

# Pope prays for 'renewal and hope' in Cuba

## Leaders wave off any change

By Girish Gupta  
Special for USA TODAY

HAVANA — Aida Valdés Santana fought against former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista "with weapons," she says, bringing her frail arms up in a rifle action.

But the 73-year-old coordinator of the National Society of Political Prisoners in Havana is not happy about helping bring Fidel Castro to power in his 1959 revolution.

"I didn't fight one dictator to bring in another," Santana said from her home in central Havana. "I have hope for the pope's visit. The church has spoken with the government and achieved some liberties."

Pope Benedict XVI prayed for freedom and a renewal of Christian faith Tuesday before a religious icon that is a powerful symbol of the Cuban nation on the second day of a visit to the communist-run island. Before arriving, he accused the socialist state of not living in reality or caring for its people.

"I have entrusted to the mother of God the future of your country, advancing along the ways of renewal and hope, for the greater good of all Cubans," the pope said at the sanctuary of the Virgin of Charity of Cobre near the eastern city of Santiago.

"I have also prayed to the Virgin for the needs of those who suffer, of those who are deprived of freedom, of those who are separated from their loved ones or who are undergoing times of difficulty," he said.

Leaders here said there would be no



By Patrick Farrell, The Miami Herald, via AP

**Second day of visit:** Pope Benedict XVI prays Tuesday before leaving Santiago de Cuba. "I have entrusted to the mother of God the future of your country," he said.

moves toward democracy following five decades of one-party rule led by Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl.

Marino Murillo, a vice president, said that though Cuba is making changes in its impoverished Marxist-style economy, "there will not be political reform."

The exchange came before the pope had a 55-minute meeting with Raúl Castro.

There are 72 political prisoners in Cuban jails, imprisoned for criticizing the regime on issues ranging from poor economic opportunities to fair elections. Amnesty International reported this month that the Cuban government wages a permanent cam-



USA TODAY  
**Santana:** Hopes visit leads to change.

paign of harassment and short-term detentions of political opponents to stop them from demanding respect for civil and political rights.

"If you are critical of the Castro government, you will be punished," said Nik Steinberg of Human Rights Watch. Steinberg said punishment ranges from solitary confinement, beatings, denial of employment and harassment of family members.

The Cuban government pardoned 2,900 prisoners in December ahead of this papal visit, including some who had been convicted for crimes against the "security of the state."

## U.S. Jews seek pontiff's help to free American

Before Pope Benedict XVI leaves Cuba today, U.S. Jews hope he'll persuade Cuba's government to show mercy to Alan Gross, an ailing American prisoner in Havana.

Gross is serving a 15-year prison sentence for attempting to "undermine the integrity and independence" of Cuba. He was arrested in 2009 and accused of being a spy while setting up Internet systems for Jewish communities as part of a democracy promotion contract for the State Department.

"The pope, who represents humanitarianism and a force of good in the world, is a hard person to say no to," says Ron Halber of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington.

Gross, 62, has lost 100 of his 250 pounds since his arrest. His daughter is battling breast cancer, and his 89-year-old mother has inoperable cancer, relatives say.

The State Department has also asked the Vatican for help. "Alan Gross is serving a very long prison sentence for something completely legal in almost all parts of the world," State Department spokesman William Ostick said.

By Oren Dorell

The previous year, Cuba released more than 100 political prisoners in a deal brokered by the Roman Catholic Church. Many here say they hope the pope's presence will help.

Last year saw the release of the final set of 75 prisoners arrested in 2003 in an event that the Damas de Blanco, or Ladies in White, regularly march and protest outside a Havana church. The government refused to let them visit with the pope. "We only want a minute to communicate with him," leader Berta Soler said.

You need permission to leave Cuba and to use the Internet. Blogger Yoani Sánchez, recently denied permission to leave Cuba for the 19th time, told Voice of America that the pope's visit would be "a good opportunity" for foreign journalists to see "the real Cuba."

The foreign news media is acutely aware of Cuba's repression. Havana's Hotel Nacional de Cuba is filled with accredited foreign journalists, but many news organizations have been unable to obtain credentials from Cuba. Interviews on the street by USA TODAY have been interrupted by police. Dissidents who wish to talk say cellphone service is being disrupted.

An attempt to visit dissident Elizardo Sanchez, a former political prisoner, at his home was prevented by police who patrolled the streets around his home.

Just before a Mass celebrated Monday by the pope in the city square of Santiago de Cuba, a man yelled "Down with the revolution! Down with the dictatorship!" near journalists covering the ceremony. Security agents quickly hustled him away. Video showed him being hit by a first aid worker.

Oscar Espinosa Chepe, imprisoned for nearly two years in a crackdown on dissent, said the consequences for disrupting a public act are serious.

"Everyone in Cuba knows what happens. ... Going to jail in Cuba is hell," he said. "I lived it."

Contributing: The Associated Press

## Syria OKs U.N. plan; opponents skeptical

Syria accepted a cease-fire drawn up by United Nations envoy Kofi Annan on Tuesday, but the diplomatic breakthrough was swiftly overshadowed by intense clashes between government soldiers and rebels.

Opposition members accused President Bashar Assad of agreeing to the plan to stall for time.

"We are not sure if it's political maneuvering or a sincere act," said Louay Safi, a member of the opposition Syrian National Council. "We have no trust in the current regime."

Annan's plan calls for an immediate, two-hour halt in fighting every day to allow humanitarian access and medical evacuations. The plan also outlines a complete cease-fire, but that will take more time because Syria must first move troops and equipment out of cities and towns.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "We will judge Assad's sincerity and seriousness by what he does, not by what he says."

### Al-Jazeera won't air French killings video

A video apparently showing a Muslim gunman's attacks on soldiers and a Jewish school was sent to the Al-Jazeera news network — but not by him, French police said Tuesday, raising the specter of a possible accomplice.

Al-Jazeera on Tuesday decided not to air a video

that seems to have been filmed from the killer's point of view and includes the cries of his victims. The decision came after President Nicolas Sarkozy asked the network not to broadcast it.

The gunman, Mohamed Merah, 23, was killed in a shootout Thursday after a standoff with police.

### Arab League summit begins in Baghdad

Drought and uprisings are threatening to undermine the Middle East's economy, Arab officials said as they discussed plans to boost the region's stability at the start of an Arab League summit in Baghdad. For the first time in a generation, leaders from 21 states gathered in Iraq for the annual meeting. Iraq is spending \$500 million to host it.

The Associated Press

## U.S. death toll

As of Tuesday, 1,792 U.S. servicemembers and three Defense Department civilians had been reported killed in the Afghanistan War.

The latest death identified:

► **Army Sgt. Daniel J. Brown, 27**, of Jerome, Idaho, died Saturday in Kandahar province when enemy forces attacked his unit with an improvised explosive device; 4th Infantry Division.

Source: Defense Department  
► **For a full list of U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq, go to [casualties.usatoday.com](http://casualties.usatoday.com)**

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