

Facing Irma in Cuba: “¡Saldremos adelante!” (“We Can Only Move Forward!”)

By [Arnold August](#)

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“Saldremos adelante!” (“We can only move forward!”). This is what a colleague exclaimed during one of my several phone calls to Havana in the days after Irma unleashed its wrath on the capital.

Others, when asked how they, their families, colleagues and neighbours were faring, declared in a similar manner, “We are fighters,” “We are never defeated” and “We are in the battle for recovery.”

Despite this attitude, they were unanimous in their emphasis that Cuba’s situation is “critical,” having suffered the most devastating hurricane in about 85 years. This coincides with Raúl Castro’s message to the people, when he said,

“No one should be fooled; the task we have before us is huge.”

Another colleague remarked that the Cubans’ trademark solidarity immediately became stronger and more widespread in the course of Irma’s fury on Havana. For example, in a small apartment building without gas or electricity for cooking, one family used charcoal to prepare meals for all the residents, using everyone’s food that was otherwise perishing in their refrigerators. Another colleague, a journalist, recounted how she was able to meet the deadline for her story despite her office building remaining without electricity, thanks to being granted access to the headquarters of another news outlet. One can hardly imagine a similar situation taking place in the US! Would CNN and FOX collaborate this way? Would the capitalist *New York Times* share its offices with its diehard competitor *The Wall Street Journal*? In the same manner, in Canada, can anyone imagine such cooperation between archrivals *The Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*? This is just one great advantage of the Cuban press not being privately controlled. All of the above and countless other examples are also reflected in Raúl’s statement “with a people like ours, we will win the most important battle: recovery.”

In fact, only three days after these initial phone conversations, the same people reported that their electricity and gas had been restored but that, sadly, many small towns on the north coast have been devastated to the extent that normal services and housing had not yet come close to being restored.

The Cuban Revolution and Notions of Defeat Are Incompatible

The Cuban Revolution does not know the meaning of defeat. It likewise does not accept in its collective and individual minds the notion of fear or despair. This new consciousness

began developing in Cuba since 1959, solidifying and deepening over the decades in the face of adversity. This unique feature was noticeable before Irma, but it has become ever more evident these past two weeks. Its latest expression in the dramatic days during and after Irma could not help one to think of the first two sentences of the Cuban Constitution, which states that Cuban citizens express “combativity, firmness, heroism and sacrifice fostered by our ancestors.” An early example of this consists of “the Indians who preferred extermination to submission.” The 16th-century Taíno Indian chief Hatuey is a legend in Cuba. On February 2, 1512, Hatuey was tied to a stake at the Spanish camp, where he was burned alive. Just before lighting the fire, a priest offered him spiritual comfort, showing him the cross and asking him to accept Jesus and go to heaven. “Are there people like you in heaven?” he asked. “There are many like me in heaven,” replied the priest. Hatuey answered that he wanted nothing to do with a god that would allow such cruelty to be unleashed in his name.



Raul Castro (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

This fierce characteristic of the native people remains true of the Cuban people today. The same cannot be said of the European peoples, nations and their descendants as a whole, with the exception of the Cuban nation, which, faced with one adversity or another – whether it be successive hurricanes, Moncada, post-1959 terrorist attacks on the island, the Bay of Pigs or the fall of the former USSR and Eastern European socialist countries (with which 85% of Cuba’s economy was entangled) – have demonstrated an indelible feature of their collectivity: the impossibility to accept defeat.

Cuba accomplished this not only since 1959, but also as far back as the wars of independence in the second half of the 19th century. One notable example of this historical period is the Protest of Baraguá. Cuban independence fighter Antonio Maceo could not accept defeat because he did not feel defeated – he had been winning his battles and had a good military organization. In the Baraguá (eastern Cuba) meeting with the Spanish, he strongly objected to the terms of the peace agreement, which the conciliatory section of the resistance to the Spanish accepted, deeming the agreement to be insulting and brushing

aside its promise of concessions. Cuba is an eternal Baraguá, as they say.

This feature of the Cuban people having revolutionized their mentality as a people and a nation in a protracted process, obliterating any notion of fear and defeat while replacing it with a firmly based new consciousness, is not only inspired by the inevitable victory over adversity, but is also of historic importance for this century. In Latin America, the Bolivarian Revolution (with its more than 8 million proactive people) is another example, even though it has not yet penetrated the Venezuelan people or nation as a whole.

It seems as if the overwhelming majority of Cuban people have reached this new consciousness, as it existed among the native peoples for thousands of years. The latter's mindset constitutes an entirely different mentality generally not found as a **distinguishing characteristic** among European nations and their descendants. The Cuban off-springs of the Spanish and other Europeans, Africans, Chinese and others **as a new nation** have been evolving in the course of revolutionary struggles since 1868, with a renewed spark after the 1953 Moncada attack. This fearless way of thinking and corresponding actions seems to have merged into an entirely new national idiosyncrasy that has far more in common with the heritage of the native peoples than with that of the Europeans.

"Survival of the Fittest?"

The words that follow may stir some interest as well as cackles. It is a historical fact that the Cuban Revolution has survived against all odds and predictions despite, among other factors, the five-decade-long blockade and the earthshaking fall of the USSR, which was supposed to have sounded the death knell for the socialist revolution. Instead, rather than merely surviving it, Cuba has evolved further – socially and culturally – while constituting an unprecedented model of international solidarity. And, let us not forget, all this has transpired **within the limits of the blockade**, whose goal, it must always be recalled, is the protracted **genocide of the Cuban people**.

