



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

**Background on Cuba**  
**February 2012**

*I intend to undertake an Apostolic Journey to Mexico and Cuba before Easter, to proclaim there the Word of Christ and support the conviction that this is a precious time to evangelize with a true faith, a living hope and an ardent charity.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, December 12, 2011

## **BACKGROUND**

**The Government of President Raul Castro:** Although grave concerns remain for human rights, some new reforms have been announced by President Raul Castro that appear to provide greater latitude for Cuban citizens to own property, operate small businesses and obtain access to credit. In spite of significant restrictions that remain, religious leaders, and particularly the Catholic Church, continue to make some progress in engaging the Cuban government. After a dialogue with Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana, Raul Castro had announced that he would be releasing political prisoners. That offer has resulted in most prisoners being released and moving to Spain and in some cases, then on to other countries. Of the others who refused to leave the island, many remain incarcerated. In November 2010, the Church was allowed to dedicate the first religious institution to be built in Cuba in over 50 years—the Saint Charles and Saint Ambrose Seminary. The Church has also been permitted to operate in Havana a business school affiliated with a Spanish university, even though the provision of formal religious training and education remains restricted.

**Church Situation:** The Cuban government still places significant restrictions on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, and receiving pastoral agents from abroad, among other areas. 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. It also continues to do as much pastoral work as is possible given the restrictions still in place in Cuba. 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. As a sign of pastoral affection for the Cuban people, Pope Benedict announced that he would be visiting Cuba in March 2012. Although the Pope stressed that he would be visiting as a religious pilgrim in honor of this fourth Centenary, there will be opportunities for conversations with Cuban government officials as well as to address significant issues.

**Existing U.S. Policy:** In 2009, President Barack Obama lifted restrictions for Cuban-Americans to travel to Cuba. In January 2011, the White House also announced a new Presidential Directive lifting restrictions on purposeful travel (religious, academic, and people-to-people), allowing all Americans to send economic assistance to the Cuban people, and permitting any U.S. international airport to allow charter flights to Cuba. The USCCB welcomes these modest but important steps. Sadly, these changes have been met by attempts in Congress to re-impose more burdensome requirements which had been in existence prior to these executive orders. No legislation has passed that would either codify the lifting of restrictions or re-impose such earlier requirements.

**The Travel Ban and Other Engagement:** Efforts in Congress have focused on three areas: the sale of food and medicines, the right of U.S. citizens to travel, and the financial support (remittances) people in this country can send to people on the island. Bills have been introduced that call for lifting the travel restrictions to Cuba for all Americans and lifting some of the restrictions on agricultural sales to Cuba. More recently, amendments to appropriations in the House and the Senate have sought to reverse President Obama's executive orders that make

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it easier for U.S. citizens to visit relatives in Cuba and to transmit monetary remittances to them. To date, these efforts at legislative action have not succeeded. The December 2009 arrest of an American citizen in Cuba, up to now unresolved, continues to undermine efforts to normalize further trade and travel relationships between the U.S. and Cuba.

## **USCCB POSITION**

The bishops in Cuba have long-held the position that greater dialogue within Cuba and between Cuba and the rest of the world (especially its diaspora) would be helpful and fruitful. 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 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 and current U.S. policy of isolation to promote respect for human rights and a greater openness. 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.
- 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 provide employment opportunities for poor persons.
- The Church in Cuba is strongly opposed to the U.S. embargo, as are most political dissidents. Any steps towards removing barriers to engagement with Cuba are welcome and encouraged to the degree that they do not undermine Cuban civil society and religious freedom.

USCCB is deeply concerned about the 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. 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 opening itself up to 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 Cuban and American peoples. Ending the U.S.-imposed travel ban will pressure the Cuban government to be more open since it will not be able to blame this aspect of the embargo for the economic challenges facing Cuba. Removing the barriers to agricultural exports to Cuba, and thus deepening the trade relationship, is also another step toward greater engagement. Increased agricultural sales to Cuba will not undermine the Cuban agricultural sector as it is unable to provide enough food for its people and will allow Cubans greater access to food supplies for domestic consumption.

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

USCCB urges Congress to end the travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans and allow increased agricultural sales to Cuba, and to resist efforts to re-impose more burdensome travel and remittance requirements in effect prior to the actions taken by President Obama in 2009. 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 democracy in Cuba are best accomplished through greater, rather than less, contact between Cuban and American peoples. USCCB continues to support strongly and actively the Church in Cuba in her pastoral and evangelizing mission.

**For further information:** visit [www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) or contact *Richard Coll*: 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); [rcoll@usccb.org](mailto:rcoll@usccb.org).

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