



17 April 2026

Minister of Foreign Affairs

For action by

22 April 2026

United States Pressure on Cuba

BRIEFING Decision Submission

PURPOSE To provide an update on US pressure on Cuba and propose New Zealand positioning.

Recommended referrals

Prime Minister

For information by

20 April 2026

Minister of Defence

For information by

20 April 2026

Contact details

NAME	ROLE	DIVISION	WORK PHONE
James Waite	Divisional Manager	Americas Division	s9(2)(a)
Tui Dewes	Unit Manager Latin America	Americas Division	

Minister's Office to complete

☐ Approved☐ Noted☐ Referred☐ Needs amendment☐ Declined☐ Withdrawn☐ Overtaken by events☐ See Minister's notes**Comments**

United States Pressure on Cuba

Key points

- s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
- In 2025, the Trump Administration launched a “maximum pressure” policy against Cuba, redesignating Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, and tightening its embargo on the island. The first quarter of 2026 has seen the US strengthen restrictions on Cuba, principally by establishing a de facto fuel blockade. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
- s6(b)(i)
- s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
- International reaction has been mixed, with broad concern expressed for Cuba’s humanitarian situation. Several countries and regional blocs are providing humanitarian assistance to the island.
- s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
- s9(2)(h)
- New Zealand maintains a s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i) constructive relationship with Cuba including our consistent and long-standing support of the UN General Assembly resolution calling for an end to the US embargo. s6(b)(i)
- We propose that New Zealand’s position on developments concerning Cuba reflect our long-standing approach to the US embargo against Cuba as well as our public concern with the human rights situation in Cuba, and be guided by following principles: (1) we expect all parties to comply with international law and the UN Charter; (2) diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to resolve differences; (3) the future of Cuba is for the people of Cuba to determine; (4) the human rights of the people of Cuba, including political freedoms, must be upheld; (5) New Zealand is concerned by the humanitarian situation in Cuba; and (6) New Zealand will seek to maintain an open and constructive relationship with Cuba.



Grahame Morton
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

- 1 **Note** that the US launched a “maximum pressure” policy toward Cuba in 2025, which it intensified in early 2026 through the imposition of a de facto fuel blockade on the island. **Yes / No**
- 2 s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i) **Yes / No**
- 3 s6(b)(i) **Yes / No**
- 4 **Agree** that New Zealand’s position on developments concerning Cuba reflect our long-standing approach to the US embargo against Cuba as well as our public concern with the human rights situation in Cuba, and be guided by following principles: **Yes / No**
- 4.1 We expect all parties to comply with international law and the UN Charter;
 - 4.2 Diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to resolve differences;
 - 4.3 The future of Cuba is for the people of Cuba to determine;
 - 4.4 The human rights of the people of Cuba, including political freedoms, must be upheld;
 - 4.5 New Zealand is concerned by the humanitarian situation in Cuba;
 - 4.6 New Zealand will seek to maintain an open and constructive relationship with Cuba.
- 5 **Endorse** the proposed reactive media lines outlined in this submission. **Yes / No**
- 6 **Refer** a copy of this submission to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. **Yes / No**

Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Date: / /

United States Pressure on Cuba

Report

US pressure on Cuba

1. On 20 January 2025, within the first 24 hours of assuming office, US President Trump signalled his Administration's intention to significantly recast US policy toward Cuba, signing an omnibus executive order rescinding a range of Biden-era measures that had relaxed restrictions on the island. This included the redesignation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism and the implementation of stricter economic measures under the existing US embargo¹. This early action set in place what President Trump has termed a "maximum pressure" policy against Cuba.
2. The US has ratcheted up pressure on Cuba in the first quarter of 2026. Critically, on 29 January, President Trump signed an executive order threatening tariffs on countries supplying oil to the island.^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

US interest in Cuba

3. ^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

4. ^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

5. ^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

- ^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

6. ^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}

¹ In 1962, the US imposed a comprehensive economic embargo on Cuba, which remains largely in place and continues to restrict trade, finance, and travel to the island.

