

March 8, 2023

The Honorable Robert Menendez
210 Hudson Street
Harborside 3, Suite 1000
Jersey City, NJ 07311

Dear Senator Menendez:

As the Conference of Bishops for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a body of 3 million members, we appeal to you on behalf of the Lutheran churches in Cuba, religious people across Cuba, indeed all Cuban people. Whatever the faults of the Cuban government, we know from the firsthand accounts of colleagues that most Cubans suffer greatly under the economic sanctions imposed by the previous U.S. president's administration. We call upon you to help relieve the collective suffering of the Cuban people.

Across the island there are significant shortages of food, fuel, and medicine. These shortages are causing malnutrition in rural and outlying populations. Hospitals lack basic supplies. Patients have had to bring their own bandages and medicines. Cancer patients have been sent home without treatment because standard drugs are unavailable. Rolling blackouts have occurred across the island because energy must be rationed. Families lack access to food sufficient for their households. The crisis has impelled up to a half million people to leave their homes and undertake either the dangerous land journey through Latin America to the southwest border of the United States or the dangerous sea crossing to the Florida Keys. Since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, over 300,000 Cubans have entered the United States.

What are the direct reasons for this crisis? The United States has included Cuba on its list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (SST), identified it as a state sponsor of religious repression, blocked its oil shipments from Venezuela, blocked remittances, imposed 240 special sanctions under the Trump administration, and failed to act on the 20-memorandum signed under the Obama administration. The cumulative effect of our government actions is the collective suffering of all Cubans. This is neither morally nor pragmatically justified.

Right now, the Florida-Bahamas Synod of the ELCA is working with Norwegian church partners to send Cuba a shipping container of medical supplies, but the New York bank acting as agent has frozen funds and demands a special license from the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control. Three months have passed since the partners applied for that license. On what grounds should these funds be kept from them, and the license not granted?

The only restrictions to our humanitarian and religious work have come from our own government. We have processed through the streets of Cuba with the cross of Christ and freely engaged people on all manner of topics. Cuba is not a state sponsor of terrorism but has participated in securing the peace process in Colombia. The *Washington Post* has found no evidence that Cuba used microwaves as a weapon against U.S. embassy employees. Cuba endorses all international accords to combat terrorism, cooperates with the U.S. military in drug interdiction, accepts returning migrants and allows humanitarian flights to Haiti to pass through its airspace.

We implore you to help reverse the current economic and international sanctions against Cuba and initiate a pathway toward normalizing diplomatic relations. We stand ready to assist the people of Cuba in their recovery and to work with your office in creating a future beyond hostility between our nations.

Sincerely,



Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew
New Jersey Synod of the ELCA
Chair, ELCA Conference of Bishops



Bishop Pedro Suarez
Florida-Bahamas Synod of the ELCA