

# NEWS RELEASE

From Congressman Joe Moakley, 9th District, Massachusetts

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## MOAKLEY STATEMENT ON CUBA TRIP

WASHINGTON -- Congressman Joe Moakley released the following statement from his office today on his recent trip to Cuba:

"I traveled to Cuba for two basic reasons --- first, to try to create an atmosphere in which relations between the US and Cuba could be improved; and, second, to find ways to support ordinary Cuban people.

My trip was hosted by the ABC Forum on Cuba, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating US citizens on issues related to Cuba and to supporting the activities of NGO's promoting human rights and helping the Cuban people.

Our delegation consisted of 23 participants ranging from business leaders to NGO's like the Boston-based Oxfam America.

I met with a variety of people while in Cuba -- including top Cuban government officials, church leaders, dissidents, NGO's, foreign diplomats, US officials.

I even had the chance to visit a small group of farmers who are working with Oxfam on a project to increase agriculture production for sale on the open market. These farmers and all the ordinary people I had the chance to meet, were excited to talk with our delegation and candid about their hopes for closer ties with people in the United States.

In addition, my aide Jim McGovern and I had a 2 hour private meeting with Cuban President Fidel Castro. Afterwhich, the Cuban leader met with our entire group for another 2 hour session. I told President Castro that we are at a crossroads in terms of US-Cuba relations. The United States Congress is nearing final action on the so-called Helms-Burton Bill which, if signed into

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law, will strengthen the current economic embargo and end any possibility for improved relations anytime in the near future.

I told President Castro that there must be more movement in Cuba with regard to human rights and economic reforms -- and urged him to act now. He seemed responsive and pledged to give my request very serious and immediate consideration.

We also had an excellent meeting with Jaime Cardinal Ortega -- the Roman Catholic Cardinal in Cuba. His Eminence told us that the official position of the Catholic Bishops was against the US embargo for humanitarian reasons. He also was very clear about his continued concerns regarding human rights abuses that currently exist in Cuba.

On a related matter, I raised with the Cuban leadership my hope that they would invite Pope John Paul II to visit Cuba during his visit to the Caribbean later this year.

My trip began and ended with important meetings with Cuban dissident groups. While these people suggested that the difficulties in Cuba run much deeper than the economic hardships, a majority of those we met expressed opposition to the Helms-Burton legislation.

One of the things that stunned me the most about my trip is the explosion of independent entrepreneurship. There are roughly 208,000 independent family businesses operating in Cuba. This entrepreneurship is allowing people greater personal freedom from government controls. When people are no longer dependent on the government for their jobs, they are freer from economic coercion. I got the sense that the Cuban government recognizes that these small businesses are necessary for the country's economic viability and are accepting the political space that they create.

In fact, Caritas (a Catholic charitable organization in Havana) described its plans to establish training programs to help these fledgling businesses succeed. Michael Ryan, President of ABC Forum on Cuba, which organized the trip said: "It was great to see our group get excited about helping support the Cuban people, particularly in their efforts to form small businesses and independent NGOs. A number of our participants expressed a real desire to support these efforts after we concluded our trip."

The European Union is about to hold talks with the Cubans on closer economic ties -- and is using this opportunity to urge the Cuban government to improve its human rights record. The United States could have ten times more leverage with Cuba than the

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Europeans if we got serious about improving relations. Right now the embargo leaves us completely out of the picture. I'm afraid if we let Helms-Burton become law, we will lose an important opportunity to improve the situation in Cuba. Of all the meetings I had, there was consensus on one thing -- that the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans on the island. The degree to which we can encourage positive change will depend on whether or not we defeat Helms-Burton.