

World Day of Prayer 2016 • Supplemental Materials

About Cuba



Santiago de Cuba and the whole eastern part of the country in 2012.

The flora is rich and diverse. The national tree is the royal palm and the national flower is the white butterfly jasmine, which was used to transmit messages during the liberation wars, as a sign of Cuban identity.

History

Cuba is an indigenous word that means “cultivated land.” The native Arawaks from Venezuela and Guyana crossed the Caribbean Sea to take advantage of the fertile soil of the island. Spanish colonizers enslaved the native population, resulting in almost complete extinction of the indigenous people. They were

replaced by large numbers of slaves brought over from Africa and sold to landowners. The slave trade lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. A web of relationships formed among landowning families, giving rise to the term *criollo*, men and women of Spanish descent who were born on Cuban soil, who created a new way of living and thinking about their identity. On October 10, 1868, one of these landowners, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, freed his slaves and the first struggle against Spanish colonialism was initiated. This struggle became known as the Ten Years’ War.

This war strengthened another group of valiant Cubans, headed by José Martí, Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez, who took up arms in 1895 in a second conflict known as the War of Independence.

In 1902 the Republic of Cuba was created. Cubans’ freedom was constrained, however, by the Platt Amendment, which gave the United States the right to intervene in internal island matters whenever they thought it convenient. This law was abolished in

Geography

The Republic of Cuba is a beautiful, green archipelago in the shape of a caiman or alligator. It consists of over 4,000 islands, many of which are uninhabited and covered with mangrove forests. Cuba is the largest of the Caribbean islands and is located at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico.

Cuba has a population of 11,116,000; of those, approximately 2 million live in the country’s capital, Havana. According to the National Census of 2012, the population self-classified as 64.1% white, 9.3% black and 26.6% *mestizo* (of both European and Amerindian descent). The official language is Spanish. National symbols include the “flag of the solitary star,” the national anthem (“La Bayamesa/The Bayamo Song”) and the national coat of arms; all are deeply rooted in the traditions, identity and conscience of the people.

The climate is subtropical with an average temperature of 78°F. Cuba’s geographical location and elongated shape favor the passage of hurricanes, like Sandy, that caused serious damage to the city of

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1934 due to pressure from labor and student movements. However, the rights to the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base were maintained by lease. Even today, this piece of national territory remains under the control of the U.S. government, despite repeated demands by the Cuban government that it be returned to the Cuban people. Guantánamo is the largest naval base in the Caribbean and its prison is among those with the most violations against human rights in the world.

In the 1950's, the economy suffered under Batista's dictatorship; poverty was widespread and the most vulnerable of Cuban society suffered. A new movement, formed under the leadership of Fidel Castro, started what is known as the National Liberation War to bring down this dictatorship. After many attempts, Castro triumphed on January 1, 1959, and the transformation became known as the Cuban Revolution.

Fidel Castro fought alongside other leaders, such as Ernesto Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, Celia Sánchez Manduley and Haydée Santamaría. Their goal was to help the most disadvantaged Cubans: peasants, workers, children, women and the poor. Illiteracy was eliminated, large companies and foreign monopolies were nationalized, and public health care was made available to everyone.

The Cuban Revolution, supported politically and economically by the countries of the socialist bloc, moved more and more toward Marxist–Leninist ideology. From the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the great political and economic change among socialist countries, Cuba found itself in deep crisis. It



no longer received food, fuel and other important trade items. This began what Cubans call the Special Period, a time when basic products were unavailable. This scarcity was intensified by the reinforcement of the embargo that the U.S. government maintained since the Revolution of 1959.

Form of Government

Since 1961, the Republic of Cuba has maintained a democratic socialist government led by the National Assembly of People's Power, the only constituent and legislative authority in the country. Its members are elected by each municipality and province and are responsible for directing and protecting the nation's social, economic and political life. The Assembly holds elections every five years, and any citizen may nominate a candidate, regardless of gender, race or creed. Since 2008, Raúl Castro Ruz has been the president. He is

also the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba.

