



All is not peaceful in Cuba

May, 2016

Dear partners of God's mission in Cuba,

The historic U.S. policy changes jointly announced by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro on December 17, 2014 paved the way for a dramatic shift in diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States during the course of 2015. This process of normalization included the opening of embassies in the capitals of both countries on July 20, 2015 and culminated in Obama's historic visit to Havana on March 20-22, 2016.

However, in a new report the group Christian Solidarity Worldwide warned of "an unprecedented crackdown on churches across the denominational spectrum," which has "fueled a spike in reported violations of freedom of religion or belief." There were 220 specific violations of religious liberties in 2014, but 2300 last year, many of which "involved entire churches or, in the cases of arrests, dozens of victims." In contrast, there were only 40 cases in 2011.

One of the government's more odious practices, according to CSW, has been to threaten churches with closure if they "do not comply with government demands to expel and shun specific individuals." Failure to surrender can result in sustained surveillance, pressure on congregants to file complaints against church leaders, and approaches to denominational leadership. This attempt to socially isolate believers "has been utilized by the Cuban government since the earliest days of the Revolution." The government's repression has triggered public demonstrations.

A separate report published last month by The United States on International Religious Freedom says that "religious freedom conditions in Cuba deteriorated due to increased government actions and threats to close, demolish, or confiscate church properties. In addition, the Cuban government continues to harass religious leaders and laity, interferes in religious groups' internal affairs, and prevents democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities. Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the Cuban government actively limit, controls, and monitors religious practice through a restrictive system of laws and policies and government-authorized surveillance and harassment."

The Obama administration was right to engage Cuba. After more than 50 years, the embargo serves no useful purpose. Continuing this failed policy will not bring freedom to the island in the future. However, even lifting all economic restrictions isn't enough to turn Cuba into a democracy. Only sustained pressure from within and without Cuba is likely to force the Castro regime to yield control to the Cuban people. Americans should forthrightly encourage freedom in Cuba. Religious believers should be particularly vocal in supporting people seeking to live out their faith under Communist oppression. Someday autocracy will give way to liberty even in Cuba.

I want to again thank you for expressing your love and concern through your faithful support of all our programs. Because of you, we are able to offer thousands of lost and hurting people in Cuba with what they desperately need: the love of Jesus. Please remember to send your confidential prayer requests to Mary@echocuba.org. We consider it an honor to prayerfully intercede on your behalf.

Grace, peace, and love be yours in abundance,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Teo A. Babun, Jr."

Dr. Teo A. Babun, Jr.
Chairman