuban Southern Front in southern Angola in its war against South African led forces. More importantly, Menongue was also the terminus for rail service from the port of Namibe on the

coast and served as a main interior transit hub. Cabinda was even more vital to the Cuban Southern Front as the location of substantial oil extraction which was and still provides a large portion of Angola's income. A main MINFAR objective was the protection of oil extraction in Cabinda from attack by insurgents based in Zaire which surrounds the Cabinda enclave.

The Cuban and MPLA forces eventually stalemated in 1988 at the small town of Cuito Cuanavale in southern Angola with the SADF and UNITA forces never capturing the town. This stalemate was eventually negotiated in 1988 into a withdrawal of both Cuban and South African forces from the region by 1991 and intervention from UN peacekeepers. It is also curious to note that in the year 2006 Cuban personnel are once again in Angola, with about 500 construction, education and medical professionals in Angola.

The two examples given show a wide distribution for the MINFAR/TELCOR PSE within a short time in the spring of 1989 and document the postal history of the Cuban Southern Front in Angola and confirms the 1989 MINFAR/TELCOR envelopes as provisional PSE.

One area of focus for the Cuban Forces Working Group has been electronic research. The Internet has yielded a number of testimonials from Cuban participants which have appeared in the electronic Cuban press. The work of a number of South African researchers documenting the South African perspective during the Angola border wars have also appeared. Among the articles given by the Air Combat Information Group on their web site is an article by Tom Cooper that details South African actions against the Cuban/Angolan Southern Front. One image is pertinent to Cuban postal history – it shows four Cuban PSE, described as recovered from a Cuban air crew shot down in 1987 over Southern Angola.

A close look at the covers in the picture reveals a number of interesting details. The upper left envelope (PSE S139 issued July 1986) was posted from Cuba to a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6963, using post office box 6168-30, located at Xangongo; the lower left envelope (PSE S140, issued July 1986) is an unused PSE, such as Cuban forces were issued for use for letters home; the upper right envelope (PSE S136, issued July 1986) was posted from a Cuban MINFAR unit in Angola, likely as inter-theatre military mail; and the lower right envelope (PSE S144, issued July 1986) was also posted from Cuba to Cuban MINFAR unit 6963. Identifications for the Cuban PSE shown in **Figure 4** are taken from the 2000 Piper-Portuondo PSE catalog; locations are drawn from research by Jesus del Valle Rodríguez.

Xangongo is located 60 km from the Namibian border and was the site of an airbase for the Cuban/Angolan Southern Front. The image shows substantial damage to the covers, lending credence to the description given as recovered from a downed Cuban aircraft stationed at Xangongo. The source of the image is currently unknown but is likely drawn from South African military archives. Cuban personnel in Angola were under direct orders to destroy mail from home, as were South African forces, in both cases to eliminate evidence such as **Figure 4** in the case

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Alvarez, pero él no reveló su origen. Desafortunadamente los ejemplares conocidos no proveen una cronología o marcas de tránsito que verifiquen su uso en Angola. Por lo tanto existen dudas acerca de la autenticidad de los sobres provisionales de 1989 y su uso exclusivo por las fuerzas cubanas en Angola. Es curioso que hasta ahora no se conozcan ningunos ejemplares de estos sobres de uso doméstico.

Recientemente recibí dos ejemplares que confirman el uso de los sobres provisionales del MINFAR/TELCOR en Angola en 1989. La **Figura 2** muestra un sobre del MINFAR/TELCOR enviado a Matanzas por un miembro de la unidad 6963 del MINFAR usando el apartado postal 6079-20, estacionado en Menongue, Angola, con una marca de tránsito del 20 de febrero de 1989 del Centro Distributivo Nacional en La Habana. La **Figura 3** ilustra un sobre del MINFAR/TELCOR enviado a Santiago por un miembro de la unidad 6299-8-Z MINFAR estacionado en Cabinda, Angola, con una marca de tránsito en el reverso con fecha del 2 de mayo de 1989 de la oficina principal de correos de Santiago de Cuba. Los sobres enteros postales del MINFAR/TELCOR que aquí se muestran fueron enviados desde el terreno de campaña y despachados vía la oficina de correos del MINFAR en la Embajada Cubana en Luanda y transportados a Cuba en valija diplomática. Las localizaciones de los apartados postales del MINFAR se determinaron gracias a la investigación realizada por el coleccionista de La Habana Jesús del Valle Rodríguez que pudo revisar los archivos del MINFAR en la capital.

Los sobres enteros postales del MINFAR/TELCOR fueron producidos en papel de bagazo (50 % fibra de caña de azúcar y 50 % fibra de árbol blanqueada) con medidas de 160 x 115 mm con una marca de franquicia postal del MINFAR/TELCOR estampada en la esquina superior derecha con dimensiones de 38 x 29 mm. La impresión en la **Figura 2** fue estampada en negro, y en violeta oscuro el de la **Figura 3**.

Los sobres de bagazo que se utilizaron son de un tipo de sobre sin estampar vendido en las oficinas de correo en Cuba. El rectángulo con la estrella alada y rayos es el logo del MINFAR/TELCOR con el texto PORTE PAGADO sobre el logo. Esta marca, producida por gomígrafos que se distribuyeron para el franqueo a los comisarios políticos de las unidades militares en el campo quienes eran responsables del correo, fue introducida originalmente a fines de 1981 en Angola, Cuba y Etiopía (lugar de otra presencia del MINFAR cubano). La marca fue retirada después de 1984, probablemente producto de la centralización de los servicios postales cubanos en el extranjero en marzo de 1985.

