

Media Distortion regarding Cuba's Humanitarian Activities in Haiti

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Global Research, April 21, 2010

[Cube-L Analysis](#) 16 April 2010

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti caused some 230,000 deaths, left 1.5 million homeless, and has directly affected 3 million Haitians — 1/3 of the population. On March 31, representatives of over 50 governments and international organizations gathered at the United Nations Haiti Donor Conference to pledge long-term assistance for the rebuilding of Haiti. At the conference, Cuba made arguably the most ambitious and impressive pledge of all countries — to rebuild the entire National Health Service. While the efforts of other government have been praised, those of Cuba, however, have largely been ignored in the media.

The aim of Cuba's contribution is to completely reconstruct the Haitian health care system — and to do so in a sustainable manner. The new system will be based on the Cuban model, embracing primary, secondary and tertiary health care, in addition to the training of additional Haitian doctors in Cuba. In summary:

The primary level will include 101 clinics to treat annually an estimated 2.8 million patients, perform 1.3 million emergency operations, deliver 168,000 babies, and provide 3 million vaccinations.

The secondary level will be provided through 30 community hospitals. They will have the capacity to treat annually 2.1 million patients, and provide 1 million emergency surgeries, 54,000 operations, 276,000 electro-cardiograms, 107,000 dental exams, 144,000 diagnostic ultrasounds, and 487,000 laboratory tests. In addition, due to the high numbers of poly-traumatized patients, the 30 rehabilitation rooms will be included throughout the country and will provide 2.4 million therapeutic treatments for some 520,000 patients.

The tertiary level of health care will be delivered by the Haitian Specialties Hospital, staffed by 80 Cuban specialists. It will contain various clinical departments, and will be used for research and teaching, as well as the further training of Haitian professionals who will gradually replace the Cuban professionals.

Finally, 312 additional medical scholarships are to be provided for Haitian students to study in Cuba.[1]

What is also significant point is that these are not just 'pledges' from Cuba, but rather a development of medical assistance which has been provided over the last eleven years, and dramatically increased since the earthquake. A Cuban medical brigade has been in Haiti since 1999 and has "a presence in 127 of the 137 Haitian communes, saved 223,442 lives, treated 14 million people, performed 225,000 operations and delivered 109,000 babies." [2]

Furthermore much of the promised programme is already in place, as “post-quake, 23 of these primary care health centers, 15 community reference hospitals and 21 rehabilitation rooms are up and running.”

The cost of the Cuban programme over a ten-year period is estimated at \$690.5 million — using 50 percent of international prices for services of this kind.[3] This is an enormous amount for a small developing country (11.2 million population); and moreover one that has been under a crippling economic blockade from its powerful neighbor for nearly half-a-century.[4]

It is even more notable when compared to those of other governments, particularly those of industrialized countries.

For example, Cuba’s contribution in relation to its GDP is 155 times that of the United States, which pledged \$1.15 billion.[5] Among other G-7 countries, France, the former colonial power, pledged \$188.93 million, Germany \$53.17 million, Japan \$75 million, and Canada \$375.23 million, while Italy and the United Kingdom, though not specifically listed, were probably included in the \$203.19 million pledge that was made in the name of “EU Remaining” group of countries.[6]

Hence in absolute terms the monetary value of Cuba’s contribution is almost 4 times that of France, 12 times that of Germany, and almost twice that of Canada. Indeed, excluding the U.S., Cuba’s contribution is more than the rest of the G7 countries combined, as well as 35% more than the contribution of the World Bank (\$479 million). In all, 59 pledges were made from governments, regional blocs and financial institutions.

In other words, while other countries are pledging money, Cuba is actively creating an entire sustainable health care system which will treat 75% of the Haitian population, and save hundreds of thousands of lives.[7]

And yet, in spite of the extraordinary value of this commitment, it has been largely ignored by the principal North American media.

Media Representation of United Nations Haiti Donor Conference,
Including Cuba and the United States’ Contributions [8]

News Agency

Posts regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference

Posts stating US Monetary Contribution following Conference

Posts regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference that Mention Cuba

CNN

8

3

0

New York Times

4	
3	
0	
Boston Globe	
3	
1	
0	
Washington Post	
12	
7	
0	
Miami Herald	
11	
8	
1	
Total	
38	
22	
1	

As we can see from the accompanying Table, of 38 posts on the Haiti Donor Conference in five major U.S. media on the ten days following the Conference, only one mentioned the Cuban contribution — and that only briefly. Moreover, CNN, New York Times, Boston Globe, and the Washington Post entirely ignored Cuba’s contribution. The amount of media coverage is also instructive in indicating the gradual decline in media interest following the disaster.

That said, the UN Haiti Donor Conference was clearly worthy of widespread attention, with a major gathering of some of the world’s leading decision-makers — yet there was noticeably little published about it, and especially about Cuba’s extraordinary contribution.

In addition, our analysis of the first fifty results in Google News for ‘United Nations Haiti Donor Conference,’ generated only two articles that mentioned Cuba’s role. One of these focused on the rarity of Cuban and United States officials working together. By contrast, 31

of the 50 articles discuss the contributions of developed countries at the Donor Conference, and 21 specifically discuss that of the United States — 9 of which mention the \$1.15 billion pledged by the US government.

Indeed a content analysis of the articles reveals that their main theme was the importance of the role of the United States in helping Haiti. The dollar amount pledged was repeatedly stated, and the U.S. effort was often described as being equally (or more) important than that of the UN.

According to one article, “The biggest contributions came from the United States and the European Union.”[9] Even if one compares the absolute amounts pledged, this is simply not true — as the Venezuelan pledge was for \$2.4 billion.

