

Economic sanctions against Cuba should be lifted immediately

To Americans the little yellow school bus is a symbol for children and education. It is a sign of the future and at the same time brings back fond memories of childhood trips from home to school.

Last summer the little yellow school bus became a different kind of symbol when the Pastors for Peace led a caravan of 95 trucks and cars and three yellow school busses across the United States/Mexican border along with 100 tons of humanitarian aid for the people of Cuba. Pastors for Peace, an arm of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, had collected this aid, including food, medicine, wheelchairs, Bibles, bicycles, soap, toothbrushes and computers from churches and organizations across the United States to be given to the people of Cuba through the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center in Havana. The busses themselves were to go to a program for mentally impaired persons and to church youth groups in Cuba.

For the past 34 years, the United States has embargoed all trade to Cuba, including food and humanitarian supplies. Thus, Cuban hospitals cannot purchase prescription medicines from U.S. companies and Cuban churches and other humanitarian organizations cannot receive relief. Food itself is a scarce commodity to most Cubans, while we in this nation still grow more than we eat.

Pastors for Peace decided to challenge what they believed was an unjust law. Thus began their caravan, collecting relief in cities across the nation and culminating in a border crossing last summer en route to Havana. But U.S. Customs officials were unhappy with this attempt at circumnavigation and while they allowed across two of the school busses, they forced the caravaneers to carry across much of the aid by hand and confiscated the third little yellow school bus.

Rev. Lucius Walker, founder of Pastors for Peace, and 13 others who were on the last school bus, refused to leave and began what turned out to be a 23 day hunger strike. They stayed aboard the seized school bus in 100 plus degree weather, surviving only on water and juices brought to them by many supporters until the Federal government relented and allowed the school bus to cross the border. That bus is now in Havana, at the Ebenezer Baptist church.

Members of the religious community are not

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alone in their belief that the Cuba embargo is unjust to the eleven million Cubans who suffer from widespread shortages of food, medicines and fuel. Congressman Charles Rangel of New York has introduced legislation into the House of Representatives (HR2229) calling for an end to the embargo and for an opening of trade with Cuba. Citing the ending of the trade embargo with Viet Nam, Rangel points out that U.S. companies are losing \$6 billion every year that they are not allowed to do business with Cuba. "This bill addresses not only the humanitarian issues that we all care about, but also the vital issue of free trade," said Mt. Rangel, adding, "It's ridiculous to deny U.S. companies the opportunity ... because a small interest group wants to starve the Cuban people into submission." A hearing is scheduled on the bill by the House Ways and Means Committee on March 15th.

Meanwhile, the Pastors for Peace is beginning its third caravan which is scheduled to cross the Laredo border on March 9th with 145 tons of aid. Already two tons of relief supplies have crossed the U.S./Canada border bound for the caravan, despite the passage of a 1992 bill which makes it a violation to transport goods destined for Cuba across U.S. territory. It's not clear why customs officials allowed the group to cross the border although there are some indications that the Clinton Administration may be reconsidering the embargo.

In early March, watch the newspapers and television for news of the U.S./Cuba Friendship Caravan, which will include contingents not only from the United States and Canada, but also from Mexico, England, Sweden and Germany. There will be over 100 vehicles and 10 little yellow school busses. Pastors for Peace asks those who believe that people in Cuba should have food, medicine, wheelchairs and other humanitarian aid to write or call the White House, the State Department and the U.S. Department of the Treasury (of

which the Customs is an agency) during that time. And if you're interested in supporting Congressman Rangel's legislation, let your congressperson know.

The right to food and to medicine is a fundamental human right. How long can the U.S. go

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