

Venezuela: Cuban Doctors Helping the Poor

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April 16 will be the seventh anniversary of the Venezuelan government's health care program, Mission Barrio Adentro, which has used Cuban doctors to bring free health care to millions of the poor.

The mission began as a pilot project in the impoverished Caracas municipality of Libertador at the suggestion of former mayor Freddy Bernal. It was soon extended across the whole country.

It began with 53 Cuban doctors. In Venezuela now there are 29,255 Cuban health specialists of which a little more than one third are doctors. The rest are nurses, and technicians in radiology, rehabilitation and engineers who repair the equipment.

In seven years, 11,500 medical centres have been built. This includes Integrated Diagnostic Centres, with more facilities than the basic clinics. About 97% of the services of Barrio Adentro are available every day.

Millions of people now have access to previously unaffordable or inaccessible basic health care.

The government's education policies, which seek to train Venezuelans to replace the Cuban specialists, have resulted in more than 15,000 Venezuelans working in Barrio Adentro. This includes 1430 doctors, 2100 dentists, 3000 nurses and 8300 other workers such as secretaries, drivers, cooks and general assistants.

When President Hugo Chavez first announced the mission, the plan was for the Cuban doctors to stay for five years — with the aim of having trained enough Venezuelan doctors through the new community doctor program by then to replace them.

Cuban health vice-minister Joaquin Garcia, who is in charge of Cuban medical operation in Venezuela, told the March 25 *Ultimas Noticias* that the Cuban health workers would remain "until President Chavez decides otherwise".

In September, another 1000 Cuban doctors arrived to reopen some of the consulting rooms that had been closed.

Garcia said: "It is a genuine Venezuelan project, where the Cubans participate and not the reverse." Garcia said that his colleges work in the country under the direction of the Venezuelan health ministry.

He said Cuban doctors don't use the same vaccines as in Cuba, but the ones the Venezuelan

health ministry instructs them to. He answered the criticism of a “Cuban takeover” leveled against Barrio Adentro by the right-wing opposition by stating: “We are not an occupation force in Venezuela, nor do we do as we feel like.”

Cuban health and other workers in Venezuela have come under increasing criticism from the opposition, which claims they are taking Venezuelan jobs as well as spreading all sorts of wild rumours.

The opposition publicised the fact that 69 Cuban doctors have died in Venezuela, implying they have been murdered and were victims of Venezuela’s high crime rate. However, Garcia said the majority of the deaths were from heart attacks, illnesses and car accidents.

Due to the opposition-aligned private media’s attempts to attack the presence of Cuban doctors, the health workers do not give media interviews. Garcia said: “People have tricked us, we are a little ingenuous.

“Since we don’t know what their intentions are, we do not play that game. The journalists have the right to get information but we have the right to give out information when we feel like it.

“We are not going to leave by force. Moreover, where are the doctors who to substitute for the Cubans? Next year, they will graduate 8000 community doctors.

“I don’t know whether the Venezuelan government will decide to substitute these for Cuban doctors, or keep us Cubans in order to further expand the Barrio Adentro network until there are sufficient Venezuelans [health workers] for the entire population.”

Garcia said that Barrio Adentro has much to teach the world, including ideas for improving the Cuban model of health. He noted: “After seven years of the Cuban revolution, we didn’t have a model of care like the Venezuelans.

“In a short time, we were able to solve the problem of exclusion that Venezuela had in the health sector.”

Some Cuban doctors have left Venezuela to go into exile in Miami, where they can earn high salaries, but they are a small minority.

Garcia said “We don’t go to any country with the intention of making ourselves rich, we are missionaries. The World Health Organisation has never been able to have the number of doctors working around the world that Cuba has been able to send.”

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