Los gomígrafos retirados del MINFAR/TELCOR se aplicaban a mano, produciendo sobres enteros postales provisionales con impresiones generalmente borrosas. Los sobres enteros postales provisionales de 1989

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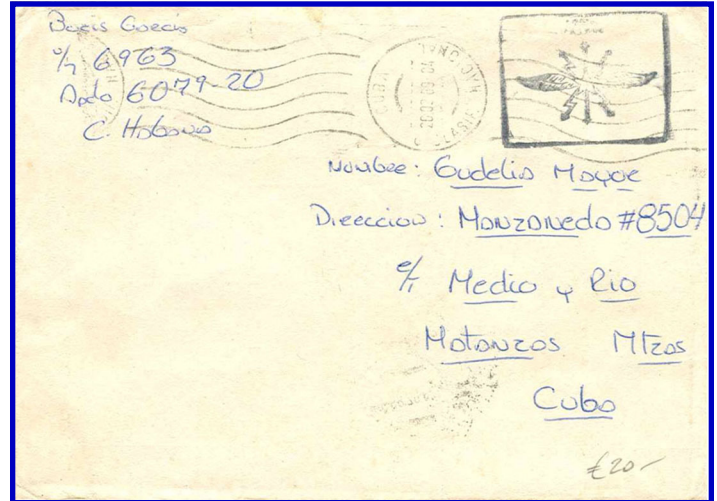


Figura 2 – Sobre entero postal militar provisional enviado en marzo de 1989 a Matanzas por un miembro de la unidad militar cubana 6963 con el Frente del Sur de Angola estacionado en Menongue, Angola.

Figure 2 – Cuban military provisional PSE posted March 1989 to Matanzas by a member of Cuban military unit 6963 with the Angolan Southern Front stationed at Menongue, Angola.

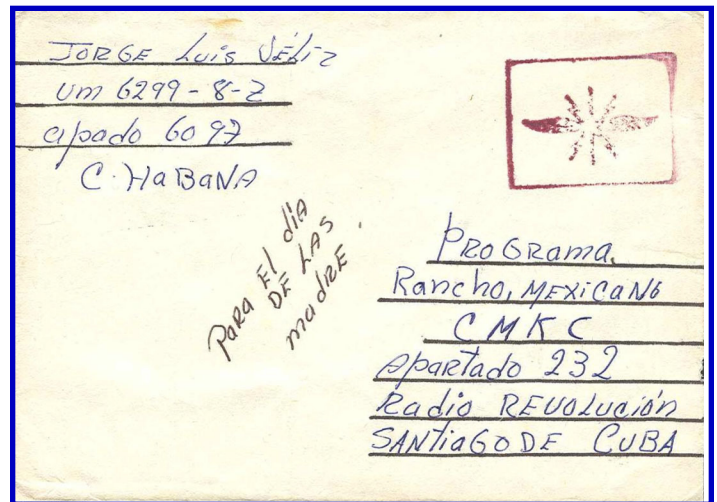


Figura 3 – Sobre entero postal militar provisional enviado en abril de 1989 a Santiago de Cuba por un miembro de la unidad militar cubana 6299-8-Z estacionado en Cabinda, Angola.

Figure 3 – Cuban military provisional PSE posted April 1989 to Santiago de Cuba by a member of Cuban military unit 6299-8-Z stationed at Cabinda, Angola.

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of capture. Both forces considered it important to conceal the foreign origin of the combatants in the Angolan conflict.

The Cuban presence abroad was greatly diminished with the end of Soviet subsidies after 1991. However, in a humanitarian response to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in late 1998, the Cuban government formed the *Programa Integral de Salud*, which was linked with the Cuban Ministry of Public Health to provide medical personnel to indigent Caribbean nations affected by the hurricane. The *Programa Integral de Salud* has since grown; providing medical personnel at low cost and to the formation of the *Escuela Latino Americana de Medicina* in Havana to train doctors from recipient nations of the program. Press reports indicate that Cuban medical personnel are present in most nations of Latin America, including many formerly conservative nations such as El Salvador, Belize, and Honduras.

Cuban personnel are also active in many parts of Africa and Asia; after a devastating earthquake in October 2005 in Pakistan, Cuba quickly dispatched a complement of 300 medical professionals to provide aid. For some nations, Cuba provides the personnel at no cost as a humanitarian mission; with most nations, the personnel are provided as a bilateral contract, with the host nation paying for the services. With an average cost of 400 US\$ per month per doctor, the Cuban program is a viable and attractive program to many underdeveloped nations. While the US has pressured

nations to decline the Cuban program, most have ignored this pressure in face of the pressing needs of their citizens for health care, sanitation, and other basic services, which these bankrupt regimes can not provide.

The election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela brought the Cuban program to Venezuela – the October 2000 Integral Cooperation Accord signed by Cuban leader Fidel Castro and Chavez created a bilateral barter with Venezuela providing 53,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil per day at preferential rates to oil-dependent Cuba in return for Cuban goods and credits including the services of 12,000 Cuban professionals (known in Cuba as *cooperantes internacionales*) in Venezuela. In the spring of 2003, Chavez initiated *Misión Barrio Adentro* to provide primary health care to the indigent, staffed with Cuban personnel. In August 2004, the bilateral agreements were expanded – Cuban imports of oil increased to 90,000 barrels of oil a day and the number of Cuban professionals assigned to Venezuela increased to 40,000. The increases were substantial enough to allow the Cuban government to cease most domestic rationing of power and increase the minimum wage. In 2005, 889 Venezuelan students were receiving education in Cuba.

