

Havana Cuba Business Travel Culture and Politics



Cuba Business News

Cuba Expert Series - Interview with Dr. Teo Babun

Rob Sequin | Havana Journal

This is our first interview for our new Cuba Expert Series that will feature newsmakers, professionals, industry leaders, authors and other Cuba experts who will offer their insight and share their experiences with our Havana Journal audience.

As a prelude to this new Series, Dr. Tim Ashby of Pembury Capital and Jay Brickman of Crowley Maritime were kind enough to share their [knowledge of Cuba](#) with us.

Cuba Expert - Dr. Teo Babun

Teo Babun is well known in the Miami, Cuban and Caribbean circles.

He is an author, humanitarian, researcher and Christian.

He has published the book [The Cuban Revolution-The Years of Promise](#) and the Business Guide to Cuba about business and investment opportunities in a post-Castro post-Embargo Cuba.

Dr. Babun has a long history of participation in evangelical activities with such ministries as Campus Crusade for Christ, Executive Ministries, Search Ministries, and Vision for a Christian Cuba.

His qualifications and experience go on and on.



President & CEO of Cuba-Caribbean Development, a consulting division of [Babun Group Consulting, Inc.](#)



National Executive Director of [ECHO-Cuba](#) (Evangelical Christian Humanitarian Outreach for Cuba)



Executive Director of [AmericasRelief Team](#) (ART) that provides humanitarian logistics support throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.

- Author of more than 100 manuscripts and reports on Cuban business, political, and economic issues that have appeared in many national publications.
- Deacon and Chairman of the Long Range Planning Committee of [University Baptist Church](#) in Coral Gables, Florida.
- Founder of [Young Life of Greater Miami](#) to help empower young people to effect positive change and growth.

The Havana Journal is honored to have Dr. Babun as our inaugural interview for our new Cuba Expert Series.

I understand that your grandparents were born in Bethlehem. How did this influence your Christianity?

Being able to trace my family tree more than 1,300 years has made me a historian of sort about Bethlehem and the region and Christianity in general. I have been overwhelmed by the suffering and evolution of the Christian faith. This has helped me to solidify my belief and commitment.

Dr. Babun, I understand that you were born in Cuba, could you tell me when you left and some of the details as to why and how you left?

My father and his family were initial supporters of the Revolution and donated trucks, marine radios, ammunition, and much support to the 26 of July Movement. Then, following the beginning of the “agrarian reform”, Fidel Castro began to confiscate all of the property of the wealthy families in Cuba. Initially this was done through trials to try to create a legal precedent why the properties had to be confiscated. In some cases the revolutionary trials would cross the line and go after the property owners with long jail sentences or in some cases even firing squads. My father escaped to Miami just before the verdict of his trial was to be read, and apparently to avoid a confrontation with the many sympathetic and supporting workers that we employed, the government asked the rest of the family to leave the country. I was 11 years old at the time and had no idea what was happening.

When did you return for the first time and how many times have you been back?

I went back for the first time in October of 2000 as an “official observant” to the open-air Evangelical Celebrations that were taking place throughout the Island, which were allowed as a result of the Pope’s visit to Cuba a year earlier. I went back a year later and visited the families that were living in my families’ old houses as I wanted to let them know that we had no interest in ever removing them from those properties. I cried a lot during that trip, the people were very kind and friendly to me. They all fed me and actually consoled me instead of me consoling them. The Cuban people are truly amazing and good-hearted; they truly blessed me. Unfortunately, the government was not comfortable with the reaction that I was causing everywhere I visited, so they asked me not to return “for the time being”.

I understand that your Evangelical organization was the first organization to obtain a license to travel to Cuba from OFAC. Please tell me more about that.

A group of Christian business men in Jacksonville, Florida and others had committed to begin sending humanitarian aid to the churches in Cuba (the churches were allowed to start operating and receive aid in 1984). That missionary organization was the first international protestant organized effort to bring humanitarian aid to the people. So

when President Clinton gave the green light to the US Commerce and Treasury Departments to begin providing licenses, we had already emerged as the premier organization to obtain the first licenses. Since then, quietly we have sent thousands of pounds of aid and millions of dollars in support to the independent churches in Cuba.

