Opinion

Guest Voices



A man transports containers of water with his children in Havana May 28, 2026. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

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The United States is prepared to provide $100 million in humanitarian assistance to Cuba, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced on May 13.

But there's a catch.

Neither the Cuban government nor its military would be allowed to manage its distribution. Instead, only humanitarian and faith-based partners, such as Caritas — the Catholic Church's humanitarian aid network — and other nonprofits would deliver the aid. That is, the U.S. is willing to provide assistance that will help the Cuban people, but it does not trust the Cuban government to distribute it.

A week later, on May 20, Rubio reinforced the caveats that came with the Trump administration's announcement during a 5-minute video address directed at the Cuban people. In his remarks, which coincided with Cuban Independence Day, he blamed Cuba's economic problems and chronic energy shortages on its own government.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel has said Cuba would accept the U.S. offer of aid "without ingratitude," while also criticizing the new approach and urging the U.S. to lift or ease the decades-old embargo. The timing of the offer was particularly challenging because it coincided with the U.S. indictment of Raúl Castro, a former Cuban president who helped lead the revolution that brought his brother, Fidel Castro, to power in 1959.



A hospital worker carries medical supplies donated by members of the European Convoy to Cuba in Havana March 16, 2026. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

The Trump administration's aid restriction may sound unusual. But as a scholar of Cuban studies and a former humanitarian aid worker, I have seen firsthand how faith-based organizations have long played a critical role in reaching Cuban families when formal systems there fall short.

You may wonder whether religious groups and other kinds of nonprofits are prepared to distribute $100 million in humanitarian aid inside Cuba.

But there's evidence that this arrangement would probably work. The Catholic Church has one of the strongest national networks in Cuba outside the government, and this would not be the first time it has coordinated the distribution of humanitarian aid.

For several months after Hurricane Melissa hammered the island's eastern provinces in 2025, Washington supported smaller humanitarian shipments to Cuba. And it sent

that assistance through the church.

From 2011 to 2017 I saw church networks become lifelines for the most vulnerable, delivering aid from governments, humanitarian organizations and faith-based groups directly into communities and opening pathways beyond Havana into rural areas where need is often greatest.

Cuba's other faiths

Not all of these faith-based groups are tied to the Catholic Church.

Protestant and evangelical churches, including Baptist and Assemblies of God communities, maintain extensive networks across Cuba.

I observed that foreign aid that arrived in Havana did not automatically reach rural provinces such as Holguín or Santiago de Cuba. Getting it there required trucks, fuel, warehouses, local partners and logistical assets that Cuba lacked even then and has in much shorter supply now.

I worked directly with vulnerable communities in the aftermath of hurricanes and other disasters in Cuba to help deliver lifesaving aid, including food and clean water, to those most in need.



People recover belongings from a home flooded by Hurricane Melissa in Santiago de Cuba Oct. 29, 2025. (AP/Ramón Espinosa)

That experience makes me certain that other faith-based networks could potentially also play a critical role in delivering U.S. humanitarian aid as they have done in years past and in the spring of 2026.

Many of Cuba's faith-based groups operate through house churches — small congregations that meet inside private homes instead of formal church buildings. They emerged because the Cuban government didn't allow anyone to build new churches after a constitutional change in 1992 led to somewhat more freedom for worshippers. New local congregations could form, but they had to be based in houses. House churches are now deeply connected to their communities.

Together, these networks often reach rural areas and vulnerable families that more formal systems struggle to serve.

Pivot from Russia to Venezuela

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cubans endured years of severe shortages of food, fuel, medicine and basic supplies, hobbling transportation and many basic services. Daily life changed dramatically, and families had to find new ways to survive with very little.

Until then, the Soviet Union had met Cuba's demand for oil in exchange for shipments of Cuban sugar. The Cuban government euphemistically called that era of economic collapse a "Special Period in a Time of Peace."

Starting in the late 1990s, Venezuela began to supply Cuba with deeply discounted oil, an arrangement that lasted until January 2026, when the U.S. ousted Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The U.S. subsequently imposed an oil blockade on Cuba.

Losing access to oil has created a major crisis. Without fuel, Cuba's government is unable to operate power plants, buses, water pumping systems, food refrigeration, hospitals, schools and agriculture at full capacity.

Many Cubans are enduring frequent, long blackouts and are unable to get to work or travel almost anywhere. They're losing access to healthcare, and food insecurity is growing.

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In short, Cuba is facing a major human-made disaster today without having been hit by a hurricane, earthquake or other kind of common disaster. Instead, it's the result of politics and foreign policy.

Potential appeal to Cuban Americans

Many Cuban Americans support sending U.S. humanitarian aid to Cuba if it reaches ordinary Cubans and does not strengthen the Cuban government. Bypassing the Cuban authorities by distributing assistance via faith-based groups would be appealing to Cuban Americans who have long accused Havana of using foreign assistance from foreign sources to maintain their grip on power.

Based on my own experience on the ground after disasters in Cuba, I believe that if aid is delivered through trusted and transparent channels, it could save lives and reduce suffering.

And if the aid is never delivered, I would expect that the people who need help most would once again pay the highest price.

[Dulce Suarez is assistant director of the Academy for International Disaster Preparedness at Florida International University. She previously worked on programs funded by government agencies, including USAID, while employed by a nongovernmental organization that received these contracts.]

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