

THE PRIME STIMULUS FOR OUR EFFORTS

The graphic reporting by journalist Gladys Rubio on the cholera epidemic in Haiti that was published on yesterday's Round Table TV programme was so impressive that I decided to postpone the Reflection I announced on Monday until today, Wednesday. The aim of the report was to analyze, from a different angle, the dramatic impact on the Haitian people of the January 12th earthquake this year, followed in less than 10 months by the generalized cholera epidemic and a hurricane.

Those events were taking place in a country that had been the victim of conquistadors, colonialism and slavery. Its native population had been wiped out by the conquest and the enforced hunt for gold.

The roots of the nation of Haiti are the hundreds of thousands of human beings wrenched from Africa by the European slave traders and sold to the Haitian slave-owning plantation owners to produce coffee, sugar and other tropical goods with which could supply the emerging capitalist markets.

The Haitian people were the protagonists, during the early years of the nineteenth century, of the first social revolution in this hemisphere; it was the source of inspiration and support in terms of weapons for those who carried out the heroism of liberating South America from Spanish domination.

Our solidarity with the people of Haiti has a two-fold root: it is born from our ideas, but also from our history.

After the social revolution that occurred there, Spanish colonialism turned Cuba, where countless Africans had also been torn from Africa and sold as slaves, into the main supplier of coffee, sugar and other products from the tropics.

As a result of that process, when the Spanish colonies in South and Central America won their independence in bloody and heroic battle, the Cuban colony was contributing more net income to the Spanish metropolis than all those countries together before they had declared their independence, a fact that decisively influenced the fate of our Homeland throughout the almost two centuries that were to follow.

Two days ago I was explaining how our medical cooperation with Haiti began, leading us to train hundreds of young doctors from that sister country and to send a legion of Cuban health professionals. It isn't something I would be mentioning just by chance.

Nor are we surprised by the American and European disinformation efforts that cover up and lie about the motives for Cuba's behaviour.

Three days ago, a well-known British newspaper, The Independent, with unchallengeable prestige among the liberal media in Great Britain – even though it does not enjoy the privilege WikiLeaks granted The Guardian and four other well-known press agencies who consulted with Washington on the most sensitive points of information received – published a daring article by journalist Nina Lakhani, under the caption of “Cuban medics in Haiti put the world to shame”. This is the matter that I wanted to analyze, because of its daring to call a spade a spade on this subject, even though it doesn't mean that it shares each of the evaluations about the motives determining our behaviour. I shall explain by using the translation of that text, as briefly as possible.

“They are the real heroes —she says— of the Haitian earthquake disaster, the human catastrophe on America's doorstep which Barack Obama pledged a monumental US humanitarian

mission to alleviate. Except these heroes are from America's arch-enemy Cuba, whose doctors and nurses have put US efforts to shame.

"A medical brigade of 1,200 Cubans is operating all over earthquake-torn and cholera-infected Haiti, as part of Fidel Castro's international medical mission which has won the socialist state many friends, but little international recognition."

"... international aid agencies were alone in tackling the devastation that killed 250,000 people and left nearly 1.5 million homeless. [...] Cuban healthcare workers have been in Haiti since 1998 [...] And amid the fanfare and publicity surrounding the arrival of help from the US and the UK, hundreds more Cuban doctors, nurses and therapists arrived with barely a mention."

"Figures released last week show that Cuban medical personnel, working in 40 centres across Haiti, have treated more than 30,000 cholera patients since October. They are the largest foreign contingent, treating around 40 per cent of all cholera patients. Another batch of medics from the Cuban Henry Reeve Brigade, a disaster and emergency specialist team, arrived recently as it became clear that Haiti was struggling to cope with the epidemic that has already killed hundreds."

"...Cuba has trained 550 Haitian doctors for free at the Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina en Cuba (Elam), one of the country's most radical medical ventures. Another 400 are currently being trained at the school, which offers free education – including free books and a little spending money – to anyone sufficiently qualified who cannot afford to study medicine in their own country."

"John Kirk is a professor of Latin American studies at Dalhousie University in Canada who researches Cuba's international medical teams. He said: "Cuba's contribution in Haiti is like the world's greatest secret. They are barely mentioned, even though they are doing much of the heavy lifting."

"This tradition can be traced back to 1960, when Cuba sent a handful of doctors to Chile, hit by a powerful earthquake, followed by a team of 50 to Algeria in 1963. This was four years after the revolution, which saw nearly half the country's 7,000 doctors voting with their feet and leaving for the US."