In March 2004, the late Cuban academic and philatelist Héctor Juárez Figueredo reported the introduction of a new non-denominated PSE (Figure 5) at the main Camaguey post office, dedicated for mail to Cuban personnel stationed in Venezuela. The envelope measures 218 x 110 mm, on 20 pound paper, with texts printed in medium gray

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probablemente fueron producidos localmente a mano por los empleados del MINFAR/TELCOR en Luanda para proveer el material necesario para las fuerzas cubanas desplegadas en Angola. Se desconoce el número de sobres enteros postales que fue producido, pero por su baja proporción en comparación con los cientos de sobres que se conocen de la participación cubana en Angola, es probable que éstos hayan sido hechos cada uno a la vez en cantidades limitadas y distribuidos exclusivamente en Angola.

Las fuerzas cubanas llegaron a Angola a fines de 1975 para apoyar el gobierno del MPLA (Movimiento Popular de Liberación de Angola), que seguía siendo atacado por las guerrillas insurgentes de grupos rivales. En la primavera de 1988 una fuerza de 50,000 cubanos fue enviada para tratar de poner fin al impase en el conflicto entre el MPLA y las fuerzas de UNITA que eran apoyadas por el gobierno de Sur Africa. En Menongue había un aeropuerto militar importante para el frente del sur cubano en el sur de Angola en su guerra contra las fuerzas dirigidas por Sur Africa. Más importante aún, Menongue también era el término del servicio de ferrocarril desde el puerto de Namibe en la costa y servía como el principal centro de tránsito para el interior. Cabinda era aún más vital para el frente del sur cubano ya que tenía ricos depósitos de petróleo los cuales continúan proveyendo

una de las mayores fuentes de ingresos para Angola. Uno de los objetivos principales del MINFAR era la protección de la extracción de petróleo en Cabinda contra ataques de insurgentes con base en Zaire, en los alrededores de Cabinda. Las fuerzas cubanas y del MPLA eventualmente en 1988 rodearon las tropas del SADF (South African Defense Forces) y UNITA en el pequeño pueblo de Cuito Cuanavale en el sur de Angola pero no pudieron capturar el pueblo. Este impase fue eventualmente resuelto por negociaciones en 1988 que resultaron en la retirada de la región en 1991 de tanto las tropas cubanas como las de Sur Africa y la llegada de la intervención pacificadora de la ONU. También es curioso notar que en el año 2006 el personal cubano está nuevamente en Angola con cerca de 500 profesionales empleados en la construcción, educación y medicina. Los dos ejemplares ilustrados demuestran la amplia distribución de los sobres enteros postales del MINFAR/TELCOR en un corto período en la primavera de 1989, documentan la historia postal del frente del sur cubano en Angola y confirman el uso provisional de estos sobres del MINFAR/TELCOR.

Una área de enfoque del Grupo de Trabajo de las Fuerzas Cubanas ha sido la investigación por medio de fuentes electrónicas. El Internet ha proveído una serie de testimonios de cubanos que participaron en los

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color against a white background with a purple stripe on the upper frame. On the interior, the envelope was printed with a uniform gray color block to provide a security background. The reverse of the envelope does not bear any printing and the flap bears a glossy gum Arabic type gum. In his report, Juárez states that the envelope sold for 1 peso 30 centavos in national currency and satisfied the Cuban airmail rate for Venezuela, 65 centavos.

Juárez also posted an example of the PSE to the US; because it satisfied a 65 centavos postal value, it also satisfied the airmail rate for the US (Figure 6). However, this was strictly an improper use done to document the existence of this issue. The envelope does not bear any country name or insignia, normally disqualifying it for international usage. Thus, the 2004 Cooperante envelope is a domestic PSE with an airmail value for mail service to Cuban personnel at an international location. This differs from the domestic postal rate applied in the 1970s and 1980s to mail from Cuba to *cooperantes* abroad. I later contacted a number of collectors in Cuba in reference to the 2004 Cooperante PSE. With no official press announcement, few collectors were aware of its existence. The 2004 Cooperante PSE was quickly depleted

and not restocked, leading to the conclusion that it was experimental. The postal history of the Cuban *Programa Integral de Salud* (PIS) remains to be formed, with the possibility of additional dedicated PSE.

Examples of PIS mail so far have eluded the working group. It appears that mail from the Cuban personnel abroad continues to be forwarded by diplomatic pouch to Havana where it is introduced into the domestic mail stream for delivery. This inference is drawn from a recent *cooperante* cover listed in a Havana philatelic auction in 2004. The cover consisted of a 1999 airmail PSE posted from a *cooperante* stationed in Ghana to Havana.

The Cuban Forces Working Group was not able to secure this cover; however it should be mentioned that the cover sold in the excess of 60 USD. Particulars on mail delivery from Cuba to the Cuban personnel in Venezuela has not emerged from the testimonials so far encountered on the internet. However it is safe to assume that mail to the *cooperantes* is delivered by PIS headquarters based at Cuban embassies in the host nations. This will remain an area of focus and research for the working group.



Fig. 4 – Sobres enteros postales cubanos de miembros de la fuerza aérea cubana derribados mientras volaban sobre el sur de Angola en el otoño de 1987. Fuente de la imagen: http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/printer_183.shtml

Cuban PSEs belonging to a Cuban air crew shot down over southern Angola in the autumn 1987. Image source: http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/printer_183.shtml

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conflictos los cuales han aparecido en la prensa electrónica cubana. El trabajo de varios investigadores de Sur Africa documentando la perspectiva de ese país durante las guerras fronterizas con Angola también has salido a la luz. Entre los trabajos en el sitio del Internet del Grupo de Información de Combate Aéreo hay un artículo de Tom Cooper que describe las acciones sur africanas contra el frente sureño de Cuba/Angola. Una de las imágenes es pertinente a la historia postal cubana – muestra cuatro sobres enteros postales cubanos encontrados en la tripulación de un avión derribado en 1987 mientras volaba sobre el sur de Angola.