While social science is far from able to provide an exhaustive analysis, explanation or encouragement of this rare phenomenon that is the Cuba Revolution, the metaphoric use of natural science may be of assistance in reflection. Charles Darwin showed that, as part of natural evolution, only the fittest survive extinction. The Cuban Revolution is indeed the "fittest," in the sense that it has imbued the vast majority of Cuban people composing the nation to overcome even the most difficult and seemingly insurmountable challenges.

This mentality of refusing to accept defeat was also reflected in the call by Raúl to his people, when he ended by saying,

"We face the recovery with the example of Comandante en Jefe de la Revolución Cubana, Fidel Castro Ruz, who, with his unwavering confidence in victory and iron will, taught us that nothing is impossible. In these difficult hours, his legacy makes us strong and unites us."

Fidel is at once the main impulse and guide, through his thinking, action and example for the Cuban Revolution. He embodies this iron will to fight off attacks from all hostile tendencies inside and outside Cuba to defeat any challenge that stands in its way and thus come out victorious.

International Solidarity

The Cuban people have proven themselves to be world leaders when it comes to international solidarity, and the love they have extended to others has been rewarded with the rapid material and moral support of Russia, Vietnam and countries in Latin America. For example, in a briefing after Irma hit Cuba, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, with his Chavista flair, showed a video of a Hercules plane loaded with material support landing on a makeshift runway cleared by the Cuban government as part of reopening of the Havana airport.

More than ever before, Cuba needs and deserves such material and moral support. While Cuba receives this type of solidarity from around the planet, Trump has signed the Trading with the Enemy Act once again, and made a statement on September 13 about human rights violations in Cuba and Venezuela. This was followed by the callous statement of his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. He stated on September 16 that, in light of the alleged and totally non-founded sonic interference by Cuba against the American diplomats in Havana, the US is considering closing its Embassy in Havana. He said with a callousness completely oblivious to the suffering of the Cuban people by the very real Irma:

“It’s a very serious issue with respect to the harm that certain individuals [American diplomats] have suffered.”



Canadian PM Justin Trudeau

Justin Trudeau’s Canadian government is among the Western countries that have not issued any statement of support or solidarity with Cuba. This is a sad reality, given Canada’s special relationship with Cuba, having not ever broken diplomatic ties with the country. In fact, Justin Trudeau’s father was the first Western leader to visit Cuba and express solidarity with Fidel Castro and “Cuba Libre.” Justin Trudeau himself visited Cuba and met with Raúl Castro only days before Fidel passed away. Furthermore, Canada has been the biggest source of tourism for Cuba for several decades, to the extent that millions of Canadians have visited the island not only once, but multiple times, making Cuba practically a home away from home for many.

One may hope that the Trudeau government will rectify and at least express its moral support, which would very much encourage the Cubans, who are conscious of this special Cuba-Canada relationship forged to an extent by the Trudeau tradition. As far as critically needed financial and material support, Canada should overcome its self-imposed bureaucracy and provide immediate aid. According to the website of the Cuban Mission in Ottawa, the first on the list of material needs is **construction material**. Canada is the **fifth in the world** as far as lumber production and hovers between the **first and second** of the

world's top exporters of timber products. Should Canada not immediately consider overcoming any obstacle and make use of this plentiful natural resource that is so necessary for Cuba in this critical situation?

This obstinacy by some Western governments – such as the US, Canada, the UK, the rest of Europe, Australia and New Zealand, as well as others – is in contrast to the attitude of solidarity organizations and other institutions in these countries that are going all out to raise relief funds at the grassroots level to support Cuba. While all countries in the Caribbean also need this support, Cuba was the hardest hit in terms of **quantity** of infrastructure and the **number** of people affected by Irma. It is also a political issue, in terms of supporting the survival of the Cuban Revolution, which is now facing an unprecedented climate challenge. Furthermore, the hurricane season still has close to another three months to go, as some of my colleagues in Havana have pointed out.

The American Blockade and Irma

Cuba is also facing a new disinformation campaign from mass media and others. Many are having a field day describing housing, roofs and other structures as being “dilapidated,” which to an extent is true, especially in cities such as Havana. But is this a feature of the Cuban system? The impression given is that any problematic housing and infrastructure is entirely Cuba's fault and thus proof of the “failure of socialism.” However, what about the effects of the blockade, which was mainly completely ignored in these reports or reduced to a footnote? As mentioned by Cuban colleagues in Havana who were consulted on this issue of disinformation,

“It is no accident that these media hide or minimize the effects of the blockade.”

The cumulative effect of the blockade since 1961 seriously hinders normal economic development in Cuba. The blockade itself resulted from the original genocidal goal to make Cuba bend to its knees and give in to the US empire. Watching Cuban TV during and immediately after Irma, it was clear that the blockade has had a cataclysmic effect on the damage, just as it is having now with the recovery.

Take, for example, construction and infrastructures, where “dilapidated” housing is more likely a direct result of the blockade, which led to \$30,868,200 in damages in a single year alone, spanning 2015–2016. One of the main causes of damages was the lack of access to lightweight and efficient construction technologies and energy components, which are available on the US market or are produced by subsidiaries of US-based companies. Could this not be the main cause of the “dilapidated” housing, notwithstanding any Cuban domestic insufficiencies?

This situation requires that we outside of Cuba counter the disinformation campaign against the Cuban Revolution and demand the complete lifting of the blockade, as part of our expression of financial, material and moral solidarity with Cuba.

Arnold August, a Canadian journalist and lecturer, is the author of [Democracy in Cuba and the 1997–98 Elections](#), [Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion](#) and the recently released [Cuba-U.S. Relations: Obama and Beyond](#). Arnold can be followed on Twitter [@Arnold_August](#) and [FaceBook](#)

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<http://Guillaume>

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