



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

Background on Cuba
February 2008

I wish to mention Cuba, which is preparing to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the visit of my venerable Predecessor. Pope John Paul II was received with affection by the authorities and by the people, and he encouraged all Cubans to work together for a better future. I should like to reiterate this message of hope, which has lost none of its relevance.

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 7, 2008

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 bills or were never brought up. The Administration continues its firm opposition to any changes. The 2006 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. The 2008 presidential election may prompt a reassessment of U.S. policy toward Cuba by both parties.

There are several factors behind the new harder line of the current Administration. Beginning with the sudden arrests and sentencing in Spring 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 now face restrictions on their travel to Cuba and on what they can send to their families there. In 2005, the House voted down amendments to end or modify the embargo.

Cuba still places significant restrictions on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, and receiving pastoral agents from abroad. In December 2007 government authorities raided Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Santiago, ostensibly to break up a meeting of "dissidents." Archbishop Dionisio Garcia spoke out against the raid and sought an agreement with the Cuban Government to prevent such actions in the future. There are reports that the Church in Cuba has experienced limited improvements in its relationship with the Cuban authorities, but the illness of Fidel Castro and the "transition" that will follow has created uncertainty. Fidel Castro recently announced his intention to stand down ahead of elections that are due to take place on February 24. Either Fidel's brother, Raúl Castro, will be confirmed as Fidel's permanent successor, or possibly, a younger politician such as Vice President Carlos Lage will be elected. Groups pressing for change are mobilizing to challenge current U.S. policies, especially the travel restrictions.

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Also from February 20 – 26, 2008, a decade after Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba, Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, will visit Cuba to strengthen the faith of the Cuban people and help improve church-state relations. The Cardinal will meet with church leaders, Cuban government officials, and the nation's acting president, Raul Castro. Cardinal Bertone's visit includes Havana, Santa Clara, and Santiago de Cuba, where he will visit the shrine to Our Lady of Charity, patroness of Cuba. He will also inaugurate a monument to Pope John Paul II, in the place where the late Pope celebrated mass during his visit ten years ago. This trip offers hope to Catholics in Cuba and abroad.

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. In recent years, Congress has focused greater attention on the travel ban. 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.

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 in Cuba 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 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. 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.

ACTION REQUESTED

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.

For further information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cuba.shtml> or contact *Rev. Andrew Small, OMI* 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); asmall@usccb.org.

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