

Columbia Hosts Pastors for Peace "Caravanistas" from NYC

Last Updated Saturday, 01 August 2009

On Friday, July 10, 2009, "caravanistas" from New York City passed through Columbia with their Pastors for Peace bus loaded with humanitarian aid in the 20th Friendshipment Caravan to Cuba.

From July 3 through August 3, 2009, Pastors for Peace mobilized its 20th Friendshipment Caravan to Cuba. The Caravan to Cuba, which is now an annual event, is a response to the U.S. government's nearly 50-year embargo of Cuba, which blocks trade of food and agricultural products, medical supplies and equipment, and other commodities between the two nations. The embargo also curtails travel between the two countries, causing long-term separation of families whose members have sought refuge and opportunity in the U.S. The Friendshipments deliver humanitarian aid to Cuba to help alleviate the hunger, poverty and disease that are worsened by the blockade as well as to raise awareness and encourage the American people to seek an alternative to the long-standing policy. Pastors for Peace is an ecumenical movement founded by Rev. Lucius Walker Jr., Executive Director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizing (IFCO). The IFCO's mission has been to help victims of civil and human rights abuses in the U.S. and around the world. IFCO/Pastors for Peace was born of an incident in which a 1988 IFCO delegation to Nicaragua, led by Rev. Walker, came under attack by Nicaraguan contras. Rev. Walker, along with other civilians, was wounded in the attack. In response to the injustices he witnessed, Rev. Walker organized Pastors for Peace Material Aid Caravans to countries in Central America and the Caribbean, and Cuba. The movement defines "anyone who works for peace with justice, a 'pastor' for peace" and welcomes activists of all stripes. Caravan participants are called "caravanistas." As in previous years, hundreds of volunteer activists from around the U.S. and Canada (and some from Europe) participated in the 2009 Caravan to Cuba, traveling along 14 routes and visiting a total of 140 cities. The caravanistas spent weeks painting and preparing their buses and collecting and loading supplies before taking to the road for two weeks or more. All in all, the 2009 caravan carried more than a hundred tons of aid to Cuba. Along each designated route, the caravanistas spread their message from city to city where local organizations and congregations recruit volunteers to host them in their homes for the night. On July 18, the caravanistas began arriving in Mexico to load and board cargo ships bound for Havana on July 24. They spent the next 9 days, during the 50th anniversary of the revolution, distributing the aid supplies with the assistance of Cuban volunteers from the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center, the Cuban Council of Churches, and a committee representing other religious denominations. Once the aid was delivered and distributed, the caravanistas began their journey home on August 3 after returning to Mexico. Often the aid supplies that are collected are designed to meet a specific need. In some of the early caravans, satellite dishes were delivered to establish live communications between the U.S. and Cuba. Other shipments have included medical supplies, educational materials, computers, sports equipment, and hip-hop music. In 2009, the aid included materials needed for reconstruction efforts after the devastating hurricanes in Fall 2008. [Visit IFCOnews.org for more information on previous caravans.] The hand-painted buses, trucks, and ambulances are also shipped to Cuba as a visible and practical show of support for the Cuban people. Ten buses and trucks were donated in 2009. As with the aid supplies, the vehicles are acquired through donations. Shipments to Cuba require a government-issued license; however, in protest of the U.S. policy toward Cuba, Pastors for Peace does not apply for a license for the friendshipment caravans. As a result, caravanistas have had to overcome threats by U.S. government officials to block border crossings or efforts to confiscate vehicles and supplies at the Canadian and Mexican borders. The first caravan in 1992, Friendshipment I, crossed the border without resistance, but not without generating a great deal of national press and calls to Washington. The second caravan, however, resulted in a stand-off between caravanistas and U.S. officials. When authorities seized a bus at the border, more than a dozen caravanistas on what became known as the Little Yellow School Bus decided to stay on the bus and stage a hunger strike. After 23 days of fasting and intense pressure on Washington, the bus was released to continue to Cuba. One of CUCC's members drove a different school bus in the same caravan. Subsequent caravans have not always been without incident (Friendshipment VI involved another seizure and fast) but the shipments have always been completed successfully. To attract greater national attention, some US/Cuba Friendshipments have traveled from West to East to Washington, DC, where anti-embargo demonstrations were staged and activists visited with congressional representatives and senators before the caravans continued their journey to Cuba. As part of the 20th Caravan to Cuba, 13 caravanistas from New York pulled up to the Meeting House in Columbia, MD on July 10 in an old bus that had been loaded with supplies and decorated with colorful murals and slogans [photos]. Columbia was their seventh stop on a 14-city itinerary that stretched from New York City to Tampico, Mexico, via McAllen, Texas. Howard County Friends of Latin America, the Baltimore-Matanzas Sister City Association, and the Maryland-Cuba Friendship Coalition provided a beans and rice dinner and informational program for the New York activists, their hosts, and the public [photos]. This event was held at the Meeting House at the Oakland Mills Interfaith Center through the sponsorship of Columbia United Christian Church. Columbia and Baltimore take turns each year as host cities for this caravan route. [Visit IFCONews.org for blog reports and photos of the 2009 Cuba Caravan.] In November 2009, IFCO/Pastors for Peace will send a Caravan to Nicaragua and Honduras. This caravan will travel 4 routes and visit 30 cities in the U.S. and Canada. In addition to delivering much-needed material aid to Nicaragua and Honduras, caravanistas will spend 8 days visiting non-governmental social projects and learning about the successes of sustainable development programs. There will also be the opportunity to see first-hand how Cuban medical missions to Central America have come to the aid of millions of people. Howard County Friends of Latin America will host this event. If you are interested in being a part of this effort, please contact Leslie Salgado at 410-381-4899 or via e-mail at cuba_is_hope@comcast.net. More information about Cuba, the effects of the embargo, and links to related Web sites can be found at the U.S. National Network on Cuba (NNOC).