



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

Background on Cuba
February 2009

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

Transition in Cuba: In August 2006, Fidel Castro transferred power to his younger brother, Raúl Castro. In February 2008, the transfer of power became official as Raúl became President of Cuba. Both before and after Raúl's accession, there has been much discussion of "transition" in Cuba. Signs of such transition can be seen in a series of measures introduced by the Cuban government that relax existing prohibitions in some areas of economic life, including restrictions on ownership of computers and private property. Planned structural changes in Cuban agriculture towards a more market-based system are also possible indications of greater Cuban economic openness to the international community.

Existing U.S. Policy: Initial Bush Administration reaction to the changes in Cuba was muted. This lukewarm reception of changes in Cuba has been matched by failed attempts in Congress to change U.S. policy toward Cuba. In the past, 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. Existing restrictions on travel to Cuba as well as limitations on financial help within the context of the overall embargo remain in place.

New Administration and 111th Congress: With a new Administration and a new Congress there may be opportunities to modify U.S. policy toward Cuba. As a candidate President Obama committed to change U.S. travel policy towards Cuba, stating his intention to loosen travel for Cuban Americans and to allow them to send financial support (remittances) to relatives in Cuba. During confirmation hearings in January, Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary of Treasury Geithner both indicated the Administration would make a full review of U.S.-Cuba policy. The review should be completed by the end of March 2009.

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 recent years, Congress has focused greater attention on the travel ban. In February 2009, Reps. William Delahunt and Jeff Flake introduced the *Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act* (H.R. 874). Similar legislation allowing travel between the U.S. and Cuba is expected to be introduced in the Senate.

2008 Hurricanes: The effects of the embargo became particularly acute in the wake of last year's hurricanes

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that battered the island. In September 2008, Hurricane Ike alone destroyed 500,000 homes and left 2.5 million Cubans without shelter. Altogether, a series of hurricanes and tropical storms flooded farms and devastated small towns, destroying crops and livelihoods. Because of the U.S. embargo and travel ban, Cuban Americans were severely restricted in their ability to send aid to their relatives or to travel there to help rebuild.

Church Situation: Cuba still places significant and unacceptable restrictions on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, and receiving pastoral agents from abroad.

From February 20 – 26, 2008, a decade after Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba, Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited Cuba to help strengthen the faith of the Cuban people and help improve Church-State relations. The Cardinal met with church leaders, Cuban government officials, and the nation's president, Raúl Castro. This trip was well received by many parties in Cuba. Most recently, Raúl Castro attended the beatification of Cuban-born friar Brother José Ollalo Valdés O.H. in November 2008.

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. Along with the Cuba bishops, USCCB believes engagement with Cuba will do more than the current policy 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, providing the basis for excuses and denunciations of the U.S.
- 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.
- 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. As was the case before the fall of the Berlin Wall, engagement and cultural exchange can be agents of change, not isolation.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB urges Congress to support the H.R. 874, *Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act*, which would end the travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans. We also support 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.

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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