ENCASA/US-CUBA
http://www.encasa-us-cuba.org/
Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Artists for Change in U.S.-Cuba Policy

November 23, 2010

Dear President Obama:

ENCASA/US-CUBA, the Emergency Network of Cuban American Scholars and Artists for Change in U.S.-Cuba Policy, is a national organization of more than 400 scholars and artists, including 160 Cuban American academics and professionals, affiliated with universities in more than 150 cities in 37 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Many are distinguished academics in the nation’s leading research universities. We coalesced in 2006 as a network of U.S. citizens opposed to the prevailing U.S. policy toward Cuba and committed to promoting reasoned debate in the public arena, to countering the stereotype of a monolithic Cuban American community, to challenging the disproportionate influence of an unrepresentative sector out of touch with U.S. public opinion, and to help bring about an end to a failed policy that defied all sound principles for conducting foreign affairs. We strongly supported you in the 2008 elections, not least because your statements on Cuba appeared to support ours. And we still hold to the hope that you will follow through on a historic opportunity to change a policy that for over half a century has proven to be ineffective in improving the lives of the Cuban people and in advancing the interests of the United States among its neighbors. Put more bluntly but clearly: a policy that is also unjust and harmful to U.S. interests.

In September 2008, on the eve of the election, we issued a white paper that called upon the next President of the United States to (1) rescind the 2004 restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances to the island, (2) permit unrestricted travel by U.S. citizens to Cuba, and (3) signal to the Cuban government a willingness to enter into conversations with the purpose of exploring ways to normalize relations between the two countries for their mutual benefit and to improve the lives of the Cuban people. We were gratified to see that upon election you implemented (1) and have taken tentative steps to pursue (3). We write to you now to emphasize the crucial importance of following up by Executive Order, at least in part, on (2): permitting purposeful (non-tourist) travel by all U.S. citizens to Cuba on a broader scale, not solely the tiny number of us who were born in Cuba and still have family there.

We do so for the following reasons: Issuing the executive order is in the economic and foreign policy interests of the U.S., fulfills your commitment to seek new openings with Cuba in good faith, and encourages further reforms in Cuba. There is broad support for these changes among U.S. organizations and constituencies—including 67% of Cuban Americans nationwide, and even Cuban-American registered voters in south Florida, a majority of whom in fact support ending the ban on travel to Cuba for all Americans. There is strong bipartisan support
by business and labor associations, agricultural and trade groups. There is also substantial support in the Congress: More than 180 Representatives in the current House have *cosponsored* Cuba travel and agricultural trade legislation, including 16 Republicans; 44 Senators have *cosponsored* legislation to ease Cuba travel and trade restrictions, and more than 60 would vote in favor of such proposals today. There will still be more than 50 votes in favor of such Cuba policy reforms in next year’s Senate, regardless of what position the incoming Senators eventually take. Making these changes would strengthen your presidency at home and position the U.S. on the side of the Cuban people at a truly critical moment in their history.

Mr. President, at the 2009 Summit of the Americas you promised to engage Cuba if Cuba’s government took steps to reform its economy and release political prisoners. As you know, Cuba is in the process of laying off 500,000 state workers (a tenth of its workforce), eliminating social programs, and implementing private sector reforms to absorb the unemployed workers—unprecedented in Cuban history since 1959. Cuba has also freed more than 50 political prisoners since July 2010. Issuing an Executive Order now that significantly increases travel to Cuba and reduces transactional barriers to U.S. food exports would materially demonstrate your recognition of the important changes taking place in Cuba and the U.S.’s interest in encouraging continued reforms. Indeed, you would be keeping your word. By the same token, failing to respond to Cuba’s initiatives would undermine your credibility not only in Havana, but among allies who will see your inaction as a dismaying instance of foreign policy timidity bowing to (misperceived) domestic politics.

Moving confidently forward *now* with Cuba travel and food sales regulations would fulfill your principled and long-time-coming call for a “new beginning” with Cuba, one which has to date gone unfulfilled. It would send a clear message to our compatriot Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the incoming House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairwoman (who has already said sarcastically that she plans to “help” your administration be tougher abroad by playing “bad cop”), and to other Congressional adversaries seeking to stymie every one of your initiatives, that you will not be bullied. It is the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do—and it would help make history.

On behalf of the several hundred members of ENCASA, thank you for your serious consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Rubén G. Rumbaut
ENCASA/US-CUBA Executive Committee