

US and Allies Target Cuba's Overseas Medical Missions

By Tom Whitney

News item: Three rightwing Latin American governments have forced out Cuban doctors at work in their countries. Over 8000 of them departed from Brazil in late 2018 and 382 doctors left Ecuador in mid-November, 2019. Some 700 Cuban doctors exited Bolivia after the coup there on November 10. Brazilian President Bolsonaro alleged that Cuban doctors were incompetent. He also accused the Cuban government of enslaving them through having retained Brazil's reimbursement for their services. Governments in Ecuador and Bolivia claimed the Cubans doctors had supported political opponents.

News item: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently applauded the interim Bolivian government's decision to expel Cuban doctors working there. He took a position consistent with the U.S. government's former "medical parole" program, which provided incentives for Cuban doctors working abroad to abandon their posts and move to the United States. President Obama ended that program in January 2017 after 22 years of existence. U. S. Senators Marco Rubio, Rick Scott, and Robert Menéndez demanded recently that it be restored.

News item: In a report issued on December 6, Cuba's Foreign Ministry took note of a "U.S. campaign against our international medical cooperation [which] is a disgraceful, criminal act against peoples in need of medical assistance ... The attitude of the United States government in this matter is despicable. Cuba's response is firm: we will continue to save lives, to seek health and well-being for the world, within the limits of our possibilities, wherever we are requested."

U.S. interference with Cuban medical assistance to other countries is part of its long campaign – joined by rightwing allies in Latin America - to undo the Cuban Revolution. When Cuba's enemies look for targets to hit, they presumably settle on aspects of the Revolution viewed as essential to its purpose or its survival.

Dedication to human solidarity has defined Cuba's revolutionary movement from the start. Cuba has not only achieved superior indicators of health outcome at home but has extended healthcare to peoples abroad. Cuba's example of international medical solidarity serves as a model for other nations. Cuban doctors working abroad are visible agents of solidarity, as are Cuban teachers, literacy specialists, sports experts, technicians, and engineers.

The Cuban doctors reach out to marginalized and working peoples. Doing so, they establish bonds with fellow victims of capitalist or colonialist excess - with fellow members of the same social class. Workers of the world really have been uniting, just as the founders of scientific socialism had predicted. That's a process well calculated to infuriate Cuba's counter-revolutionary enemies.

A penchant for solidarity might have led Cuba's enemies to suppose that international outreach, particularly Cuba's practice of medical solidarity, may have something to do with the Revolution's durability. The vanished socialism of the Soviet Bloc nations never betrayed such verve. In attacking the doctors, those enemies are undoubtedly striving to hurt the Revolution.

Jose Marti, prime organizer for Cuban independence and “Cuba’s most universal citizen,” long ago established that bothersome connection between human solidarity and revolutionary purpose. His teachings included messages like “Homeland is humanity” (*Patria es humanidad*) and “With All and for the Good of All” - this being the title of a speech delivered in Tampa, Florida in 1891.

Likewise elevating solidarity, Ernesto Che Guevara taught that for individuals to participate in history, they must attend to their own consciousness. He envisioned the Revolution as a school for introducing students to moral values and ethics and that way encouraging voluntary action for the common good.

Epitomizing an important revolutionary ideal, the doctors are ready-made targets for adversaries already overflowing with wrath at the Cuban Revolution. These parties need only to find pretexts for hostile actions. Yet the stakes involved in this contest are immense, not least because of the sheer size of Cuba’s solidarity project. Analyst Wilkie Delgado Correa provided figures recently that are staggering.

As he reports: since 1963 Cuban doctors have worked in 164 countries. Non-Cubans graduating as doctors in Cuba (1966-2017) totaled 33, 974. Originating from 135 countries, they include 28,538 graduates (2005 – 2017) of Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine, among them 5135 Bolivians, 2071 Ecuadorians, and “more than 1000” Brazilians. In 2017 Cubans were teaching at 7 foreign medical schools. Cuba’s “Operación Milagro” has provided 2.9 million people from 34 countries with no-cost eye operations. Since 1963, Cuban doctors abroad have participated in 1,667,248,707 patient visits; they’ve performed 12,188,554 surgeries. Around 400,000 Cuban health care workers, mostly doctors, have served abroad over the course of 56 years.

The U.S. purpose in harassing Cuban doctors fits with that object of the U.S. economic blockade which is about depriving Cubans and their government of money. Some of the governments hosting Cuban doctors do pay for their labor with money sent to Havana. (The Cuban government pays the doctors, while retaining a good portion of the funds.) When the doctors depart, the money stops.

Ultimately, however, the doctors’ role in generating money for the Cuban government is probably less irritating to reactionaries than their service to the Revolution as emissaries of solidarity. That they’ve succeeded in extending health care may be an additional sore point. That’s something the United States has failed at. And the world is watching.

An epidemiologic report recently established that life expectancy has been dropping for U.S. adults in their middle years. Earlier reports show that black babies in the United States die at twice the rate of white babies. U.S. babies, taken together, are considerably more likely to die in their first year of life than Cuban babies.

What remains here is to highlight documentation of some of the main points of this report. Appearing below are excerpts from two recent sets of first-hand observations. The author translated.

1. Luis Varese observed Cuban doctors at work in Latin America.

Trained as an anthropologist and originally from Peru, Varese served as representative of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), working mostly in Ecuador.

