



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

**Background on Cuba**  
May 2008

*I wish to mention Cuba, which is preparing to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the visit of my venerable Predecessor. Pope John Paul II was received with affection by the authorities and by the people, and he encouraged all Cubans to work together for a better future. I should like to reiterate this message of hope, which has lost none of its relevance.*

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 7, 2008

## **BACKGROUND**

**Transition in Cuba:** In August 2006, Fidel Castro transferred power to his younger brother, Raúl Castro. In February 2008, the transfer of power became official as Raúl became President of Cuba. Both before and after Raúl's accession, there has been much discussion of "transition" in Cuba. Signs of such transition can be seen in a series of measures introduced by the Cuban government that many consider a relaxation of existing prohibitions. Raúl has recently dropped restrictions on ownership of computers and private property. In the first ten days after new rules allowed personal use of cell phones, 7,400 Cubans signed cell phone contracts. Previously such use was restricted to government officials or foreign business employees. There are some indications that Cuba is considering lifting travel restrictions, which would be a major shift from current policy. Significant also are the planned structural changes in Cuban agriculture towards a more market-based system that indicate a much-expected Cuban economic openness to the international community.

**US Policy:** U.S. government reaction to recent changes in Cuba has been muted. This lukewarm reception of changes in Cuba has been matched by failed attempts in Congress to change U.S. policy toward Cuba. In the past despite majority votes in both houses in support of lifting certain provisions of the embargo, especially affecting travel to Cuba, the provisions were either stripped from the final bills or were never brought up. The Administration continues its firm opposition to any changes. There are several factors behind the new harder line of the current Administration. Beginning with the sudden arrests and sentencing in the spring of 2003 of some 75 peaceful Cuban dissidents, many of them activists with the Catholic-inspired Varela Project, followed by the summary execution of three ferryboat hijackers, the pro-embargo stance of the Florida Congressional delegation has been strengthened.

The U.S. has expelled Cuban diplomats. The Treasury Department has eliminated the exemption for non-degree related educational travel to Cuba. The bilateral migration agreement of 1995, providing for the orderly departure of up to 20,000 Cubans to settle here annually, is in jeopardy. And Cubans in this country now face restrictions on their travel to Cuba and on what they can send to their families there. In 2005, the House voted down amendments to end or modify the embargo.

Cuba still places significant restrictions on the Church's freedom in education, mass communications, and receiving pastoral agents from abroad. In December 2007 government authorities raided Santa Teresita Catholic Church in Santiago, ostensibly to break up a meeting of "dissidents." Archbishop Dionisio Garcia spoke out against the raid and sought an agreement with the Cuban Government to prevent such actions in the

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future. There are reports that the Church in Cuba has experienced limited improvements in its relationship with the Cuban authorities since February 2008, when Raúl Castro succeeded his brother Fidel as President.

Also from February 20 – 26, 2008, a decade after Pope John Paul II's historic trip to Cuba, Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, visited Cuba to strengthen the faith of the Cuban people and help improve church-state relations. The Cardinal met with church leaders, Cuban government officials, and the nation's president, Raul Castro. Cardinal Bertone's visit included Havana, Santa Clara, and Santiago de Cuba, where he visited the shrine to Our Lady of Charity, patroness of Cuba. He also inaugurated a monument to Pope John Paul II, in the place where the late Pope celebrated mass during his visit ten years ago. This trip was well received by all parties in Cuba.

**The Travel Ban:** Up until the events of March 2003 and the report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, expectations of reversing the decades-old Cuba sanctions policy were high. Votes in both houses clearly pointed to lifting restrictions in three areas: the sale of food and medicines, the right of U.S. citizens to travel, and the amount Cubans in this country can send to their families on the island. In recent years, Congress has focused greater attention on the travel ban.

### **USCCB POSITION**

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's basic message over the years has made the following points:

- The principal effect of the U.S. embargo is to strengthen government control, providing the basis for the constant denunciation of the U.S., blaming Cuba's genuine shortages of medicines and food on the embargo, instead of on a failed economic system and the end of Soviet subsidies.
- Dollar-laden tourists and the party faithful in Cuba live well enough, and Cuba is a world leader in certain areas of medicine for paying tourists, but the average poor Cuban--a majority--suffers real and constant deprivation of both food and basic healthcare.
- The Church in Cuba is unalterably opposed to the U.S. embargo, as are most political dissidents.

USCCB is well aware of the many 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. Neither international pressure, nor Pope John Paul II's visit, has succeeded in changing conditions which may now be worsening. However, America's next president faces a choice: Continue a Cuba policy rooted in ineffective sanctions or tailor U.S. policy to promote greater engagement in light of new possibilities and opportunities to promote positive social change in Cuba.

### **ACTION REQUESTED**

USCCB urges Congress to support efforts to drop the travel limitations for visits by families here to their family members in Cuba and asks their support for legislative efforts by the Senate and House Cuba Working Groups to end an economic embargo that is morally unacceptable and politically counterproductive. The goals of improving the lot of the Cuban people and encouraging the democratization of the governance of Cuba are best accomplished through greater rather than less contact between the Cuban and American people.

**For further information:** visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/cuba.shtml> or contact *Rev. Andrew Small*, OMI 202-541-3153 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); [asmall@usccb.org](mailto:asmall@usccb.org).

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