Si miramos de cerca la foto de estos sobres se pueden observar detalles interesantes. El sobre en la esquina superior izquierda (S139, emitido en julio de 1986) fue enviado desde Cuba a un miembro la unidad 6963 del MINFAR utilizando el apartado postal 6168-30, localizado en Xangongo; el de abajo a la izquierda (S140, emitido en julio de 1986) es un sobre entero postal sin usar, el cual era distribuido a las fuerzas cubanas para su uso en la correspondencia a la isla; el de la esquina superior derecha (S136, emitido en julio de 1986) fue enviado de una unidad militar del MINFAR en Angola, probablemente correo interno entre las tropas; y el de abajo a la derecha (S144, emitido en julio de 1986) también fue enviado desde Cuba a la unidad militar 6963 del MINFAR. Los números de identificación de los sobres enteros postales cubanos de la **Figura 4** vienen del catálogo de enteros postales cubanos Piper-Portuondo de 2000 y sus localidades fueron descubiertas por Jesús del Valle Rodríguez.

Xangongo está a unos 60 km del borde con Namibia y tenía una base aérea del frente del sur de Cuba/Angola. La foto muestra el daño a los sobres, que le da credibilidad a la versión de que provienen de un avión derribado con base en Xangongo. Hasta ahora se desconoce la fuente de la imagen pero probablemente viene de los archivos militares de Sur Africa. El personal cubano en Angola tenía órdenes estrictas de destruir todo el correo de Cuba, al igual que las fuerzas de Sur Africa, en ambos casos para eliminar la evidencia como la de la **Figura 4** en caso de captura. Ambas fuerzas consideraban importante el esconder el origen extranjero de los combatientes en el conflicto en Angola.

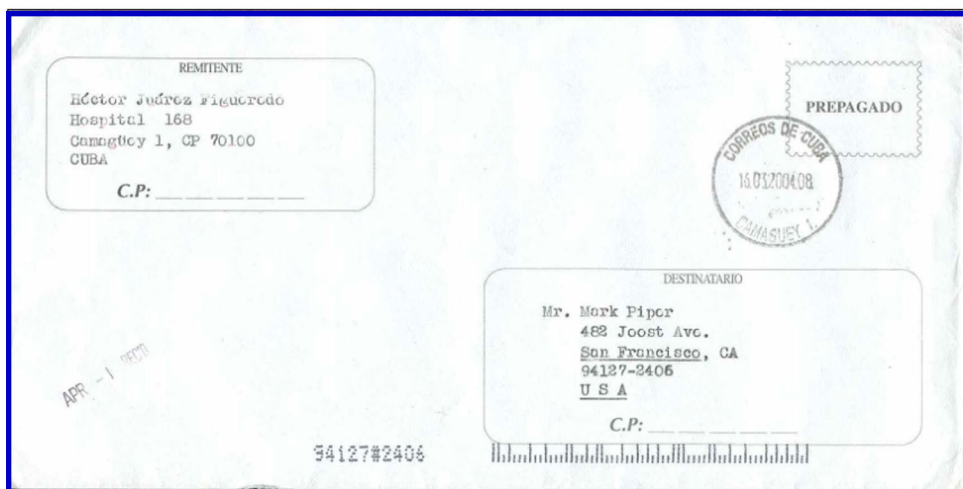
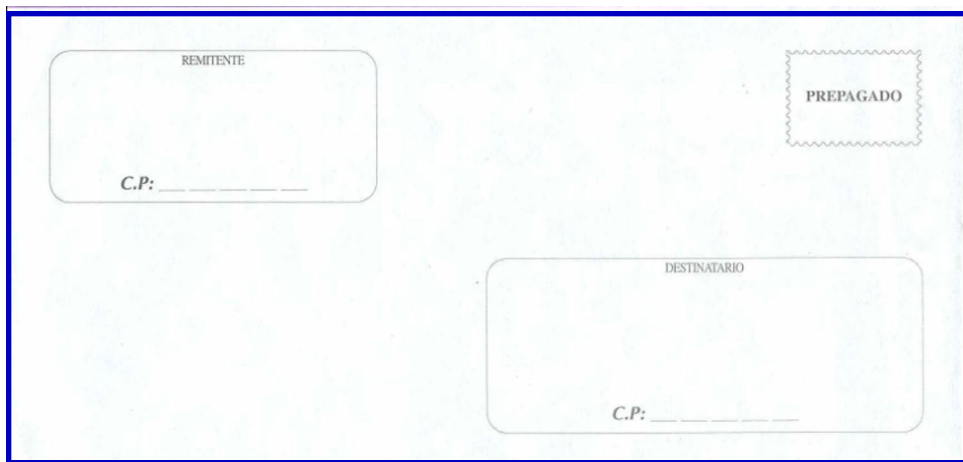
La presencia cubana en el extranjero disminuyó grandemente con el fin de los subsidios soviéticos después de 1991. Sin embargo, como un gesto humanitario en respuesta a la devastación causada por el huracán Mitch a fines de 1998, el gobierno cubano formó el Programa Integral de Salud, parte del Ministerio Cubano de Salud Pública, para proveer personal médico a las naciones mas pobres del Caribe afectadas por el huracán. El Programa Integral de Salud ha crecido desde entonces, proveyendo personal médico a bajo costo y formando la Escuela Latino Americana de Medicina en La Habana para entrenar doctores de las naciones recipientes del programa. Reportes

de prensa indican que el personal médico cubano está presente en la mayoría de las naciones de Latino América, incluyendo muchos países previamente conservadores como El Salvador, Belize y Honduras.