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s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

Situation in Cuba

7. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i) have been stacked on top of Cuba's enduring economic and humanitarian crisis, characterised by a failing oil-dependent power grid, a scarcity of basic goods, and reduced tourism. Energy shortages s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i) have significantly worsened this situation, disrupting water and waste systems, transport, food distribution and medical services. Three nationwide blackouts occurred in March, and many people have resorted to using wood fires to cook and heat water. Cuba is reporting a backlog in paediatric surgeries due to instability in the national power grid. s6(b)(i)

What steps might the US take next?

8. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

9. s6(b)(i)

s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

10. s6(b)(i)

During a first interview on US television on 13 April, President Díaz-Canel shared that his administration and the Cuban people were prepared to fight back against any potential US military intervention, stating that Cubans were ready to "give [their] lives for the revolution".

11. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel has publicly confirmed that Cuba and the US are in diplomatic talks. Secretary Rubio is said to be leading talks for the US side. The scope of the talks is unknown. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

12. The recent arrival of a Russian oil tanker in Cuba, carrying 100,000 metric tonnes of crude oil, has signalled a moderation of the US approach, with the US confirming that it will assess such shipments on a "case-by-case basis" going forward.

13. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

² s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

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14. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

Reactions from others

15. Russia has described US actions as "suffocating measures" and "unacceptable unilateral coercion", asserting solidarity with the people of Cuba. On 9 April, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, visited Havana to express Russia's support for the Cuban Government, noting that Russia had no intention of leaving the "Western Hemisphere". He said Cuba's energy security remained a major priority for Russia.
16. China has urged the US to "immediately cease the blockade and sanctions against Cuba, as well as any form of coercion or pressure" and is providing humanitarian aid to Cuba in the form of rice shipments.
17. Costa Rica recently broke relations with Cuba, citing its non-recognition of the Cuban Government and concerns over Cuba's deteriorating human rights situation. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
18. Elsewhere in Latin America, Cuba retains substantial support from countries with leftist governments including Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil. Mexico and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) are providing Cuba with humanitarian assistance, though several CARICOM members, including Jamaica and Guyana, have withdrawn from Cuba's international medical programme³. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)
19. The European Union and Canada are each providing humanitarian assistance to Cuba, though have refrained from commenting on the US fuel blockade.

New Zealand's interest

20. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

³ Cuba's international medical programme is a long-standing initiative whereby Cuba sends health professionals across the world – mostly to Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Pacific – to provide healthcare in exchange for foreign revenue.

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s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

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s9(2)(g)(i)

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s9(2)(h)

21. s9(2)(h)

New Zealand's proposed position

22. New Zealand maintains a s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i) constructive relationship with Cuba, with diplomatic relations established in 2001. New Zealand has consistently voted in support of the UN General Assembly resolution calling for an end to the US embargo since it was first tabled in 1992, along with almost all UN members. We have also registered publicly in the UN our concern with the Cuban Government's ongoing restrictions on freedom of expression and association, and the imprisonment of political prisoners.

23. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

24. We propose that New Zealand's position on developments concerning Cuba reflect our long-standing approach on the US embargo against Cuba as well as our public concern with the human rights situation in Cuba, and be guided by the following principles:

- We expect all parties to comply with international law, including the UN Charter;
- Diplomacy and political dialogue are the preferred pathways to resolve differences;
- The future of Cuba is for the people of Cuba to determine;
- The human rights of the people of Cuba, including political freedom, must be upheld;
- New Zealand is concerned by the humanitarian conditions in Cuba;
- New Zealand will seek to maintain an open and constructive relationship with Cuba.

Media lines

25. Subject to how developments unfold, it is proposed that New Zealand draw on the following messages:

- New Zealand is monitoring developments in Cuba and is concerned by the deteriorating humanitarian situation there. We support the free flow of humanitarian supplies into Cuba.

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- We expect all parties to comply with international law, including the UN Charter.
- Diplomatic solutions and dialogue are needed to resolve differences, and we urge restraint and de-escalation.
- It is for the people of Cuba to determine their future.
- New Zealand maintains an open and constructive relationship with Cuba. As part of this, we express our concerns with ongoing restrictions on freedom of expression and association, and political prisoners.

26. In the event of future developments,^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)}
^{s6(a), s9(2)(g)}, we will revert with additional messaging.

Resourcing

27. The issue will be able to be managed within MFAT's resources both in Wellington and our Americas network.

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