

Cuba, China, Venezuela Send Immediate Assistance to Haiti

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As soon as the devastating earthquake struck Haiti on Jan. 12, Cuban doctors began saving lives.

Years before this monumental disaster hit, Cuba had set up a medical mission in Haiti to provide health care in areas where there had been little or none; Cubans also were training Haitian medical workers in basic first aid. When the quake struck, these teams quickly went into emergency mode.

A relief plane from Venezuela was among the first to land in the stricken country, where normal services had ground to a halt. Venezuelan and Brazilian doctors soon joined the Cuban teams, who were accustomed to working in spartan conditions and had their own generators to power surgical equipment.

Other Cuban doctors who had been working in Haiti, but were in Cuba on vacation when the quake occurred, quickly returned. They were joined by additional Cuban surgeons experienced in working in difficult situations and Haitian doctors who had been training in Cuban medical schools in various specialties.

Within less than 24 hours, Cuban medical personnel in Haiti had already assisted hundreds of patients — a figure that grew to thousands by the weekend.

Fidel Castro used his newspaper column “Reflections” on Jan. 16 to relay to the Cuban people the gist of a report from the head of the Cuban medical brigade:

“The ‘Delmas 33 Hospital’ is already operational. It has three operating rooms, its own power generation plants, doctors’ visits areas, etcetera, but is absolutely full.

“Twelve Chilean doctors have joined in. One of them is an anesthesiologist. There are also eight Venezuelan doctors and nine Spanish nuns. It was expected that, at any moment, 18 Spaniards, to whom the U.N. and the Haitian Public Health authorities had handed over the control of the hospital, would come, but they lacked some emergency supplies that had not arrived, so they have decided to join us and start working immediately.

“Thirty-two Haitian resident doctors were sent in; six of them were going straight to Carrefour, a place that was totally devastated. Traveling with them were also the three Cuban surgical teams that arrived here yesterday.

“We are operating the following medical facilities at Port-au-Prince: ‘La Renaissance’ Hospital, the Social Insurance Hospital, and the Peace Hospital.

Four Comprehensive Diagnostics Centers are already working.”

At the same time that the Cuban government was coordinating relief for Haiti, it also, in less than an hour, evacuated 30,000 Cubans from low-lying towns on the coast opposite Haiti, until fears of a possible tsunami had subsided.

Chinese search and rescue team

At 2 a.m. on Jan. 14, about 32 hours after the quake, a plane landed in Port-au-Prince with a search and rescue team from China — which had its own earthquake catastrophe just two years ago. The plane had left China within hours of hearing of Haiti’s urgent need and flew halfway around the world.

The China Earthquake Administration reported that the team worked for more than 60 hours pulling people out of collapsed buildings in the capital. According to China Daily, the team “started working with peacekeeping forces from Brazil and Nepal and rescue teams from the U.S. and France.

“They had retrieved the bodies of some United Nations officials, including U.N. chief in Haiti Hedi Annabi and Luiz Da Costa, deputy special representative of the U.N. general secretary in Haiti, in addition to eight Chinese police officers.

“The team also set up a medical station to offer treatment for patients pulled out of debris and medical support to medical and security personnel. The team will continue search and rescue work in other parts of Haiti in coordination with the U.N., the CEA said.”

Hou Shike, chief doctor of the Chinese medical team, reported that the team had already treated more than 200 patients with severe trauma.

Three days later, on Jan. 17, a Chinese transport plane arrived in Port-au-Prince with 90 tons of supplies, including medicines, tents, emergency lights, water purification supplies, food, drinking water and clothing.

Also on Jan. 17, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela pledged his country would provide as much fuel as Haiti needed to generate electricity and provide transport.

U.S.-controlled airport a ‘bottleneck’

Meanwhile, the Haitian government, now barely able to function, turned over control of its international airport to the U.S. Washington’s first priority was to rush in thousands of troops. This has already brought criticism from aid groups.

Doctors Without Borders, based in Geneva, said the U.S.-controlled airport was a supply bottleneck and that there was “little sign of significant aid distribution.” (Telegraph [Britain], Jan. 18) The aid group said a flight carrying its own inflatable hospital was denied landing clearance and the material was being trucked overland from the Dominican Republic, delaying its arrival by 24 hours.

“French, Brazilian and other officials had earlier complained about the airport’s refusal to allow their supply planes to land. A World Food Program official told

The New York Times that the Americans' priorities were out of sync, allowing too many U.S. military flights and too few aid deliveries.

"Alain Joyandet, French cooperation minister, said he had protested to Washington about the U.S. military's management of the airport, where he said a French medical aid flight had been turned away." (Telegraph)

China Daily on Jan. 18 in a report from Port-au-Prince said that aid distribution was in general "random, chaotic and minimal." It described how crowds jostled for food and water "as U.S. military helicopters swooped down to throw out boxes of water bottles and rations. A reporter also saw foreign aid workers tossing packets of food to desperate Haitians.

"The distribution is totally disorganized. They are not identifying the people who need the water. The sick and the old have no chance," said Estime Pierre Deny, standing at the back of a crowd looking for water with his empty plastic container."

The Chinese paper added that "Dozens of countries have sent planes with rescue teams, doctors, tents, food, medicine and other supplies, but faced a bottleneck at Port-au-Prince's small airport."

It is very difficult to find coverage in the U.S. corporate media of what socialist and progressive countries are doing to help Haiti. Perhaps it is because they don't put a price tag on their sacrifice? We do hear a lot about the \$100 million that the Obama administration is promising. But on the ground, when thousands are dying every day from lack of water, food and medicine, that promise of greenbacks down the line isn't enough.

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