El personal cubano también está activo en muchas partes de Africa y Asia. Después del devastador terremoto en octubre de 2005 en Pakistán, Cuba rápidamente envió un destacamento de 300 profesionales médicos para proveer ayuda. Para algunas naciones Cuba provee el personal sin costo alguno como una misión humanitaria. A la mayoría de las naciones el personal se les provee gracias a un contrato bilateral en en cual el país anfitrión paga por los servicios. El costo promedio mensual es de solo \$400 por doctor por lo que el programa cubano es viable y atractivo para muchas de las naciones subdesarrolladas. Aunque los EE.UU. han presionado a las naciones para que rehusen el programa cubano, la mayoría ha ignorado esta presión debido a la extrema necesidad de sus ciudadanos que carecen de los servicios más básicos de salud y sanidad cuyos gobiernos empobrecidos no pueden proveer.

La elección de Hugo Chávez en Venezuela llevó al programa cubano a Venezuela – el Acuerdo Integral de Cooperación de octubre de 2000 firmado por el líder cubano Fidel Castro y por Chávez creó un intercambio bilateral con Venezuela que le provee 53,000 barriles de petróleo venezolano diario a tarifas muy reducidas a Cuba, que depende del combustible, a cambio de productos y crédito cubano incluyendo los servicios de 12,000 profesionales cubanos (conocidos en Cuba como cooperantes internacionalistas) en Venezuela. En la primavera de 2003, Chávez inició la Misión Barrio Adentro para proveer cuidado primario de salud para los pobres, a cargo del personal cubano. En agosto de 2004, los acuerdos bilaterales fueron expandidos – las importaciones cubanas de petróleo aumentaron a 90,000 barriles diarios y el número de profesionales cubanos asignados a Venezuela subió a 40,000. Los aumentos fueron lo suficiente para poner fin al racionamiento de energía en Cuba y para subir el salario mínimo. En el 2005, 889 estudiantes de Venezuela estaban recibiendo educación en Cuba.

En marzo del 2004, el ya fallecido académico y filatelista cubano Héctor Juárez Figueredo reportó la introducción de un nuevo tipo de sobre entero postal sin denominación (**Figura 5**) en el correo de Camaguey, producido para el correo del personal cubano asignado a Venezuela. El sobre mide 218 x 110 mm, en papel de 20 libras, con el texto impreso en color gris claro en un fondo blanco con una raya violeta en el marco superior. En el interior del sobre se imprimió un color uniforme en bloques para proveer un fondo de seguridad. El reverso del sobre no tiene ninguna impresión y la lengüeta tiene goma arábiga brillante. En su reporte, Juárez menciona que el sobre se vendía por 1 peso 30 centavos en moneda nacional y satisfacía la tarifa aérea cubana a Venezuela de 65 centavos.



Figuras 5 y 6 – Sobres enteros postales sin denominación emitidos en marzo de 2004 para la correspondencia de los cooperantes cubanos estacionados en Venezuela. Nuevo y usado a los EE.UU.

Figure 5 and 6 – Non denominated PSE issued in March 2004 for correspondence to Cuban cooperantes stationed in Venezuela. Mint and used to the US.

Juárez también nos envió un ejemplar de este sobre entero postal a los EE.UU. ya que éste satisfacía el valor postal de 65 centavos y también cubría la tarifa aérea a los EE.UU. (**Figura 6**). Sin embargo, estrictamente hablando este fue un uso indebido para documentar la existencia de esta emisión. El sobre no tiene el nombre o la insignia de ningún país, lo que normalmente lo descalificaría para uso internacional. Por consiguiente el sobre cooperante de 2004 es un sobre entero postal doméstico con un valor para correo aéreo al personal cubano en una localidad internacional. Esto difiere de la tarifa postal doméstica aplicada en los años 70 y 80 al correo de Cuba a los cooperantes en el extranjero. Posteriormente contacté a una serie de coleccionistas en Cuba en referencia a los sobres enteros postales de cooperantes del 2004. Sin ningún anuncio oficial de prensa, muy pocos coleccionistas conocían su existencia. Los sobres enteros postales de cooperantes del 2004 se agotaron rápidamente y no se volvieron a producir, llegando a la conclusión de que eran experimentales. La historia postal del Programa Integral de Salud (PIS) cubano queda sin estudiar, con la

posibilidad de que existan otros sobres enteros postales específicamente dedicados a este programa.

Los ejemplares de correspondencia del PIS hasta ahora han eludido al grupo de trabajo. Aparentemente el correo del personal cubano en el extranjero continúa siendo transportado por valija diplomática a La Habana donde se incorpora al correo doméstico para su entrega. Esto se infiere de un sobre de cooperantes recientemente incluido en una subasta filatélica en La Habana en el 2004. Se trataba de un sobre entero postal de correo aéreo de 1999 enviado a La Habana por un cooperante estacionado en Ghana. El Grupo de Estudio de las Fuerzas Cubanas no pudo adquirir esta pieza; sin embargo cabe mencionar que el mismo se vendió por más de \$60. No se han encontrado muchos detalles sobre el transporte de correo de Cuba al personal cubano en Venezuela en los testimonios que hasta ahora han aparecido en el Internet. Sin embargo se puede asumir que el correo a los cooperantes se entrega en las oficinas del PIS con base en la embajadas cubanas en los países anfitriones. Esta seguirá siendo un área de enfoque e investigación para el grupo de estudio.

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Cuban Forces Abroad: Update 2007

The field of Cuban forces postal history has been the subject of dedicated research and study by a number of prominent collectors such as Jesús del Valle Rodríguez, Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga and Héctor Juárez Figueredo. This group of philatelists over time coalesced into the informally dubbed Cuban Forces Working Group. Each collector has brought new material and information to the group while I have worked with a number of collectors in Cuba, South Africa, Europe and the US in the compilation and dissemination of this research. I have also contributed to this study with exhibits at TEXPEX 2003 and WESTPEX 2005 and articles in *The American Philatelist*, *The Cuban Philatelist*, and *The South African Philatelist*.

