



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

Background on Cuba September 2015

“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. In spite of the significant restrictions that remain, religious leaders, and particularly the Catholic Church, continue to make measured progress in engaging the Cuban government. Prisoners have been released and the Church has been allowed to dedicate the first religious institution to be built in Cuba in over 50 years—the Saint Charles and Saint Ambrose Seminary. In Havana, the Church has also been permitted to operate 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 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 as much pastoral work as is possible given the restrictions still in place in Cuba. As a sign of pastoral affection for the Cuban people, Pope Francis visited Cuba in September 2015. Although the Pope will be visiting as a religious pilgrim, opportunities for conversations with Cuban government officials should take place.

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 in a statement on that same day: “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 in the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States, as well as in the lifting of Cuba’s designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. USCCB welcomes these important steps.

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, others in Congress have sought to re-impose some of the

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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:

- The principal effect of the U.S. embargo has been to strengthen Cuban government control and to weaken an already fragile 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 suffer real and constant deprivation of both food and other human needs. A complete end to 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 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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