

Churches challenge plan to limit religious assistance to Cuba: Outraged by latest restrictions on humanitarian aid

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A Bush administration recommendation that the United States should further limit humanitarian and religious aid to Cuba is contrary to religious freedom, say many U.S. Christian groups with long ties to Protestants on the island.

The Commission on Assistance to a Free Cuba released a report July 10 with recommendations designed to foster democracy in the Caribbean communist nation. President Bush gave the interagency task force—headed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez—the task of devising plans to ease Cuba’s transition to democracy once longtime dictator Fidel Castro, now 80, dies.

The report included measures designed to further tighten the nearly 50-year-old U.S. embargo of Cuba. One recommendation was to ban U.S. groups from providing humanitarian aid to Cuban organizations that the administration deems too closely tied to Castro’s regime.

The report advises the government to tighten strictures on U.S. groups’ “export of humanitarian items, other than agricultural or medical commodities, to ensure that exports are consigned to entities that support an independent civil society and are not regime-administered or -controlled organizations, such as the Cuban Council of Churches.”

That recommendation—and the fact that the commission singled out the Cuban Protestant group—outraged officials of the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches.

“We strongly feel that it is completely inappropriate for the U.S. government, or any government, to determine who is and who is not a legitimate national council of churches and to restrict or deny Christian fellowship and humanitarian assistance to any particular national church council, including the Cuban Council of Churches,” said Samuel Kobia, the WCC’s general secretary, in a July 11 letter to Bush.

The Cuban body, embracing half the nation’s Protestant churches, had partnered with the NCC and WCC in humanitarian work long before Castro seized power. A news release from the U.S.-based Church World Service said the recommendation “flies in the face of religious freedom.” CWS said it is “looking into the possibility of a lawsuit” if Bush chooses to implement the recommendation.

The move is the latest setback the Bush administration has dealt to religious, humanitarian and educational groups working with Cuban people.

In recent months the Treasury Department has declined to renew travel licenses for several mainline Protestant denominations and other religious groups with long track records of sending missions and humanitarian workers to Cuba. The groups include the American Baptist Churches, the United Methodist Church, the Disciples of Christ and the National Council of Churches.

Due to the government’s embargo on commerce with Cuba, religious groups must use renewable travel permits for religious activity to enable U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba. The permits are granted through the Treasury Department.

A bipartisan congressional group this year sent a letter to federal officials opposing new restrictions on religious travel to Cuba—restrictions they said would make it virtually impossible for anyone other than members of a local church to get a Cuba travel license.

The head of one Baptist group whose Cuba license was suspended last year said July 11 that the latest recommendations are not surprising. “There is no doubt in my mind that the administration has not only exceeded its regulatory authority but also has trampled on the free exercise of religion—not only in this action but in a series of actions limiting our ability to work with churches in Cuba,” said Stan Haste, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists.

That network of churches partners with a Cuban Baptist denomination that pairs U.S. churches with Cuban congregations.

Referring to the WCC and NCC reactions, Hasteley said, "I fully understand why they are outraged by the president's signing off on this—and by that coterie of Castro-haters at the State Department, dominated by hardline Cuban Americans who, by the way, do not represent even the Cuban-American community in this country." - *Associated Baptist Press*