The mission statement of this working group is education with the collaboration of all interested parties. At WESTPEX 2005 I presented a five-frame exhibit covering the history of Cuban forces mail in Angola, a Cold War site of a substantial Cuban presence in the years 1975-1991. As time passes, new items come into the philatelic arena adding new dimensions to this study. Since 1998 the Cuban government greatly expanded participations abroad with the *Programa Integral de Salud*, this time with medical personnel sent to underdeveloped nations of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This opens a new chapter in the study of the postal history of the Cuban forces abroad. This short review highlights items which have come to light since 2005 that add to this study.

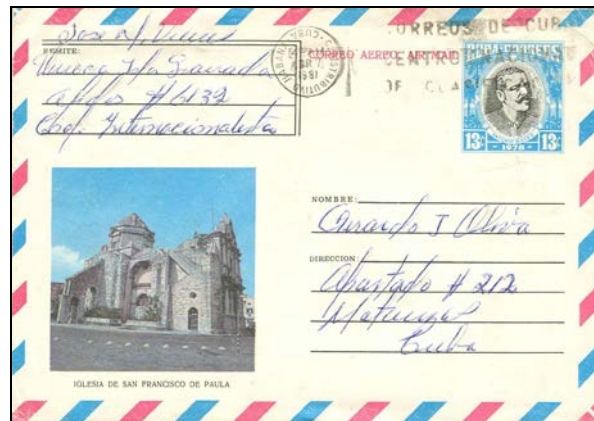


Figure 1 – Cuban PSE posted April 1981 to Matanzas by a Cuban *cooperante* with the UNECA construction enterprise, stationed on the island of Grenada.

In 1979, Maurice Bishop led a coup and took over the governance of the Caribbean island of Grenada. The new Bishop government quickly sought to ally itself with the Soviet sphere – diplomatic relations with Cuba were established on 14 April 1979, and soon after Cuban personnel were dispatched to Grenada. One notable Cuban project in Grenada was the construction of an international size airfield at Point Salines, coordinated with Cuban government construction contractor UNECA [*Unión de Empresas de Construcción del Caribe*]. Grenada became a concern to the Reagan administration in the US that saw the Bishop regime as an inroad by communism in the Latin American/Caribbean sphere; the airfield project was seen as providing a potential transit point for Cuba and the USSR for their support of leftist insurgencies in the Americas.

The activities of the Bishop regime were carefully monitored in Washington, and when a coup in October 1983 ended with the assassination of Bishop, the Reagan administration used

the opportunity to effect regime change in Grenada. Operation Urgent Fury, with an invasion force of 6,000 US paratroopers supported by a task force of six US Navy ships, quickly routed the coup. Cuban personnel initially tried to resist the invasion. The new regime in Grenada quickly allied itself with the US and requested the withdrawal of the Cuban personnel. The US invasion forces quickly rounded up the 800 Cuban personnel on Grenada and arranged for their repatriation to Cuba.

The cover in Figure 1 was located by Cuban collector Santiago Portuondo Zúñiga. It is a 1978 Cuban airmail PSE, posted by a Cuban member of the Cuban construction concern (UNECA) on the island of Grenada. The sender identifies himself as an internationalist collaborator and uses post office box 6132 at Havana's *Plaza Revolución* post office as his return address. A number of such post office boxes were set up in Havana after 1975 as conduits for mail to and from Cuban MINFAR and non-military personnel abroad. The cover traveled from the UNECA office at the Cuban Embassy in St. George's via diplomatic pouch from Grenada to Havana. At UNECA headquarters in Havana, the cover was posted in the domestic mail stream, cancelled in transit on 7 April 1981 at the *Centro Distributivo Nacional* (National [Postal] Distribution Center) in Havana, and forwarded for delivery to the recipient in Matanzas. This is the first example known for mail from the Cuban personnel in Grenada.

Scarcity of material has been a deficiency for the Cuban Forces Working Group in the study of the postal history of the Cuban forces in Angola. This was also the case for the 1989 provisional MINFAR/ TELCOR (Telecommunications Corps of the Cuban Ministry of Armed Forces) free frank envelopes. Until recently, only a group of mint envelopes with the military TELCOR markings in a variety of colors were known. This group of envelopes originally came from Havana collector Leandro Rico Alvarez, though he did not provide any provenance. Unfortunately the known examples do not provide any time chronology or transit markings to verify usage in Angola. Thus some questions remained as to the authenticity of the 1989 provisional envelopes and their exclusive use for the Cuban forces in Angola. Curiously no examples of these envelopes in domestic usage have been reported to date.



Figure 2 – Cuban military provisional PSE posted March 1989 to Matanzas by a member of Cuban military unit 6963 with the Angolan Southern Front stationed at Menongue, Angola.

Figure 3 – Cuban military provisional PSE posted April 1989 to Santiago de Cuba by a member of Cuban military unit 6299-8-Z stationed at Cabinda, Angola.

Recently I received two examples that confirm the usage of the MINFAR/TELCOR provisional envelopes in Angola in 1989. Figure 2 shows a MINFAR/TELCOR PSE posted to Matanzas by a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6963, using post office box 6079-20, stationed at Menongue, Angola with a transit marking dated 20 February 1989 from the *Centro Distributivo Nacional* in Havana. Figure 3 shows a MINFAR/TELCOR PSE posted to Santiago by a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6299-8-Z, stationed at Cabinda, Angola with a transit marking on the reverse dated 2 May 1989 from the main Santiago de Cuba post office. The MINFAR/TELCOR PSE shown here were posted from the field and dispatched via the Cuban MINFAR post office at the Cuban Embassy in Luanda and transported to Cuba via diplomatic pouch. The locations of the MINFAR post office boxes were determined from research drawn from MINFAR archives in Havana provided by Havana collector Jesús del Valle Rodríguez.