Another article singles out the United States, explaining “Over 140 nations, including the United States, have provided immediate assistance and relief to millions of Haitians,”[10] and in media coverage the United States consistently headed the list of contributing countries. Another article lists the United States as having a more important role than the United Nations, noting “Haiti’s friends, as they are called – including the U.S., France, Brazil, Canada, the UN and the Red Cross”. [11]

In sum, while relief efforts in Haiti were/are an international affair, the media have largely focused on contributions made by the United States.

Another common theme in coverage was the lack of assistance from other countries. Hence, when the assistance of the United States was not praised, those of other countries were denigrated. As one article states, “The United States pledged \$1.15 billion, in addition to the \$900 million it has already given... By comparison, China pledged \$1.5 million yes, you read it right, million with an “m” — in addition to the nearly \$14 million it has already given.”[12]

Thus, there is a consistent pattern of disproportionately positive representation by the media of the role of the United States, one that both emphasizes the actual pledge and ignores blatantly the significant Cuban pledge.

There is a dramatic contrast between the cover-up of Cuba’s extraordinary contribution to Haiti by mainstream US media and the enormous attention by the same media on alleged human rights abuses in that country. Literally dozens of articles on this topic have appeared in recent weeks. Of particular media interest was the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo (a jailed “dissident” with a criminal record who refused food for 80 days before dying) and the hunger strike of Guillermo Fariñas. The death of Zapata as a result of the hunger strike continues to be written about and discussed. Indeed it has been used consistently as a springboard to increase criticism of the Cuban government. The table below illustrates the extent of this coverage.

Media Coverage of Hunger Strikes
in Cuba between February 10 and April 9 [13]

News Agency

Stories about the
Hunger Strikes in Cuba

CNN

5

New York Times

7

Washington Post

13

Boston Globe

4

Miami Herald

48

Total

77

In analyzing the coverage of these two Cuba-related stories, the difference in the number of articles is quite striking, and reveals a clear disinterest in providing any positive information on Cuba, while at the same time maintaining a significant appetite to criticize Cuba. The comparison of the two in the following table is telling.

Comparison between Media Coverage of Hunger Strikes in Cuba
and Cuba's Contribution at the United Nations Haiti Donor Conference
from February 10 to April 9.

News Agency

Stories About the Hunger Strikes In Cuba
February 10 – April 9

Posts Regarding the UN Haiti Donor Conference that Mention Cuba
March 31 – April 9

CNN

5

0

New York Times

7

0

Washington Post

13

0

Boston Globe

4

0

Miami Herald

48

1

Total

77

1

As a result, instead of reporting on an enormously important and topical story on a programme aimed at improving the lives of 75% of Haiti's population, the media have chosen to focus on the individual cases of two men who have consciously and deliberately decided to embark on a suicidal course.

It does not take much to work out that the aim is to embarrass the Cuban government by following these "human interest" stories about two individuals who oppose the Cuban government, presenting them as martyrs. It is also obvious that there is a clear media filter, one which seeks to prevent any media coverage that could be construed as being positive of Cuba — in this case seen in the government's commitment to the reconstruction of Haiti.

In examining the media's representation of Cuba's role in Haiti's development and the stories of two "dissidents", it is clear that politically biased "infotainment" has won out. Sadly (but perhaps predictably), in their coverage of Cuba, the media in the "developed world" have focused on the latter while ignoring Cuba's remarkable offer that will surely and significantly improve the lives of millions of Haitians, (while at the same time highlighting the role and contribution of the United States).

Yet again we have an example of selective commendation and selective indignation in the North American media's presentation of Cuba.

Notes

[1] "Pledge Statements". United Nations International Donors' Conference Towards A New Future For Haiti". 2010. Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from <http://www.haiticonference.org/pledges-statements.html>

[2] From the statement by Foreign Minister Rodriguez.

[3] The total “includes the medical services provided, calculated at 50% of international prices; the sustainability of these services and the personnel providing them; and the training of a further 312 Haitian doctors in Cuba”. Whereas the [Official Text of the Cuban Statement](#) published on the UN website refers to this cost “over four years,” the text of Foreign Minister’s Bruno Rodríguez’s speech as published by Granma International refers to this cost over ten years (see [Overseas Territories Review](#)).

[4] Speech given at the United Nations by Cuban foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla. See “Declaración del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba en la Reunión de Donantes a Haití”.

[5] Cuba’s contribution is approximately 1.22 percent of its GDP (\$56.52 billion in 2009); that of the U.S. amounts to 0.00785 percent of its 2008 GDP (14,204, billion)

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See search results for “United Nations Haiti Donor Conference” —

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.miami.com

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.thestar.com

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.washingtonpost.com

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.boston.com

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.nytimes.com

Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from www.cnn.com

[9] “UN Haiti Donor Pledges Surpass Target of Almost \$10 Billion”. BBC. 1 April, 2010. Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8596080.stm>

[10] Esther Brimmer. “Rebuilding Haiti: A Global Response to a Global Crisis”. The Huntington Post. 12 April, 2010. Retrieved 12 April, 2010 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/esther-brimmer/rebuilding-haiti-a-global_b_528790.html

[11] Wilnetz, Amy. “Renew Haiti From The Ground Up”. NY Daily News. 12 April, 2010. Retrieved 12 April, 2010 from http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2010/04/12/2010-04-12_renew_haiti_from_the_ground_up.html

[12] Andres Oppenheimer. “China Should Be Ashamed of Its Aid to Haiti”. Miami Herald. 3 April, 2010. Retrieved 10 April, 2010 from <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/04/03/1562417/china-should-be-ashamed-of-its.html#ixzz0ktnhldAK>

[13] See search results for “Hunger Strike, Cuba” —

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.miami.com

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.thestar.com

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.washingtonpost.com

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.boston.com

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.nytimes.com

Retrieved 6 April, 2010 from www.cnn.com

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