

Cuba gets first Orthodox church: Government-built Greek Orthodox cathedral in Havana

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The spiritual leader of many of the world's Orthodox Christians dedicated a government-built Greek Orthodox cathedral in Havana, Cuba, last month, and called U.S. sanctions against the communist nation a "historic mistake."

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos, in the first visit by an Orthodox patriarch to a Latin American country, dedicated the tiny San Nicolas Cathedral in downtown Havana on January 25. Bartholomeos was presented with keys to the cathedral by Cuban President Fidel Castro, who paid for the church's construction. It is the first Orthodox church built to serve the island's estimated 2,000 Orthodox Christians. In a homily, Bartholomeos said he hoped that in the future more buildings would be used for public worship.

Agence France Presse quoted the patriarch on U.S. sanctions. "The blockading of peoples and countries by society in general from other nations on Earth is a historic mistake," said Bartholomeos, according to the wire service. "And the problems between nations and countries, like those between people, are resolved through dialogue."

Bartholomeos skipped a reception sponsored by an American diplomat that featured political dissidents, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. In his place, he sent Archbishop Demetrios, the U.S. Greek Orthodox leader, because he was too busy, officials said.

The ecumenical patriarch's visit was part of a six-day visit by a 30-member delegation from the National Council of Churches. The NCC leaders pressed their case with the Cuban government for the release of 75 political prisoners arrested in the spring of 2003. But the NCC, whose delegation was hosted by the Cuban Council of Churches, has for years opposed U.S. sanctions against Cuba during the long

Castro regime. The delegation asked Washington in December if its members could make a humanitarian visit to some of the 660 terrorism detainees at the U.S. Marine base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The request to enter Guantánamo was rejected in a letter to NCC executive Bob Edgar by Jeffrey M. Starr, principal director for Special Operations Program Support in the Defense Department. Starr said access to Guantánamo is limited to representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross and government officials. Starr added that the 660 “enemy combatants” at the base receive “proper shelter and medical care. Each is allowed to exercise his religious beliefs, and has been provided with a Qur’an to do so. Additionally, all are provided food consistent with their religious requirements.” *-Religion News Service*