The MINFAR/TELCOR PSE were produced on bagasse paper (50 percent sugar cane fiber and 50 percent bleached tree fiber) paper measuring 160 x 115 mm with a stamped MINFAR/TELCOR free frank marking in the upper right hand corner measuring 38 x 29 mm. The impression on Figure 2 was stamped in black, and in cranberry on Figure 3. The bagasse envelopes used are a type of unstamped envelopes sold at Cuban post offices. The stamped boxed winged star and bolts symbol is the logo of the MINFAR/TELCOR with the text *PORTE PAGADO* (postage paid) over the logo. This marking, produced by rubber hand stamps distributed for franking to the political commissars of military units in the field responsible for mail, was introduced originally in late 1981 in Angola, Cuba and Ethiopia (the site of another Cuban MINFAR presence). The marking was withdrawn from use after 1984, most likely as part of a centralization of Cuban postal services abroad in March 1985. The withdrawn MINFAR/TELCOR rubber stamps were applied by hand, producing provisional PSE with mostly blurred impressions. The 1989 provisional PSE were likely produced locally by hand by MINFAR/TELCOR staff in Luanda to provide postal stationery to Cuban forces stationed in Angola. The number of PSE prepared is unknown, but because of their small ratio in comparison to the hundreds of covers known for the Cuban participation in Angola, it is likely the envelopes were produced on a one-time basis in limited quantity and distributed in Angola exclusively.

Cuban forces were in Angola since late 1975, in support of the ruling MPLA, which remained under attack from rival insurgent guerrilla groups. In the spring of 1988, a force of 50,000 Cuban forces was brought in to end a stalemated conflict between the ruling forces of the MPLA and the South African supported UNITA forces. Menongue was the site of an important military airfield for the Cuban Southern Front in southern Angola in its war against South African led forces. More importantly, Menongue was also the terminus for rail service from the port of Namibe on the coast and served as a main interior transit hub. Cabinda was even more vital to the Cuban Southern Front as the location of substantial oil extraction which was and still provides a large portion of Angola's income. A main MINFAR objective was the protection of oil extraction in Cabinda from attack by insurgents based in Zaire which surrounds the Cabinda enclave. The Cuban and MPLA forces eventually stalemated in 1988 at the small town of Cuito Cuanavale in southern Angola with the SADF and UNITA forces never capturing the town. This stalemate was eventually negotiated in 1988 into a withdrawal of both Cuban and South African forces from the region by 1991 and intervention from UN peacekeepers. It is also curious to note that in the year 2006 Cuban personnel are once again in Angola, with about 500 construction, education and medical professionals in Angola. The two examples given show a wide distribution for the MINFAR/TELCOR PSE within a short time in the spring of 1989 and document the postal history of the Cuban Southern Front in Angola and confirms the 1989 MINFAR/TELCOR envelopes as provisional PSE.



Figure 4 – Cuban PSEs belonging to a Cuban air crew shot down over southern Angola in the autumn 1987. Image source: http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/printer_183.shtml

One area of focus for the Cuban Forces Working Group has been electronic research. The internet has yielded a number of testimonials from Cuban participants which have appeared in the electronic Cuban press. The work of a number of South African researchers documenting the South African perspective during the Angola border wars have also appeared. Among the articles given by the Air Combat Information Group on their web site is an article by Tom Cooper that details South African actions against the Cuban/Angolan Southern Front. One image is pertinent to Cuban postal history – it shows four Cuban PSE, described as recovered from a Cuban air crew shot down in 1987 over Southern Angola.

A close look at the covers in the picture reveals a number of interesting details. The upper left envelope (PSE S139 issued July 1986) was posted from Cuba to a member of Cuban MINFAR unit 6963, using post office box 6168-30, located at Xangongo; the lower left envelope (PSE S140, issued July 1986) is an unused PSE, such as Cuban forces were issued for use for letters home; the upper right envelope (PSE S136, issued July 1986) was posted from a Cuban MINFAR unit in Angola, likely as inter-theatre military mail; and the lower right envelope (PSE S144, issued July 1986) was also posted from Cuba to Cuban MINFAR unit 6963. Identifications for the Cuban PSE shown in Figure 4 are taken from the 2000 Piper-Portuondo PSE catalog; locations are drawn from research by Jesus del Valle Rodríguez.

Xangongo is located 60 km from the Namibian border and was the site of an airbase for the Cuban/Angolan Southern Front. The image shows substantial damage to the covers, lending credence to the description given as recovered from a downed Cuban aircraft stationed at Xangongo. The source of the image is currently unknown but is likely drawn from South African military archives. Cuban personnel in Angola were under direct orders to destroy mail from home, as were South African forces, in both cases to eliminate evidence such as Figure 4 in the case of capture. Both forces considered it important to conceal the foreign origin of the combatants in the Angolan conflict.

The Cuban presence abroad was greatly diminished with the end of Soviet subsidies after 1991. However, in a humanitarian response to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in late 1998, the Cuban government formed the *Programa Integral de Salud*, which was linked with the Cuban Ministry of Public Health to provide medical personnel to indigent Caribbean nations affected by the hurricane. The *Programa Integral de Salud* has since grown; providing medical personnel at low cost and to the formation of the *Escuela Latino Americana de Medicina* in Havana to train doctors from recipient nations of the program. Press reports indicate that Cuban medical personnel are present in most nations of Latin America, including many formerly conservative nations such as El Salvador, Belize and Honduras.

