A TURNING POINT
December 17, 2014, is a date that will go down in history as an important step towards more just U.S. policies towards Cuba. On that day, Presidents Obama and Castro simultaneously announced measures that signaled a major break with the U.S. and Cuba’s bitter past, including a re-establishment of diplomatic relations. While necessary and very significant changes were announced, there is still much work to do. The embargo and some restrictions on travel persist, while the goals of U.S. policy continue to be the same. Witness for Peace’s unique role in exposing U.S. citizens and residents to the effects of U.S. policy on Cubans is even more necessary in this new context!

THE EMBARGO CONTINUES
The U.S. government’s stringent financial and economic embargo, first imposed on Cuba in 1962, has had a devastating impact on Cuban families that have had to endure severely restricted access to critical medicines, food, and technology. And the Cold War tactics of the U.S. government have politically isolated the U.S. instead of Cuba, as President Obama himself has admitted. Despite condemnation by the United Nations and human rights organizations, including Witness for Peace, the harsh laws and excessive punishments for violations of the embargo continue.

AN ACHIEVEMENT FOR GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS
The historic changes to U.S. policy towards Cuba did not come about overnight. They were the result of decades of hard work by grassroots activists, including the thousands of people who have traveled to Cuba with Witness for Peace starting in the 1990s. Since that time, Witness for Peace, our Cuban partners at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Havana, and countless grassroots activists have been calling for an end to the suffering of the Cuban people. The first Latin American Pope played a major role as well, appealing to both presidents to negotiate their differences. And the results show that both the grassroots’ and the Pope’s clamor for justice are being heard!

CURRENT DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES
In the last few months, the two governments have focused on re-establishing diplomatic relations and opening embassies in both countries. Officials from the U.S. and Cuba have stressed the difference between these negotiations and full normalization of relations, which will be a much longer and more complex process. They are, however, taking the first steps, and are hopeful that both countries can establish embassies in each other’s capitals soon. Certainly, the people-to-people ambassadorship that WFP has been proud to facilitate for decades will go forward, and we hope that it will grow during this unique moment.

The Cuban people continue to demand that the U.S. end the embargo on Cuba and remove the country from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Ending the embargo is something only Congress can do, and in February, bipartisan bills to end the economic embargo and travel ban—which together would halt the entire embargo—were introduced. The Obama administration has ordered a State Department review regarding removing Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. WFP fully supports removing Cuba from the list, especially in recognition of the fact that Cuba’s hosting makes possible the current peace talks between the Colombian government and the largest Colombian guerilla group, talks to which the U.S. government has itself sent an official representative.

CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM
A majority of Americans, including a majority of Cuban-Americans, historically a vocal opponent to changing U.S. policy towards Cuba, favor a normalization of relations. On the island, people are variously excited about the changes and cautiously optimistic. The Cuban people and our partners at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center agree that the announcements made on December 17th are an important step in the right direction. However, they are also concerned that the end goals of U.S. policy continue to be the same: changing Cuba’s political and economic system. WFP will be there to stand in solidarity with the Cuban people, and to monitor the actions of our government toward the island, even as those actions change.

TAKE ACTION TO CHANGE U.S. POLICY
1. Support recently introduced bills in Congress to end the travel ban and lift the embargo.

There have been two bipartisan bills introduced in Congress. A Senate Bill (S 299) and its counterpart House Bill (HR 664), both titled the “Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act of 2015,” call for a full lifting of the U.S. travel restrictions on Cuba. And another Senate Bill (S 491) the “Freedom to Export to Cuba Act of 2015” was introduced by five Senators from both parties, seeking to lift the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba.

2. Demand Cuba’s removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism
You can sign the petition online here: http://bit.ly/PetitionCubaOffList

Travel to Cuba with Witness for Peace:
On our delegations, participants:
• Investigate the impact of the U.S. embargo on everyday life in Cuba
• Explore Cuba’s system of universal health care
• Speak with the Ministry of Education, meet teachers, and learn about how Cuba eradicated illiteracy

Visit http://witnessforpeace.org/delegations to learn more about specific delegations.

And visit our website www.witnessforpeace.org for special content, including a Cuba delegation report-back, grassroots updates, and a full delegation schedule.