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Pope Francis greets a child at the conclusion of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Jan. 15, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Taking up the spirit of the recently inaugurated Holy Year 2025, the Cuban government has announced the release of 553 people currently serving prison sentences.

Cuba said it would gradually release the prisoners "in the spirit of the Ordinary Jubilee of the year 2025 declared by His Holiness" following a "thorough analysis" of the legal and humanitarian avenues to enact their release, Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in a statement Jan. 14.

The statement did not specify who would be among the 553 prisoners designated to be released.

That same day, the White House announced that it will no longer designate Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism and that it would eliminate some restrictions on Cuba.

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"We take these steps in appreciation of the Catholic Church's efforts to facilitate Cuba to take its own, constructive measures to restore liberty to its citizens and enable conditions that improve the livelihood of Cubans," the White House statement said.

Following the announcement, Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, retired archbishop of Boston, said that for the last several years he had carried messages from Francis to the presidents of the United States and Cuba "seeking the release of prisoners in Cuba and improved relationships between the two countries for the good of the Cuban people."

In the spirit of the Jubilee, which invites all people to foster forgiveness, reconciliation and various expressions of compassion, "I commend and welcome the decisions of the government of the United States and the government of Cuba to take steps that for years have seemed impossible," the cardinal said Jan. 14 in a blog post.

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The statement from Cuba's foreign ministry made no mention of the United States' measures, but noted discussions between Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel, the Cuban foreign minister and Francis on international issues "with emphasis on the unjust nature and nefarious effect of the U.S.-Cuba policy."

"His Holiness has given unequivocal proofs of his empathy and love for the Cuban people," it added.

In his bull of indiction formally proclaiming the Holy Year 2025, Francis called on governments to implement "forms of amnesty or pardon" as well as "programs of reintegration" for prisoners. After inaugurating the Holy Year 2025 at the Vatican, the pope opened a Holy Door at Rome's Rebibbia prison Dec. 26 as a symbol of hope for all incarcerated people.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.