



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

Background on Cuba January 2016

“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

BACKGROUND

The Government of President Raul Castro: Although 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 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, 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 existing controls, reach many sick, elderly, and disabled people. It also continues to do significant pastoral work within the restrictions still in place in Cuba. As a sign of pastoral affection for the Cuban people, Pope Francis visited Cuba in September 2015.

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. On December 17, 2014, President Obama announced the humanitarian release of Alan Gross from prison in Cuba and of certain Cuban prisoners being held in the United States, and outlined an agreement to restore U.S.-Cuban diplomatic relations.

As Bishop Oscar Cantú, Chair of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, noted: “We share the joy of the family of Alan Gross and of all Americans upon hearing the news of his release from over five years of custody in Cuba, as well as the humanitarian release of other prisoners...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. We strongly support the review of Cuba’s designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.”

Progress has been made since December 2014 with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, as well as with the lifting of Cuba’s designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. Conversations continue on internet and telecommunications cooperation, as well as on drug trafficking and health concerns. USCCB welcomes these important steps and urges greater progress in fostering democracy and human rights in Cuba.

The Travel Ban and Other Engagement: A full repeal of the 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 Cuba. Sadly, however, some in Congress have sought to re-impose some of

the more burdensome requirements concerning trade and travel with 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 restrict the President's authority have not succeeded.

USCCB POSITION

The bishops in Cuba have long held that greater dialogue within Cuba and between Cuba and the rest of the world (especially its diaspora) would be helpful. 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's basic message 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. 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 and encouraged to the degree that they do not undermine Cuban civil society and religious freedom. New constraints on travel and trade need to be avoided, and existing prohibitions need to be eliminated.

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 Cuban and American peoples. Ending for all purposes 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 free commerce with Cuba, and thus deepening the trade relationship, is also another step toward greater engagement.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB urges Congress to end all travel limitations on visits to Cuba by all Americans and allow increased 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 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 <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/latin-america-caribbean/cuba/> or contact *Richard Coll: 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); rcoll@usccb.org.*

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