Help me understand ECHOcuba, America's Relief Team and your humanitarian missions to Cuba. Are they related?

For the record, AmericasRelief Team (ART) does not work in Cuba. ART provides humanitarian logistics support throughout the Caribbean and Latin America and today is very focused on the Haitian tragedy. It is an independent organization and not connected to ECHOcuba legally, but I am the Executive Director of both.

ECHOcuba is an Evangelical Christian non-denominational organization dedicated to provide support to the independent churches in Cuba. At last count there were more than 14,000 congregations and 600,000 members of those independent churches. ECHOcuba provides direct support to help run children programs, elderly care, and other social and help programs. We also support independent employment initiatives and other programs in support of advancing freedom of religion in the country.

In a recent email sent to members of ECHOcuba, you offered this description of your "Business in a Box" enabling entrepreneurs in Cuba to start their own businesses.

"Providing Kits for Small Businesses in Cuba - ECHOcuba has been teaching free market skills and providing tools to individuals on the island for several years, hoping to give the Cuban Church an opportunity to prosper financially by educating them on proven Christian-based business concepts and practices.

ECHOcuba provides Cubans a Business in a Box, a box filled with tools and supplies on a specific trade, along with lessons on basic free market principles, such as: how to price their services, and how to market their business. Since the beginning of this project about 1000 Cubans have received a Business in a box and started their own business!"

Please tell me more about the challenges and successes of this unique program.

As you can imagine, this is a very challenging program. We've been working to build small businesses there for more than ten years. Our main objective has been to help entrepreneurs start their small business to either add to their small incomes (which average \$20 per month), or actually become independent of the government. But up-till-now the government has not been supportive of independent micro business, so this

has made the work very difficult. However, we have found a way to provide kits to help them get going and also provide lessons on basic free market principles; how to price services; how to market their business; and what to do with revenue. So far we have started more than 1,500 of these small enterprises.

Recently the government announced it was laying-off half a million workers from the government's payroll. Then it followed up by announcing that, Cubans will have more freedom when it comes to starting small private businesses, within limits, of course. Cuba has flirted with such reforms before. We are once-again ahead of the curve on this, and may be able to help large numbers of these new self-employed start their own barber shops, graphic designs, or even small farm.

How is this program funded?

Since we have tried to stay "under the radar" with our programs, we literally have been funding these projects a dollar at a time! Amongst others, we have Christian Foundations that help our efforts and many Christians around the world send us small checks that add-up at the end to keep the programs going forward.

Has the US or Cuban governments aided or restricted implementations?

I think in general it's been hard for us on both fronts. The concept of sending one of our "Businesses in a Box" to Cuba with everything they need to get started requires licenses and a careful eye to make sure we don't send something that is prohibited by either country. On the Cuba side we have to make sure we don't cause any embarrassment to the government because they could consider what we do to be illegal and they could shut us down in one minute.

How can people help with ECHOcuba or this Business in a Box program?

When you are in the non-profit world you learn to become a "professional beggar". We need help to keep our programs going. Persons can send help though our [ECHO-Cuba website](#) or can send their support to ECHOcuba at P.O. Box 546135, Miami, Florida 33154. Anyone who wants to direct their help to the small business program can place "Business in a Box" on the memo of the check and we will honor that request. Persons can "adopt" a small business in Cuba by sending \$250/each.

What is your outlook for this program for 2011?

Unfortunately the Cuban economy is in such bad shape that we expect much suffering to take place there. The people we help depend on assistance from the outside and some from each-other, but with 500,000 and more being laid-off, there will be many

people in Cuba seeking help. We hope and pray that we get sufficient funding and fewer restrictions to be able to help as many people as possible operate their own little businesses to help themselves and their families during these difficult times.

I thank Dr. Babun so much for taking the time to educate me and the Havana Journal audience about himself and his international humanitarian efforts.