

# President Obama's Historic Visit to Cuba

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President Obama traveled to Cuba from March 20 to 22, 2016—the first visit of a U.S. President since Calvin Coolidge visited in 1928. Before the trip, the White House set forth the [goals of the visit](#), stating that the President would build on progress toward normalizing relations, including advancing commercial and people-to-people ties and expressing support for human rights.

The trip is the latest significant action by the President since his December 2014 announcement of the major shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba, moving away from a sanctions-based policy toward one of engagement. Since then, the Administration has rescinded Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism (May 2015) and reestablished diplomatic relations (July 2015). The [Treasury](#) and [Commerce](#) Departments have conducted four rounds of regulatory changes, the [most recent](#) on March 16, 2016, to ease the economic embargo that was first imposed in 1962. These changes have significantly eased sanctions on a range of transactions with Cuba, including those relating to travel, remittances, trade, telecommunications, and banking and financial services.

Over the past 15 months, U.S. and Cuban officials also have engaged in numerous [bilateral meetings](#) on telecommunications, human trafficking and other human rights issues, migration, law enforcement, counternarcotics, and property claims, with agreements reached on direct mail service, environmental cooperation, and civil aviation (regularly scheduled flights are to begin later this year).

During his visit, President Obama announced additional initiatives, including support for [collaboration between the U.S. and Cuban agricultural sectors](#); Cuban participation in the Administration's [100,000 Strong in the Americas Initiative](#) to increase student exchanges; and new partnerships in health, science, and the environment. The President attended an event with [Cuban entrepreneurs](#) to demonstrate support for the country's nascent private sector. At the event, he noted such commercial plans as General Electric selling aviation and energy equipment, the Alabama-based Cleber company building tractors in Cuba, Starwood and Marriott planning to operate hotels in joint ventures with Cuba, and Carnival beginning cruise service in May. The President also attended a baseball game between the Tampa Bay Rays and the

Cuban national team in a significant demonstration of [sports diplomacy](#).

As a reflection of the momentous shift in his Administration's policy toward Cuba, President Obama [said](#) during the trip that he had "come here to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas." The policy shift on Cuba, which has been lauded throughout Latin America, has helped to bolster the image of the United States in the region and solidify the Administration's message that it is committed to sustained engagement and partnership in the Americas.

Respect for human rights was a major focus of the visit, and President Obama spoke out strongly on the issue. Just a day before the President's arrival, the Cuban government disrupted the weekly peaceful protest march of the Ladies in White human rights group, again demonstrating the government's severe repression of political dissent. In a [joint press conference](#) with President Raúl Castro, President Obama said that the United States would "continue to speak up on behalf of democracy, including the right of the Cuban people to decide their own future" and to "speak out on behalf of universal human rights, including freedom of speech, and assembly, and religion." In contrast, President Castro became defensive when asked about political prisoners in Cuba.

President Obama spoke out most forcefully for advancing human rights during his [televised speech to the Cuban nation](#). While maintaining that the United States "will not impose our political or economic system on you," the President said:

I believe citizens should be free to speak their mind without fear—to organize, and to criticize their government, and to protest peacefully, and that the rule of law should not include arbitrary detentions of people who exercise those rights. I believe that every person should have the freedom to practice their faith peacefully and publicly. And, yes, I believe voters should be able to choose their governments in free and democratic elections.

Speaking directly to President Castro, President Obama said:

I am also confident that you need not fear the different voices of the Cuban people—and their capacity to speak, and assemble, and vote for their leaders. In fact, I'm hopeful for the future because I trust that the Cuban people will make the right decisions.

President Obama met for almost two hours with [13 prominent human rights and political activists](#), including Berta Soler, leader of the Ladies in White; José Daniel Ferrer, leader of the Patriotic Union of Cuba; Elizardo Sánchez, president of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation (CCDHRN); and Antonio Rodiles, coordinator of [Estado de Sats](#), a forum to promote cultural, social, and political debate. The meeting itself signaled recognition of the activists. Another participant, human rights activist and independent journalist Miriam Leiva, commented that no head of state visiting Cuba had met with prominent dissidents, "[not even the popes](#)." The CCDHRN has worked on human rights issues for more than 20 years and closely follows the issues of political prisoners and short-term detentions in Cuba. At the meeting, its president reportedly provided a list of 89 [political prisoners](#), including 11 already released on parole.

Looking ahead, the extent to which President Obama's trip will spur the pace of the normalization process will depend on several factors. These include, as the President acknowledged during the trip, the extent to which the Cuban government makes progress on human rights issues and the extent to which Cuba takes advantage of the recent regulatory changes to the U.S. embargo.

Moreover, as President Obama noted, even if the United States lifted the embargo tomorrow (which the President has called on Congress to do on numerous occasions), "Cubans would not realize their potential without change in Cuba." He pointed to such needed changes as making it easier to open a business, allowing workers to get jobs directly with companies that invest in Cuba, eliminating the use of two currencies that separate the types of salaries that Cubans can earn, and expanding Internet access so that Cubans can connect to the wider world.

**Also see** CRS In Focus IF10045, [Cuba: President Obama's New Policy Approach](#); CRS Report R43926, [Cuba: Issues for the 114th Congress](#); CRS Report R43888, [Cuba Sanctions: Legislative Restrictions Limiting the Normalization of Relations](#); CRS Report R44119, [U.S. Agricultural Trade with Cuba: Current Limitations and Future Prospects](#); CRS Legal Sidebar WSLG1405, [Can Creditors Enforce Terrorism Judgments Against Cuba?](#); and CRS Report R44137, [Naval Station Guantanamo Bay: History and Legal Issues Regarding Its Lease Agreements](#).