Cuban personnel are also active in many parts of Africa and Asia; after a devastating earthquake in October 2005 in Pakistan, Cuba quickly dispatched a complement of 300 medical professionals to provide aid. For some nations, Cuba provides the personnel at no cost as a humanitarian mission; with most nations, the personnel are provided as a bilateral contract, with the host nation paying for the services. With an average cost of 400 US\$ per month per doctor, the Cuban program is a viable and attractive program to many underdeveloped nations. While the US has pressured nations to decline the Cuban program, most have ignored this pressure in face of the pressing needs of their citizens for health care, sanitation and other basic services, which these bankrupt regimes can not provide.

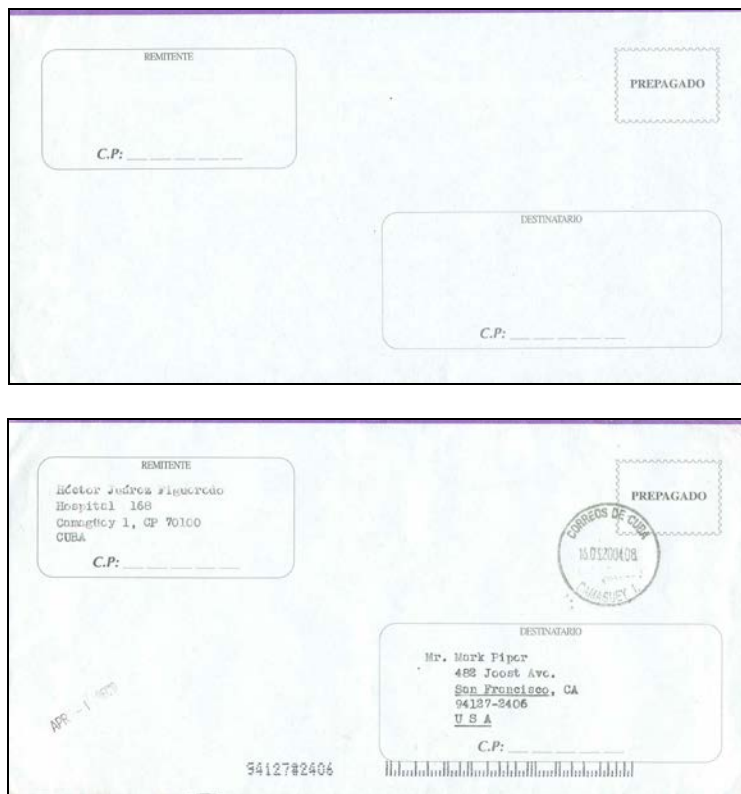


Figure 5 and 6 – Non denominated PSE issued in March 2004 for correspondence to Cuban cooperantes stationed in Venezuela. Mint and used to US.

The election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela brought the Cuban program to Venezuela – the October 2000 Integral Cooperation Accord signed by Cuban leader Fidel Castro and Chavez created a bilateral barter with Venezuela providing 53.000 barrels of Venezuelan oil per day at preferential rates to oil-dependent Cuba in return for Cuban goods and credits including the services of 12.000 Cuban professionals (known in Cuba as *cooperantes internacionales*) in Venezuela. In the spring of 2003, Chavez initiated *Misión Barrio Adentro* to provide primary health care to the indigent, staffed with Cuban personnel. In August 2004, the bilateral agreements were expanded – Cuban imports of oil increased to 90.000 barrels of oil a day and the number of Cuban professionals assigned to Venezuela increased to 40.000. The increases were substantial enough to allow the Cuban government to cease most domestic rationing of power and increase the minimum wage. In 2005, 889 Venezuelan students were receiving education in Cuba.

In March 2004, the late Cuban academic and philatelist Héctor Juárez Figueredo reported the introduction of a new non-denominated PSE (Figure 5) at the main Camaguey post office, dedicated for mail to Cuban personnel stationed in Venezuela. The envelope measures 218 by 110 mm, on 20 pound paper, with texts printed in medium gray color against a white background with a purple stripe on the upper frame. On the interior, the envelope was printed with a uniform gray color block to provide a security background. The reverse of the envelope does not bear any printing and the flap bears a glossy gum Arabic type gum. In his report, Juárez states that the envelope sold for 1 peso 30 centavos in national currency and satisfied the Cuban airmail rate for Venezuela, 65 centavos.

Juárez also posted an example of the PSE to the US; because it satisfied a 65 centavos postal value, it also satisfied the airmail rate for the US (Figure 6). However, this was strictly an improper use done to document the existence of this issue. The envelope does not bear any country name or insignia, normally disqualifying it for international usage. Thus, the 2004 Cooperante envelope is a domestic PSE with an airmail value for mail service to Cuban personnel at an international location. This differs from the domestic postal rate applied in the 1970s and 1980s to mail from Cuba to *cooperantes* abroad. I later contacted a number of collectors in Cuba in reference to the 2004 Cooperante PSE. With no official press announcement, few collectors were aware of its existence. The 2004 Cooperante PSE was quickly depleted and not restocked, leading to the conclusion that it was experimental. The postal history of the Cuban *Programa Integral de Salud* (PIS) remains to be formed, with the possibility of additional dedicated PSE.

Examples of *PIS* mail so far have eluded the working group. It appears that mail from the Cuban personnel abroad continues to be forwarded by diplomatic pouch to Havana where it is introduced into the domestic mail stream for delivery. This inference is drawn from a recent *cooperante* cover listed in a Havana philatelic auction in 2004. The cover consisted of a 1999 airmail PSE posted from a *cooperante* stationed in Ghana to Havana. The Cuban Forces Working Group was not able to secure this cover; however it should be mentioned that the cover sold in the excess of 60 USD. Particulars on mail delivery from Cuba to the Cuban personnel in Venezuela have not emerged from the testimonials so far encountered on the internet. However it is safe to assume that mail to the *cooperantes* is delivered by *PIS* headquarters based at Cuban embassies in the host nations. This will remain an area of focus and research for the working group.

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