Women are well represented in the Constituent Assembly. They make up 43.3 percent of delegates and 29.5 percent of presidents of municipal governments. According to the Interparliamentary Union, Cuba ranks fourth in the world in terms of number of women in parliament.

The state is led by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba whose philosophy is Marxist–Leninist. Its main objective has been to preserve the achievements of the Revolution, especially the defense of freedom and equality of rights for all citizens.

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Economy

The Cuban economy has fluctuated between improvement in the population's standard of living, growth versus reduction of external debt and increase of gross domestic product. Wages are not in keeping with the needs of the people; very often there is a lack of medicines, food, personal hygiene items and transportation.

As a result of the island's recent changes in economic policies, the most significant contributions now come from international tourism and small business. The export of coffee, nickel and tobacco, the rise of cooperatives in the agricultural sector, and small private service initiatives are noteworthy.

The national currency is the Cuban peso, but there is also the freely convertible Cuban peso (CUC), equivalent to the U.S. dollar. This duplication of currency has resulted in serious problems for many, since most people receive their income in Cuban pesos. The country is currently working toward the adoption of a single-currency system.

The social successes achieved since 1959 have been threatened over the years by the embargo that the U.S. government has maintained over the island. This reality is clearly manifested in the shortage of raw materials and other resources required for industry. The commercial, economic and financial embargo of the U.S. government on Cuba began in 1960, and the breakdown of diplomatic relations in 1961. The humanitarian and social impact of the embargo has affected all spheres of life of the Cuban people, including churches and family relationships. Close to 70 percent of the Cuban population was born under the embargo. More than 50 years later, it continues to be said that the embargo is humanitarily unjust for the whole Cuban people.

In the past year, however, there is evidence that things are changing dramatically. In August 2015, both Cuba and the United States opened their respective embassies and there is hope that diplomatic relations will continue to grow and improve.

Society

The social formation of Cuba is marked by *mestizaje* (cultural and racial blending) and transculturation, typical of the relationships produced throughout history among indigenous people, Chinese, whites and blacks. Until the mid twentieth century, Cuban society was divided. The most powerful classes were those who owned the means of production. In 1959 the life of Cuban society changed drastically, as the people became the ones who managed the means of production.

There is insistence on the improvement of the quality of life of the people, particularly that of senior citizens, women and children. However, the changes in economic, social and political relationships continue to affect the majority of the population and chart new courses for the socialist Cuban society.

Family, maternity and marriage are institutions that have received the protection of the state since 1940, when the Second Constitution of the Republic was approved. Since then, both spouses have absolute equality of rights, and marriages may be dissolved when any of the parties expresses his or her desire to do so.

Family life has been affected by the many changes. There is discontent and violence. Sons and daughters are worried by their continued economic dependence on parents. Another challenge Cuban families face is the aging of the population, coupled with emigration, primarily of youth, to developed countries.

Education

In 1961 a literacy campaign was launched. From that point on, there has been a cultural and educational explosion. Many types of schools opened, from primary to specialized and technical schools and universities. The opportunity to study for free is available to anyone. There are also various distance education programs; mass media, especially television, are used to disseminate courses and programs that can reach large numbers. The faculties of medical schools (open to anyone who passes the aptitude test

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and where a considerable number of women enroll each year) are outstanding. Women remain the majority in the educational system, not just as students, but also as educators at all levels.

Culture

Cuban culture is like its typical dish, *ajiaco*, which unites the flavors of various meats, vegetables, banana, cassava, sweet potato, dasheen and corn. The influence of Spain and Africa is great, as is the heritage of the indigenous people. The influence of Chinese and French, the richness of the Latino and Caribbean culture from the Greater Antilles, and influences from North America are all evident. All have left their lasting traces in the sentiments, forms, character, idiosyncrasies, lifestyle and art of Cubans.

