



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Cuba February 2011

I would also like to offer a word of encouragement to the authorities of Cuba, a country which in 2010 celebrated seventy-five years of uninterrupted diplomatic relations with the Holy See, that the dialogue happily begun with the Church may be reinforced and expanded.

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 10, 2011

BACKGROUND

The Government of President Raul Castro: The ruling Communist Party will have its Sixth Congress in April 2011, and is expected to approve new reforms announced by President Raul Castro. In spite of significant restrictions that remain, religious leaders, and particularly the Catholic Church, have made some progress in engaging the Cuban government. After a dialogue with Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana, Raul Castro announced that he would be releasing all political prisoners. That offer has mostly resulted in most prisoners being released and moving to Spain and in some cases onward to other countries. Early in the release process, one prisoner was released and stayed in Cuba. But of the approximately dozen others who refused to leave the island, only one has been released as of February 3, 2011. In November 2010, the Church was allowed to dedicate the first religious institution building to be built in Cuba in over 50 years—the Saint Charles and Saint Ambrose Seminary.

Church Situation: Cuba still places significant restrictions on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, and receiving pastoral agents from abroad. The Church in Cuba has implemented numerous social assistance projects in Cuba which, although small given the restrictions, reach many sick, elderly, and disabled people. The Church continues to do as much pastoral work as is possible given the restrictions still in place in Cuba. The Church in Cuba is preparing for the fourth Centenary of the discovery and presence of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity of Cuba) in 2012. The government is aware of such preparations and has not expressed opposition to the celebration. In June 2010, the Church celebrated the tenth "Social Week," with participants from all over the island being allowed to attend.

Existing U.S. Policy: Earlier President Barack Obama lifted restrictions for Cuban-Americans to travel to Cuba. In January of this year, the White House also announced a new Presidential Directive lifting restrictions on purposeful travel (religious, academic, and people-to-people), allowing all Americans to send economic assistance to the Cuban people, and permitting any U.S. international airport to allow charter flights to Cuba. These changes have been matched by attempts in Congress to change U.S. policy toward Cuba at broader and deeper levels. However, no legislation has passed.

The Travel Ban and Other Engagement: Efforts in Congress have focused on three areas: the sale of food and medicines, the right of U.S. citizens to travel, and the financial support (remittances) people in this country can send to people on the island. In February 2010, Reps. Collin Peterson and Jim Moran introduced the *Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act* (H.R.4645). In the Senate, Senators Klobuchar, Enzi, Carper, and Leahy introduced companion legislation, S.3112. Both bills called for lifting the travel restrictions to Cuba for all Americans and lifting some of the restrictions on agricultural sales to Cuba. H.R.

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4645 was marked up by the House Agriculture Committee, but never came up for a mark-up in the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The December 2009 arrest of an American citizen in Cuba, up to now unresolved, continues to undermine these efforts.

USCCB POSITION

The bishops in Cuba have long-held the position that greater dialogue within Cuba and between Cuba and the rest of the world (especially its diaspora) would be helpful and fruitful. The Holy See, the Cuban bishops, and the USCCB have strongly denounced the Cuban crackdown on peaceful dissent and the unwarranted use of the death penalty. USCCB continues to stand with the Church in Cuba in defending full religious liberty and opposing governmental intrusions into and restrictions on ecclesial life. Such solidarity has been made concrete by visits of bishops from the United States as well as by offering resources to help the Church in Cuba carry out its pastoral and social work. Along with the Cuban bishops, USCCB believes engagement with Cuba will do more than the current U.S. policy of isolation to promote respect for human rights and a greater openness. USCCB's basic message over the years has emphasized:

- The principal effect of the U.S. embargo has been to strengthen government control and to weaken an already weak civil society; it provides the government with excuses for its own failures.
- Dollar-laden tourists and the party faithful in Cuba live well enough, but most Cubans are poor and they suffer real and constant deprivation of both food and other human needs. Ending the travel ban will provide employment opportunities for poor persons.
- The Church in Cuba is strongly opposed to the U.S. embargo, as are most political dissidents. Any steps towards removing barriers to engagement with Cuba are welcome and encouraged to the degree that they do not undermine Cuban civil society and religious freedom.

USCCB is deeply concerned about the limitations on the freedom of the Church and other parts of civil society in Cuba, of the routine violations of human rights, and limitations on freedom of speech and assembly. Many decades of U.S.-imposed isolation have not had any discernible impact on the current regime. Change, although slow, is taking place as the Cuban government opens itself up to exploring elements of a new economic and social system. Improving the lives of the Cuban people and encouraging democracy and human rights in Cuba will best be advanced through more, rather than less, contact between Cuban and American peoples. Ending the U.S.-imposed travel ban will exert indirect pressure on the Cuban government to be more open as it will no longer be able to blame this aspect of the embargo for the economic challenges facing Cuba. Removing the barriers to agricultural exports to Cuba, and thus deepening the trade relationship, is also another step toward greater engagement. Increased agricultural sales to Cuba will not undermine the agricultural sector as it is unable to provide enough food for domestic consumption and will allow Cubans greater access to food supplies for domestic and tourism-related consumption.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB urges the new Congress to consider reintroducing legislation similar to the *Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act*, which would end the travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans and allow increased agricultural sales to Cuba. USCCB also supports an eventual end to an economic embargo that is morally unacceptable and politically counterproductive. The goals of improving the lot of the Cuban people and encouraging the democratization of the governance of Cuba are best accomplished through greater, rather than less, contact between Cuban and American peoples. USCCB continues to support the Church in Cuba in her pastoral and evangelizing mission.

For further information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cuba.shtml> or contact Rev. Juan J. Molina, O.S.S.T., Ph; 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); jmolina@usccb.org.

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