



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

**Background on Cuba**  
**2017**

*"We are all happy because...we saw two nations, who were estranged for so many years, take a step to bring them closer together."*

-- Pope Francis on U.S.-Cuba Rapprochement, December 18, 2014

**The Government of President Raul Castro:** Although serious human rights concerns persist, some new reforms announced by President Raul Castro appear to provide greater latitude for Cuban citizens to own property, operate small businesses and obtain access to credit. Religious leaders, and particularly the Catholic Church, continue to make measured, unsteady progress, despite governmental restrictions, in engaging Cuban society and fostering dialogue with the Cuban government.

**Church Situation:** The Cuban government still places significant constraints on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, receiving pastoral agents from abroad, among other areas. The Church in Cuba has implemented numerous social assistance projects in Cuba which, although small given existing controls, reach many sick, elderly, and disabled people. It also continues to perform significant pastoral work within the restrictions still in place in Cuba. As a sign of pastoral affection for the Cuban people, Pope Francis visited the island in September 2015.

**Existing U.S. Policy:** After a series of measures that lifted restrictions on purposeful travel, allowed family assistance, and permitted any U.S. international airport to allow charter flights to Cuba, in 2014 the U.S. government reestablished diplomatic relations with the island nation, and removed Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. In a dramatic gesture highlighting the historic opening between the two nations, President Barack Obama visited Cuba in March 2016, the first visit of a sitting U.S. president in over 85 years. These openings have resulted in greater freedoms and prospects for the Cuban people. Significantly, in January 2017 President Obama ended the popularly named "wet foot, dry foot" policy of the 1995 Cuban Readjustment Act, which allowed Cubans who set-foot on U.S. soil to remain in the country and become eligible for residency.

**The Travel Ban and Other Engagement:** A full repeal of trade and travel restrictions with Cuba will require action in Congress. Bills have been introduced that would allow all Americans to travel to Cuba and lift the restrictions on trade with the island. Some in Congress, however, have sought to re-impose some of the more burdensome requirements related to trade with and travel to Cuba that had previously been in existence. Amendments to appropriations bills in the House and the Senate have sought to reverse President Obama's executive orders that make it easier for U.S. citizens to visit relatives in Cuba and to transmit monetary remittances to them. In addition, other amendments would limit the ability of the U.S. government to establish new air and vessel routes between the United States and Cuba. To date, these efforts at legislative action to reverse the historic opening have not succeeded.

## **USCCB POSITION**

As Bishop Oscar Cantú, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, noted: “Our Conference has long held that universal human rights will be strengthened through more engagement between the Cuban and American people. For decades, the USCCB has called for the restoration of diplomatic relations between our nations.” The bishops in Cuba have historically supported greater dialogue within Cuba and between Cuba and the rest of the world (especially its diaspora) as being advantageous towards fostering a more open society. The Holy See, the Cuban bishops, and USCCB have strongly denounced Cuban crackdowns on peaceful dissent and the unwarranted use of the death penalty. USCCB stands with the Church in Cuba in defending full religious liberty and opposing governmental restrictions on ecclesial life. Such solidarity has been reinforced by visits of U.S. bishops as well as by offering 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 past U.S. policy of isolation to promote respect for human rights and a greater openness. USCCB over the years has emphasized that the principal effect of the U.S. embargo has been to strengthen Cuban government control and to weaken an already fragile civil society and economy, thereby hurting the most vulnerable. The Church in Cuba is strongly opposed to the U.S. embargo, as are most political dissidents. Any further steps towards removing barriers to engagement with Cuba are welcome to the degree that they encourage Cuban civil society and religious freedom.

USCCB is concerned about the limitations on the freedom of the Church and other parts of civil society in Cuba, and about the routine violations of human rights, including freedom of speech and assembly. Many decades of U.S.-imposed isolation have not had any discernible impact on the current regime. Change, although slow, is taking place as the Cuban government seems to be gradually exploring elements of a new economic and social system. Improving the lives of the Cuban people and encouraging democracy and human rights in Cuba will best be advanced through more, rather than less, contact between the Cuban and American peoples. The Church stands ready to assist in these endeavors. Ending the U.S.-imposed travel ban for all purposes will pressure the Cuban government to be more open, as it will not be able to blame this aspect of the embargo for the economic challenges facing the country. Removing the barriers to free commerce with Cuba, and thus deepening the trade relationship, is also another step toward greater engagement. Greater openness will structurally pressure the Cuban government into allowing greater freedoms for the people.

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

USCCB urges Congress to end all travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans, foster more trade with Cuba, and to resist efforts to re-impose more burdensome travel and other requirements in effect prior to the actions taken by President Obama. USCCB supports an eventual and complete end to an economic embargo that is morally unacceptable and politically counterproductive, and urges Congress to enact legislation to this effect. The goals of improving the lot of the Cuban people and encouraging democracy and human rights in Cuba are best accomplished through greater, rather than less, contact between the Cuban and American peoples. USCCB continues to strongly and actively support the Church in Cuba in her pastoral and evangelizing mission.

**Resources:** Statements and letters on Cuba: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/latin-america-caribbean/cuba/> **For further information:** *Christopher S. Ljungquist*: 202-541-3153(ph); 202-541-3339 (fax); CLJUNGQUIST@USCCB.ORG