"...The best-known programme is Operation Miracle, which began with ophthalmologists treating cataract sufferers in impoverished Venezuelan villages in exchange for oil. This initiative has restored the eyesight of 1.8 million people in 35 countries, including that of Mario Teran, the Bolivian sergeant who killed Che Guevara in 1967."

"The Henry Reeve Brigade, rebuffed by the Americans after Hurricane Katrina, was the first team to arrive in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake, and the last to leave six months later."

"...according to Professor Kirk.'It is also an obsession of Fidel's and it wins him votes in the UN'.

"A third of Cuba's 75,000 doctors, along with 10,000 other health workers, are currently working in 77 poor countries, including El Salvador, Mali and East Timor. This still leaves one doctor for every 220 people at home, one of the highest ratios in the world, [...] one for every 370 in England."

"Wherever they are invited, Cubans implement their prevention-focused holistic model, visiting families at home, proactively monitoring maternal and child health. This has produced "stunning results" in parts of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, lowering infant and maternal mortality rates, reducing infectious diseases and leaving behind better trained local health workers, according to Professor Kirk's research."

"Medical training in Cuba lasts six years – a year longer than in the UK – [...] every graduate works as a family doctor for three years minimum."

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"This model has helped Cuba to achieve some of the world's most enviable health improvements, despite spending only \$400 per person last year compared with \$3,000 in the UK and \$7,500 in the US, according to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development figures."

"Infant mortality rates, one of the most reliable measures of a nation's healthcare, are 4.8 per 1,000 live births – comparable with Britain and lower than the US. Only 5 per cent of babies are born with a low birth weight, a crucial factor in long-term health..."

"Imti Choonara, a paediatrician from Derby, leads a delegation ... at annual workshops in Cuba's third city, Camaguey. "Healthcare in Cuba is phenomenal, and the key is the family doctor, [...] and whose focus is on prevention ... The irony is that Cubans came to the UK after the revolution to see how the NHS worked. They took back what they saw, refined it and developed it further; meanwhile we are moving towards the US model", Professor Choonara said."

American embargo [...] prevents many US companies from trading with Cuba, and persuades other countries to follow suit. The 2009/10 report includes drugs for childhood cancers, HIV and arthritis, some anaesthetics, as well as chemicals needed to diagnose infections and store organs."

"...Cubans are immensely proud and supportive of their contribution in Haiti and other poor countries, delighted to be punching above their weight on the international scene..."

"Medical training is another example. There are currently 8,281 students from more than 30 countries enrolled at Elam, which last month celebrated its 11th anniversary. The government hopes to inculcate a sense of social responsibility into the students in the hope that they will work within their own poor communities for at least five years."

"Damien Joel Suarez, 27, a second year from New Jersey, is one of 171 American students; 47 have already graduated. He dismisses allegations that Elam is part of the Cuban propaganda machine. "'Of course, Che is a hero here but he isn't forced down your neck`."

Not all the statements about Cuba are favourable. The article also has criticisms, several of which we share, and at times we are even more severe than The Independent. The article talks about low salaries and shortages. Besides our errors, it does not mention that over the course of more than 50 years of blockade, aggressions and threats, our country has been forced to invest enormous energy, time and resources in order to resist the blows of the most powerful empire that has ever existed in history.

Nevertheless, it is admirable to see the sincerity and clarity with which Nina Lakhani writes, and with which The Independent publishes, in that brave article about the significance for the long-suffering people of Haiti of a tragedy which, in its first stage cost the lives of almost 3,000 victims, among them children, young people and adults, many of whom suffer from malnutrition and other health ravages, sometimes without even having firewood to boil their drinking water.

News coming in from that sister country informs us that until today, Wednesday the 29th, another 717 people have been cared for by the Cuban Medical Mission. There are no reported deaths in five consecutive days. The death rate among those looked after by Cuba which reaches 48,931 by now, has been reduced to 0.55%. The official figure of citizens affected by the disease was up to 130,534, and the death toll was at 2,761 for a rate of 2.1%. We are struggling to apply more efficient methods at all the centres fighting the epidemic. The Penetration Groups of the Henry Reeve Brigade –Cubans, Latin Americans and Haitians, all ELAM graduates – number 42 at the present time, and they can penetrate into any of the most isolated sub-communes in Haiti. They also have 61 cholera care centres.

Our country's effort in favour of human health which started with the triumph of the Revolution itself, as The Independent's article publishes, can be seen in the fact that next year 8,000 doctors will graduate in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela who were trained in both theory and practice by Cuban

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health specialists. Venezuela will also reach levels of healthcare that will place it among the first countries in the world. Such heartening results are the prime stimulus for our efforts.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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