



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

Background on Cuba
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Certain signs of détente in relations with the neighbouring United States promise new opportunities for a beneficial mutual rapprochement, with full respect for the sovereignty and rights of the States and their citizens. ... I hope that the practical signs of openness to the exercise of religious freedom will continue to increase....

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the New Ambassador of Cuba to the Holy See, December 10, 2009

BACKGROUND

New Government in Cuba: Since August 2006, when Fidel Castro transferred power to his younger brother, Raúl Castro, there has been much discussion of “transition” in Cuba. Signs of such transition can be seen in a series of modest measures introduced by the Cuban government that relax existing prohibitions in some areas of economic and religious life, including restrictions on ownership of computers and private property as well as the opening of possibilities to celebrate Mass in some prisons and the restoration of certain church buildings, although much more needs to be done in these areas.

Existing U.S. Policy: Since taking office, President Barack Obama has lifted restrictions for Cuban Americans to travel to Cuba. These changes have been matched by attempts in Congress to change U.S. policy toward Cuba. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives have introduced legislation that will permit unrestricted travel by all Americans. However, other aspects of the embargo would remain.

The Travel Ban: Up to 2003, 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 of financial support Cubans in this country can send to their families on the island. But the March 2003 sudden arrest and conviction of 75 peaceful Cuban dissidents undermined this effort. In spite of this, Congress has focused greater attention on the travel ban. The devastating hurricane season on both sides of the Cuban coasts in 2008 created a need for humanitarian help, and for Cuban Americans to travel to Cuba and send money to their relatives. Something needed to be done. Shortly after taking office President Obama lifted the restrictions for Cuban Americans to travel as well as send remittances to Cuba. In February 2009, Reps. William Delahunt and Jeff Flake introduced the *Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act* (H.R.874). In the Senate, Senators Dorgan, Enzi, Dodd and Lugar introduced similar legislation, S.428. Both bills call for lifting the travel restrictions to Cuba for all Americans, restoring the right of all citizens to travel freely, and fostering engagement over isolation with all countries of the hemisphere. The House Foreign Affairs Committee has already held a hearing regarding travel to Cuba and many of the leaders of the Committee expressed support for legislation ending the travel ban. The December 2009 arrest of an American citizen in Cuba may undermine these efforts.

Church Situation: Cuba still places significant and unacceptable 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 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 expressed openness to allowing religious processions and the construction of several houses of worship and residences for religious men and women.

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 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 the offering of 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. 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 not enrich the powerful in Cuba. It will provide employment opportunities for poor persons.
- The Church in Cuba is strongly opposed to the U.S. 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. However, many decades of U.S. imposed isolation have not had any discernible impact on the current regime. Indeed, change, although slow, is taking place as the Cuban government opens itself up to relations with the rest of the world. As was the case before the fall of the Berlin Wall, engagement and cultural exchange can be agents of change, not isolation. In addition, 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.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB urges Congress to support the H.R.874 and S.428, *The Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act*, which would end the travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans. 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 the Cuban and American people.

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