

Cuba offers medical training to Colombians affected by civil war

By Tom Whitney

The communication Cuba's ambassador sent to the "Commission for Follow-up, Impetus, and Verification" in Colombia on March 13 was no routine matter. Ambassador José Luis Ponce [Caballero informed](#) the Commission of "the Cuban government's offer of one thousand scholarships to pursue studies for a medical career in Cuba as [a] contribution to the process of implementation of the Agreement in Havana and to the post-conflict."

On November 24, 2016, Colombia's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) signed an agreement ending decades of civil war. The Commission was a product of that agreement. Cuba's offer of medical scholarships provides dramatic evidence of the enduring nature of that nation's commitment to peace in Colombia. Cuba had already hosted the negotiations leading to the agreement, talks that consumed four years.

The Ambassador indicated that Cuba, each year for five years, would be distributing 100 scholarships to the Colombian government and 100 more to the FARC-EP, now in the process of demobilizing. Presumably the selection of scholarship recipients will begin soon; they need to be in Cuba in September 2017 when the next academic term begins.

Later, Interior Minister Juan Fernando Cristo, [explained that](#) the government's share of the scholarships would go to "Colombians with the least resources who have lived in areas affected by armed conflict, [to] social leaders, and [to] all those affected by the conflict and lacking opportunities for education." Peace Commissioner Sergio Jaramillo said that "victims of the conflict" would be receiving scholarships.

In Cuba the Colombian students will probably be attending the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM by its initials in Spanish), although the initial announcement didn't specify. Since 2005, that school has graduated 1500 new physicians annually from a total of [84 countries](#). Students attending ELAM are unable themselves to pay for a medical education and they commit themselves as physicians to serving the underserved in their own countries. The students' six-year-long course of study includes four years of clinical experience in hospitals throughout the island.

Prior to the existence of ELAM, other Colombians studied medicine in Cuba courtesy of the island's government. One was Jorge Iván Ospina whose father was killed in an Army confrontation with guerrillas in 1985 and who now is a surgeon and senator in Colombia's congress. [In an interview](#), he commented on Colombian students repeating his experience: "There's "[n]othing more significant than changing the rifle for the scalpel, saving lives instead of attacking them."

He recalled that, "It was a very abrupt change... One needs support and a lot of academic dedication." He suggested that many former combatants lacking educational

experience, or far removed from their schooling, will need to be “sustained by the Colombian government” with remedial course-work.

The Colombian government, however, has delayed in implementing aspects of the peace agreement, and very likely Dr. Ospina’s recommendation will not be acted upon soon. For example, Colombia’s Congress waited [until March 13](#) to authorize the “Special Jurisdiction for Peace” which is supposed to decide on pardons for ex-combatants. Former guerrillas still lack [living facilities](#) in the rural areas where they are giving up arms. Political prisoners and FARC prisoners of war remain behind bars.

Yet [El Tiempo](#), Colombia’s pre-eminent national newspaper, greeted Cuba’s offer with enthusiasm: “May this idea become an example for other centers of study, for those other important projects of this country that we are looking to float as best we can. Perhaps this idea will be contagious in our own society; we must see and feel that it’s better to wield pencils than weapons.”

The difference that is Cuba — its socialism and commitment to human solidarity — showed up in the contrast between Cuba’s offer to prepare physicians for Colombia and a marketing initiative that week from Sweden. Mikael Damberg, Sweden’s Minister of Enterprise and Innovation, visited Colombia on March 14 with a proposal to sell Saab Corporation’s “JAS 39 Gripen” fighter plane. “[I have signed](#) a defense cooperation agreement between Sweden and Colombia.” he told reporters, adding that, “The [Colombian] armed forces are one of the important components of this peace transition.”