



Hill Notes

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FREEDOM TO TRAVEL TO CUBA: PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

[May] Cuba, with all of its magnificent possibilities, open up to the world and ... the world open itself to Cuba.
John Paul II, Papal Visit to Cuba, January 1998

With a new Administration and a new Congress, many analysts believe there is an opportunity to modify U.S. policy toward Cuba. Bipartisan legislation in the House (H.R. 874) and its counterpart in the Senate will end restrictions on U.S. citizens traveling to Cuba. If passed, this legislation would send an important signal of U.S. support for cultural exchange and engagement between the American and Cuban peoples. It would also be a concrete sign of a new spirit of dialogue and engagement in U.S. foreign policy with Latin America and the rest of the world.

Why is USCCB opposed to the U.S. embargo and travel restrictions to Cuba?

In their 1993 statement, *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*, the U.S. Bishops urged that sanctions be used with restraint, and proposed tentative criteria for evaluating sanctions:

1. They should be a response to grave and ongoing injustice, after less coercive measures have been tried, and with clear and reasonable conditions for their removal;
2. They must avoid grave and irreversible harm to the civilian population and be targeted, as much as possible, against those directly responsible for the injustice;
3. The consent of the population affected by sanctions is a moral consideration, although consent does not eliminate the need for humanitarian exemptions; and
4. Sanctions should be part of a serious diplomatic effort to find a political settlement.

The U.S. Bishops continue to have grave concerns about human rights violations generally and restrictions on religious freedom in particular within Cuba. However, in accord with the Church in Cuba, USCCB has never supported the U.S.-imposed embargo against Cuba. For decades, USCCB has actively called for lifting restrictions on travel and the sale of food and medicine as steps toward an end to the embargo. The U.S. Bishops have repeatedly rejected a policy that, while seeking to harm the Cuban government, provides it with a convenient excuse for its many failings and only increases the suffering of the Cuban people. USCCB holds that improving the lot of the Cuban people and encouraging the democratization of Cuban governance can be best accomplished through greater, rather than less, contact with the American people. More engagement means fewer excuses for failure and a greater thrust for change.

What would the “Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act” do?

The legislation would lift any and all restrictions on the ability of U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba.

Why is being able to travel to Cuba important?

The travel ban inhibits contact between our two peoples which is necessary for building mutual trust and exposing the Cuban people to the real America. In a particular way it inhibits the ability of ordinary Church members and leaders to exercise their faith through solidarity visits.

Doesn't the U.S. routinely restrict travel to oppressive countries?

No. Cuba is the only country to which U.S. citizens cannot travel without special government permission. The travel ban violates U.S. citizens' freedom to travel, absent valid national or personal security reasons. Restrictions on travel to Cuba continue, while U.S. citizens are allowed to travel to other communist nations, including China, and Vietnam.

Has a travel ban worked with other communist countries in the past?

Restricting travel to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was discarded by U.S. policy makers under the Helsinki Accords in 1975. Indeed, many observers believe the fall of the Iron Curtain was encouraged by unrestricted travel to those countries, so that Western ideas and values could be shared with people living under communism.

Can U.S. citizens travel to Cuba at the present time?

Most U.S. citizens are legally prohibited from traveling to Cuba. Individuals who fall into certain defined categories are entitled to travel to Cuba with U.S. (and Cuban) government permission. These conditions have been severely tightened over the last few years, making it very difficult for even family members to visit sick relatives, attend funerals or provide help to families after the recent hurricanes. Permissions have been granted sporadically with no clear reasons given for denial of permission. The best way to create trust and mutual understanding between the people of Cuba and the United States is to eliminate travel restrictions altogether.

What do people in the U.S. think about the travel ban?

Polls show that a majority of U.S. citizens support travel to Cuba. According to a Zogby/Inter-American Dialogue poll released in October 2008, **68% of likely voters believe all U.S. citizens should be allowed to travel to Cuba.** A 2008 Florida International University (FIU) poll reports that 67 percent of Cuban Americans, including a majority of registered voters, support unrestricted travel to Cuba for all Americans.

Why does the Church in Cuba support lifting the travel ban?

The Church in Cuba has never accepted the embargo as a means for positive social change in their nation. Instead the embargo has brought suffering to the very people it was intended to help. The travel ban in particular hinders the Church's missionary activity and solidarity visits, and contributes to the overall sense of isolation of the Cuban people within the hemisphere.

Has the travel ban and other restrictions worked in bringing about change in Cuba?

The overall sanctions policy has largely failed. It has brought about neither the end of the Castro regime nor the restoration of democracy nor the protection of human rights in that country. In reality, the principal effect of the travel ban has been and continues to be one of strengthening the control of the existing regime, providing the basis for the regime's denunciation of the U.S. and an excuse for shortages of food and medicines which the regime blames on the embargo instead of on a failed economic system and the end of Soviet subsidies.

Why is the Church not urging an end to every aspect of the embargo?

Ending the travel ban is an important and concrete step on the way to ending the embargo altogether. USCCB will continue to work for an end to the embargo.

Are there not more important issues than ending restrictions on travel to Cuba?

There are many pressing issues demanding the attention of the new Administration and Congress. Currently relations between the United States and Latin America are far too low. Lifting the travel ban could be a powerful symbol of a new era of dialogue and engagement with other countries, especially in the hemisphere.

For More Information: www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cuba.shtml. For further information, contact: *Fr. Andrew Small*, OMI, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3153, asmall@usccb.org