“On May 31, 1970 an earthquake and then floods cut down the lives of more than 70,000 Peruvians in Ancash Department, Peru. In just a few days, almost hours, five field hospitals with Cuban doctors were on the ground in five provinces devastated by the earthquakes ... Fidel and 150,000 Cubans donated blood to the surviving brothers and sisters of this tragedy. ...

“[After the earthquake] 46 years later, in Pedernales [Ecuador], I saw the same faces, the same eyes, the same looks of appreciation for the Cuban doctors who were there doing what they could, offering care and medical attention to those who needed it. They did so with professionalism, efficiency, the right equipment, and above all with the great, caring humility that characterizes them ...

“In 1988 I lived with some of my family in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, where I worked as a consultant for UNHCR. The only doctors in the area were the Cuban doctors, plus a few local doctors, either African-descended or Miskito ... It was the time of “low intensity warfare” and the Nicaraguan counterrevolution, and there were very few Nicaraguan doctors enthused about going into the conflict zone, but we saw the Cuban doctors working there. We were their patients too, especially after one of my sons fell gravely ill with malaria ...

“In 1990 in Managua when President Violeta Chamorro was governing, my youngest son contracted a middle ear infection ... It was a Cuban doctor who finally assessed him and determined that the infectious process could be turning into meningitis. He arranged for his transfer to Havana. They took care of him in the pediatric hospital there and saved his life. He was five months old and for 135 days had cried with fever and pain ...

“In 1995, working with UNHCR, we were in charge of the voluntary repatriation of 12,000 Guatemalan refugees [from southern Mexico] to Quiché province in Guatemala. The only doctors on hand in the remote settlements there were the Cubans. There was no electricity and not much potable water. The job of ACNUR was to improve the living conditions of the people returning, Because of the Cuban doctors, children, women, and men arriving in these barely accessible areas received comprehensive care ... Years later I returned and still there were no Guatemalan doctors. In the villages of Quiché there were only Cubans ...

“Later I worked for the United Nations in Haiti and again I found Cuban doctors working with that immense humanitarian vocation under the most difficult conditions in that country. With shared dedication, they were cheerful, full of life, and ready to communicate their enthusiasm. They of course gave evidence of advanced scientific and professional training ...

“During the earthquake of April 16, 2016 [in Ecuador] the first “foreigners” (if one can call them that in Our America) to arrive at the Manta airport were the Cuban doctors, and I know that because two of my sons were part of the coordination team at the airport.”

2. Fidel Castro talks about doctors and solidarity

Wilkie Delgado Correa, a cardio-vascular physiologist, academician, and political writer recently surveyed Fidel Castro's views on medical care and solidarity. The following

excerpts were taken from speeches before graduating medical and dental students and at the opening of a new science center.

Cuba needs health care -- On October 17, 1962, Castro pointed out that if basic health care is needed in the cities, “awareness of that need is much greater in the countryside where they never have hospitals, dentists, or doctors. The question precisely is: how do we attend to this necessity of the people? ... Everything that interests the people is of fundamental concern to revolutionaries, who work for that and only that... The people quite reasonably bring up the question of medical care and health care.” Castro elsewhere mentioned that, “[A] great purpose will be fulfilled: that of passing from curative medicine to preventative medicine, that of keeping citizens from getting sick.”

Health for other peoples; it takes a revolution – In that same address, Castro says: “[W]e may even do something to help other countries, although it may be more symbolic than anything else. Let’s take the case of Algeria. Most of the doctors were French and most of them left. The health care situation there is really tragic. That’s why, talking with the students today, we told them we need 50 voluntary doctors ... to go to Algeria to help the Algerians ... “

“We are certain that more will offer themselves as an expression of the spirit of solidarity of our people with peoples who are friends and who are worse off than we are. We said years, but years will pass and we can envision 40 or 50 thousand university students and young people graduating ... because the revolution can do that ... and it’s only a revolution that can accomplish those feats ... Today we celebrate ourselves as revolutionaries. But the revolution isn’t just about coming up with ideas; it carries them out. The Revolution is not about theory. It’s about deeds above all else.”

Peoples of the world can expect solidarity -- On June 18, 1965, Castro noted that, “We might limit ourselves to attending to our own necessities. But the reality of today’s world shows that ties among peoples inevitably grew stronger, especially among revolutionary peoples - and among underdeveloped peoples ... Other countries besides Algeria need technically-trained people. So, how many do we prepare? We simply prepare as many as we need ourselves and as many as other fraternal peoples happen to need ...”

“If it’s given to us to institute mass education and succeed in preparing masses of technical people at all levels, how are we to forget those peoples that still live in the midst of oppression, ignorance, and illiteracy? [We think about] the needs of other peoples where there are millions and the numbers of doctors among them [are few]. That’s because imperialism and colonialism, among other things, block the way to any kind of cultural and technical improvements for exploited peoples. They treat human beings like animals, as cheap labor. In no way will they be interested in developing the intelligence of those peoples.”

“That’s why when it’s a question of knowing how much of anything we need to prepare, we have only one answer: as much as possible! Everyone has needs, and if we don’t need something for ourselves, others who are needier can use it. And we have to prepare ourselves to make good on our obligations to other peoples. Otherwise, our concept of human solidarity would be framed within the minuscule sphere of our national borders and national interests.”