



Department of Social Development and World Peace  
Office of International Justice and Peace

**Background on Cuba**  
**February 2007**

*Our attention is also turned towards Cuba. In voicing the hope that all of its inhabitants may realize their legitimate aspirations, amid concern for the common good, I should like to renew the appeal made by my venerable Predecessor: "Let Cuba open itself to the world, and let the world open itself to Cuba." Mutual openness to other countries can only bring benefits to all concerned.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 8, 2007

**BACKGROUND**

Hopes for modifying U.S. Cuba policy, seen by many as possible in recent years, have been repeatedly undermined by the House leadership. Despite majority votes in both houses in support of lifting certain provisions of the embargo, especially affecting travel to Cuba, the provisions were either stripped from the final bill or were never brought up. The Administration continues its firm opposition to any changes. The report of the President's Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, now supported by the office of a Cuba Transition Coordinator, further tightens these restrictions.

Several factors behind the new harder line are involved. Beginning with the sudden arrests and sentencing in the spring of 2003 of some 75 peaceful Cuban dissidents, many of them activists with the Catholic-inspired Varela Project, followed by the summary execution of three ferryboat hijackers, the pro-embargo stance of the Florida Congressional delegation has been strengthened.

The U.S. has expelled Cuban diplomats. The Treasury Department has eliminated the exemption for non-degree related educational travel to Cuba. The bilateral migration agreement of 1995, providing for the orderly departure of up to 20,000 Cubans to settle here annually, is in jeopardy. And Cubans in this country are now restricted as to their travel to Cuba and as to what they can send to their families there. Last year, in a reversal, the House voted down amendments to end or modify the embargo.

Two recent developments may contribute to a review of U.S. policy in the near future: one is the illness of Fidel Castro that has necessitated the provisional transfer of his duties; the other is the new makeup of the Congress. Groups pressing for change are mobilizing to challenge current U.S. policies, especially the travel restrictions.

**THE TRAVEL BAN**

Up until the events of March 2003 and now the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, expectations of reversing the decades-old Cuba sanctions policy were high. Votes in both houses clearly pointed to lifting restrictions in three areas: *the sale of food and medicines, the right of U.S. citizens to travel, and the amount Cubans in this country can send to their families on the island.* Throughout last year, the main attention in

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the Congress has been on travel. Allowing Americans free access to visit the island and interact with the Cuban people is seen by advocates as an important means of advancing the goals of a non-violent transition to a more open and free Cuban society.

In a letter to President Bush, USCCB noted: “Over the many years of the embargo, it has failed to achieve its goals of unseating the Castro government, restoring democracy and protecting human rights. In fact, the embargo hurts the ordinary people of Cuba.... The additional restrictions proposed by the Commission—limiting Cuban-American family visits and the amount of money they can send to Cuba—will only exacerbate the situation within the country.”

### **USCCB POSITION**

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’s basic message over the years has made the following points:

- The principal effect of the U.S. embargo is to strengthen government control, providing the basis for the constant denunciation of the U.S., blaming Cuba’s genuine shortages of medicines and food on the embargo, instead of on a failed economic system and the end of Soviet subsidies.
- Dollar-laden tourists and the party faithful live well enough, and Cuba is a world leader in certain areas of medicine for paying tourists, but the average poor Cuban--a majority--suffers real and constant deprivation of both food and basic healthcare.
- The Church in Cuba is unalterably opposed to the embargo, as are most political dissidents.

USCCB is well aware of the many 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. Neither international pressure, nor Pope John Paul II’s visit, has succeeded in changing conditions which may now be worsening. To forestall the disastrous confrontation that some here seem to favor, USCCB seeks to turn a failed policy that serves the interests only of the Castro regime into a humane, morally justified and politically sensible one.

USCCB urges Congress to support efforts to drop the travel limitations for visits by families here to their family members in Cuba and asks their support for legislative efforts by the Senate and House Cuba Working Groups to end 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 the Cuban and American people.

**RESOURCES:** <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cuba.htm>

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