



Cuban President Miguel Diaz Canel, right, talks with Cardinal Beniamino Stella during a ceremony marking the 25th anniversary of St. Paul II's apostolic journey to Cuba, at the University of Havana in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2023. Stella arrived in Cuba as Pope Francis' special envoy on Jan. 24. (Adalberto Roque/Pool photo via AP)

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Pope Francis hopes Cuban authorities will release and grant amnesty to people arrested and sentenced after the historic protests that took place in 2021, Cardinal Beniamino Stella, who traveled to the island as the pontiff's special envoy, said February 8.

During an act at the University of Havana to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to the island, Stella also said the Catholic Church hopes that Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel and U.S. President Joe Biden can hold talks amid current tense relations between the countries.

Stella, who arrived in Cuba in mid-January and will remain there until Feb. 10, recalled the figures of Fr. Félix Varela and José Martí, considered national heroes in Cuba, and emphasized the need for understanding among Cubans.

Asked by journalists about the possibility the Catholic Church could intercede to have Cuban authorities grant amnesty to people imprisoned during the 2021 protests, the first in decades on the island, Stella said he had talked with the pontiff about the issue before his trip to Cuba.

"The Church wants, seeks, has manifested this proposal (amnesty)," said Stella. "I think the issue is on the table... The Pope very much wants there to be a positive response, whether it is called amnesty, clemency, the words can be secondary, but it is important that the young people who at one point expressed their thoughts... they can go back to their homes."

According to non-governmental groups, about 1,300 people were arrested following the protests. Some of the demonstrations turned violent, including looting and rioting, and one person was killed. Authorities reported about 700 sentences handed down related to the protests, with sentences ranging from a fine and community work to up to 30 years in prison for sedition.

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The protests took place amid a severe economic crisis, shortages and blackouts. Human rights groups and some governments, including Washington, harshly criticized the island for what they considered the repression of free demonstrations by Cubans.

Meanwhile, Havana maintains that it did not repress opponents, but only punished illegal activities like rioting, vandalism, and sedition.

The Catholic Church has political influence in Cuba and on previous occasions has interceded successfully for the liberation of government opponents.

In 2010, thanks to the mediation of the Catholic Church and Spain's government, a group of opponents who had been imprisoned since 2003 were released and some chose to leave the country.

The Cuban government accused anti-Castro groups based in Florida of promoting riots during the 2021 protests through social networks amid a complex economic situation caused by the paralysis during the pandemic and the increase in U.S. sanctions during the administration of then-President Donald Trump.