

Organizations Call on the U.S. for Immediate Disaster Relief, Enhanced Bilateral Cooperation, and Suspension of Sanctions to Support the Cuban People Amid Explosion at Cuba's Largest Oil Storage Facility

WASHINGTON—The undersigned organizations call on the U.S. government to expedite technical and direct disaster relief assistance to Cuba, engage in ongoing bilateral dialogue and cooperation, and suspend relevant sanctions to facilitate the response and recovery from the explosions at the Supertanker Base in the Industrial Zone of Matanzas and their after-effects.

We are saddened to learn of the many injured, missing, and dead as a result of the series of recent explosions at the Matanzas Supertanker Base and subsequent uncontrolled fire at Cuba's largest oil storage facility. We extend our condolences to the families and communities impacted, extending from Matanzas to Mayabeque, Havana, and beyond.

While we are encouraged to see that the U.S. and Cuban governments are already in conversation about the U.S. providing technical assistance, the humanitarian and medical exceptions in U.S. sanctions are fraught with bureaucratic obstacles that impede the agile and urgent response that is needed. We urge the White House to call for expedited disaster relief support across all relevant agencies and extend the necessary emergency humanitarian aid to respond to the incident and its ramifications on the island. As such, the U.S. government should:

- Expand technical assistance and disaster relief resources by mobilizing key U.S. government agencies to deploy on-the-ground support directly or through international agencies, in coordination with the government of Cuba, the international community, and relief agencies.
- Suspend relevant restrictions to facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid to address immediate needs, including access to clean water, food, medical care, transportation, among other areas related to energy. Specifically, the U.S. government should restore the EAR license exception (equivalent to a general license) to permit donations to certain Cuban state-run health and humanitarian relief entities when those donations would directly benefit the Cuban people. Humanitarian organizations, religious groups, and private citizens are eager to help, and restoring this exception will enable them to assist more quickly and effectively.
- Authorize a general license for U.S. private sector firms to provide Cuba with assistance directly related to the current emergency and recovery.
- Build on the immediate disaster relief measures above to provide sustained support for the phases of disaster risk reduction and early recovery.

Cuba's current energy and economic crisis—the island's worst since the fall of the Soviet Union—has been an ongoing source of great desperation and hardship. Before the explosions at the oil facility, Cubans were already experiencing major problems due to the unstable electric system and lack of fuel, including hours-long outages and scheduled blackouts. This sudden loss of fuel and storage capacity infrastructure caused by the fire is likely to aggravate the energy situation in the island and contribute to outward migration. Facing the possible collapse of Cuba's electrical grid, the U.S. government could assist in these critical times by authorizing humanitarian exemptions for the export of oil or LPG (Liquified Petroleum Gas) to the island. Furthermore, the 2017 [U.S. -](#)

[Cuba bilateral oil spill preparedness and response agreement](#) could serve as a framework for further disaster relief and response cooperation.

In the longer term, the U.S. government should take the following specific actions to help break Cuba's cycle of energy dependency:

- Relaunch the U.S.-Cuba Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Working Group to discuss issues of energy security.
- Conduct knowledge-sharing activities compliant with Section 515.591 of the Cuban Assets Control Regulations to help Cuba develop an energy strategy focused on decreasing dependence on imports from other countries.
- Incorporate Cuba into President Biden's proposed Clean Energy Export and Climate Investment Initiative, a plan to promote American clean energy exports and investments focusing on small island states in the Pacific and Caribbean as well as the newly [announced](#) United States-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030.

Disaster relief cooperation with Cuba has a long-standing precedent, even in the midst of a tense bilateral relationship with the United States. In the short-term, aid is needed but the ramifications of this event will be felt for years and require long-term commitments in disaster relief and climate change mitigation programs to help Cuba recover.

Joint efforts by the United States and Cuba have resulted in some of the most effective responses to natural disasters, demonstrated need on both sides for cooperation to provide healthcare solutions, and create systems to efficiently respond to and mitigate damage from man-made environmental catastrophes. These efforts include informal medical collaboration in [Pakistan](#) in 2005 and [Haiti](#) in 2010 following deadly earthquakes, Central and West Africa in 2014 during the Ebola epidemic, at the U.S. military base at Guantanamo Bay in 2018 following a wildfire outbreak, and [cooperation](#) in 2018 to coordinate pollution responses for offshore oil and hydrocarbon spills.

Last May, the U.S. and Cuba met for the first time in several years to discuss the implementation of the bilateral migration accords. The Biden-Harris administration's commitment "to pursuing constructive discussions with the Government of Cuba" was an important first step. In light of the terrible situation unfolding in Matanzas and Cuba's ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis, we urge the Administration to restart broader bilateral diplomatic engagement with Cuba on a range of issues, which will address U.S. national security interests and U.S. policy goals pertaining to disaster relief and climate change mitigation, reduce bilateral tensions, adhere to U.S. regional cooperation commitments, and mitigate future crises. Areas that will bear fruit and already have agreements in place include: Law enforcement and counter-narcotics; Environmental protection; Agriculture; Public Health; and Climate Change.

Sustained support for the Cuban people is especially critical right now as this horrible tragedy will undoubtedly accelerate the severe energy and economic crisis, among other challenges for Cubans that have also been exacerbated by long-standing blanket U.S. sanctions. To reduce further suffering, the U.S. government should suspend the sanctions that disproportionately hurt the Cuban people by expanding remittances channels; loosening regulations on banking and online payment processing; and simplifying end-user verification requirements for the exportation of medical supplies, instruments, and equipment.

With only 91 miles separating the U.S. and Cuba, the 93 mile-long smoke plume emanating from Matanzas is a visual reminder that the U.S. and Cuba are close neighbors and ongoing dialogue is critical to resolve short-term and long-term needs of the Cuban people as well as to safeguard the interests of the United States.

Alliance of Baptists

Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA)

Cuba Puentes Inc.

Cuba Partners Network, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Cuba Study Group

CubaOne Foundation

Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)

Florida Council of Churches

Fund for Reconciliation and Development

Latin America Working Group (LAWG)

Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba (MEDICC)

Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Ocean Foundation (TOF)

The United Methodist Church — General Board of Church and Society

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)