Traditional and international classical genres play an important part in the music of Cuba. Musical nationalism and the appearance of the typically Cuban are expressed in rhythmic and syncopated music and dance—as the punta, rumba, danzón, danzonete, mamba, chachachá, son, zapateo, salsa, Cuban and guaracha. The well-known song “La Guantanamera” is attributed to José Fernández, with lyrics based on the *Versos Sencillos* by José Martí, the “national hero of Cuba.” Well-known writers include Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Dulce María Loynaz and Fina García Marrúz. Filmmakers, stage actors, playwrights, singers, painters and craftspeople daily contribute to the elevation of national art.

Health

Cuba’s health system is designed to satisfy the physical and emotional needs of the people, with numerous programs of prevention, health promotion and early diagnosis, for infants, adolescents, women, persons with disability and senior citizens. These health services are offered at different levels, from primary care in the area of residence, to secondary care in hospitals and specialty institutions.

Sexual and reproductive health includes the essential right of women to assume control and make

decisions concerning her body and sexuality, a fundamental right for her development. In addition, all deliveries must be carried out in health institutions. As a result, Cuba has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world.

An immunization program begins at birth. Nine preventable diseases have been eradicated with vaccines, and the incidence of others has been decreased, thanks to biotechnological development. Careful attention is paid to all transmissible infections that are not yet vaccine-preventable, including HIV/AIDS. Patients receive personalized attention and the supply of latest generation antiretroviral drugs, produced mainly in our pharmaceutical industries, as well social benefits. Cutting-edge research on the diagnosis and treatment of cancer is carried out, although it is difficult to obtain raw material and selective medicines from overseas for treatment.

Cuba is the country with the most doctors per inhabitant. Doctors and other health specialists and technicians travel as collaborators to various countries, offering service in places where no doctors have been before. Through scholarships and agreements, hundreds of youths from all over the world study in Cuba. One of the principles of Cuban medicine is that each individual who requires medical attention is treated free of charge, regardless of creed, ideology, race or sex.

Religion

In Cuba, the profession of faith is an important component of the people and culture, despite having passed through a period when the practice of religion was marginalized by the official atheist policy.

In the 1990s, the Constitution guaranteed religious freedom and people returned to the public practice of faith. Today, there is considerable growth in Christian congregations, some of which had survived thanks to the extraordinary women who occupied leadership positions in ministry, since many pastors emigrated to the United States or were conscripted into military service.

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The most deeply rooted religion is Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church, which now has over 600 parishes across the country, arrived with Spanish colonization in the fifteenth century. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the arrival of various protestant and evangelical churches, which now include over 60 denominations including: Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal and Orthodox churches.

There is popular acceptance of Afro-Cuban religions, which have their roots in the religiosity brought and cultivated by enslaved Africans. Islam, Judaism, Spiritualism and new Christian religious movements with fundamentalist tendencies are also present in Cuba, albeit in lesser proportions.

Situation of Women

Cuban women play an important role in society, church and family, although they deal with a long legacy of suffering and discrimination. Today, there are still patterns of behavior that denote a patriarchal and male chauvinist culture at all levels of society.

After the Revolution, women were incorporated as an active force in the construction of the new society, when broadening opportunities allowed them to improve their scientific-technical and professional training. In 1961, the Federation of Cuban Women was formed by Vilma Espín, a young chemical engineer and leader in the Revolution. This organization is composed of 4 million Cuban women of all professional categories, as well as qualified technicians, skilled workers and peasants.

The women's federation worked to change the employment system and allow women to occupy posts traditionally assigned to men; to change the constitution and labor code to guarantee equal rights for men and women; and to create daycare centers for the children of working mothers.

Today more than 46 percent of those employed in the public sector are women; women constitute 68 percent of the technically and professionally qualified labor force; and 39 percent of managers are women.