

Cuba's export workers: a state-run labor trafficking business

Fact Sheet

According to Cuba, it sends around 65,000 workers (exports their services) to over 60 countries under bilateral “cooperation” agreements: government-to-government or government-to-corporation contracts. Typically, the workers go overseas for two to three years. Most are part of “internationalist missions” of doctors, teachers, and sports’ and other trainers, however, architects, geologists, musicians, sailors, tobacco rollers, construction workers, and others, are also exported. There are at least 85 state companies in Cuba devoted to selling these export services.

The medical missions provide health services for free to underserved populations in host countries suffering from either a scarcity of doctors or whose local doctors are unwilling to work/live in certain locations, and/or who use them to advance political agendas and to support Cuba. Most of these business deals are presented as “humanitarian” assistance and used as propaganda to boost Cuba’s brand of socialism and elicit praise, legitimacy, and sympathy for the Cuban dictatorship.

These export services are Cuba’s largest source of revenues and hard currency. The last official statistics are for 2016, when they brought Cuba over US\$8 billion net of tourism. Although this was a considerable decrease due to declining in payments from Venezuela, over \$2 billion from their peak in 2012-2014, it was still more than any other sector of the economy and almost three times the revenues from tourism.¹ These arrangements also strengthen political and economic ties with host nations and: 1.) leads to assistance, loans, favorable investments and markets for Cuba’s exports; and 2.) buys loyalty and political influence in international organizations and in the international arena.

Medical diplomacy: Cuba’s business of humanitarianism

That Cuba receives payment for these export medical services was long considered “a state secret.” Today, the terms of the agreements are still tightly guarded, but payment terms vary (eg. Cuba commands for a general doctor around US\$3,000 in Namibia but US\$5,000 a month in Angola; in Saudi Arabia, it can earn \$25,000 a month for a plastic surgeon). The workers typically receive only a minor fraction of the revenue that Cuba derives for his/her services, regardless of its source. Cuba’s services are typically paid by the host government with public funds; in some countries, such as Haiti and Mali, funding is reportedly provided as assistance from other governments, NGOs, or international organizations such as WHO and PAHO. Only in few cases, Cuba is believed to not charge for its services, such as when it sends emergency brigades in natural disasters, which are used as a foothold into new markets.

Cuba’s Export Services 2003-2016

in millions of Cuban Pesos
1:1 exchange with U.S. dollar

Year	Export Services	Tourism	Export Services net of Tourism
2003	2,844.60	1,999.20	845.4
2004	3,634.40	2,113.60	1,520.80
2005	6,550.50	2,398.90	4,151.60
2006	6,667.40	2,234.90	4,432.50
2007	7,951.80	2,236.40	5,715.40
2008	8,566.40	2,346.90	6,219.50
2009	7,762.60	2,082.40	5,680.20
2010	9,660.00	2,218.40	7,441.60
2011	10,281.10	2,503.10	7,778.00
2012	12,760.00	2,613.30	10,146.70
2013	13,027.00	2,607.80	10,419.20
2014	12,663.00	2,546.10	10,116.90
2015	11,369.00	2,828.60	8,550.40
2016	11,102.00	3,068.60	8,033.40

**2016 is the last year for which data has been published.*

Source: Maria C. Werlau, 2018. Table derived from External Balance of goods and services in the Statistical Yearbook of Cuba for 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014 and in Cuentas Nacionales for 2015 and 2016, published by Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, República de Cuba, www.one.cu.

¹ The host government typically provides each internationalist worker furnished housing, domestic transportation, and a small monthly stipend for food and personal expenses. Cuba covers logistical support and sometimes airfare plus pays the family of the collaborator back home their regular peso salary —a scant US\$65 a month on average for a doctor— and a hard currency bonus usually of around US\$50-\$120 monthly. Internationalists may send home some consumer goods free of import duties, which allows families to import appliances, electronic equipment, and other products nearly impossible to get in Cuba or only available at exorbitant prices. Some use these shipments as business opportunities to sell clothes and goods bought very cheaply abroad at high mark-ups in Cuba.

Cuba's doctors, "the highest qualified slave labor force in the world."²

Cuban workers abroad are subjected to many arbitrary measures as well and to the same labor right abuses as workers in Cuba: denied the right to form independent unions, to strike or peacefully protest, of collective bargaining or direct employment, and forced to "donate" pay to militias.

This brand of health diplomacy is possible only in a state that exerts totalitarian control over the medical professionals and guarantees a steady pool of captive temporary workers, i.e. "exportable commodities." The entire Cuban economy, including the health sector, is in the state's hands, so doctors and other workers may not practice privately. Doctors are paid by the state (sole employer) around US\$65 monthly, which barely guarantees their survival. Thus, many Cuban doctors seek to go abroad to minimally improve their lot or to defect.

The state, however, goes to great strides to prevent workers from leaving the country or "deserting" their missions overseas. No health professional may leave the country without a special government permission that is very difficult to obtain; those who seek to emigrate, are denied exit permits for at least five years. A Ministry of Health resolution forbids giving health workers their educational and professional credentials, so they may not work overseas other than through Cuban government sponsorship. All exported workers must leave their families in Cuba. They are usually issued a special "official" passport in a different color (red) to prevent their travel to anywhere but Cuba (it is often retained by supervisors). If they desert their mission, they may not enter Cuba for at least eight years; their families face reprisals and are prevented from joining them abroad for at least five years. In countries such as Venezuela, fleeing doctors must bribe customs authorities to avoid being turned over to Cuba's State Security and forced back to Cuba in disgrace.

Conditions of service of Cuba's health workers:

1. Are under constant surveillance from their Cuban handlers/supervisors and collaborators of Cuban intelligence.
2. Are often sent to unsafe and remote/poor areas or violence-ridden neighborhoods where local doctors do not want to serve. Many have been killed or robbed, raped, and injured.
3. Must contribute the sizeable part of their wages to the Cuban state and are paid many times less than health workers in host countries.
4. Receive a stipend in local currency that in some countries is not sufficient to cover basic needs.
5. Face a heavy workload, often working from early morning until night, sometimes seven days a week.
6. In some countries are subjected to very poor living conditions, have to share shabby and cramped accommodations with numerous co-workers or with local families, are deprived of privacy, and lack recreational activities.
7. Are subject to arbitrary regulations, such as not allowed to drive a car, enter into relations with or marry locals, visit other cities, stay out overnight, leave home after a certain hour, say 5 or 7 p.m. (If "red alerts" are issued, such as in Venezuela, they may not leave their quarters at all for days.)
8. Are bound by Cuban laws applicable to all Cuban personnel in contact with foreigners that forbid them from accepting gifts or associating with any person in the host country that is not supportive of revolutionary ideals.
9. Must attend weekly political meetings to hear the official version of news from Cuba and world events.
10. Are required to inform on any co-worker who offends the "honor of the motherland and its symbols."
11. Are not allowed to speak to any member of the media.
12. In certain countries, must manipulate statistics to meet ambitious requirements for per patient or per service goals (from which payments to Cuba depend) and dispose of medicines or supplies for the made-up patients.
13. In certain countries, have mandatory political duties with patients or the local population to coerce them to vote and must spread pro-Cuba and pro-socialist propaganda.

International law violations of the export service arrangements

This scheme of slavery and exploitation implies numerous international law violations, summarized below. Because Cuba is a repressive police state, judicial remedies, civil society activism, or working through the political

² According to a doctor who worked in an overseas mission.

system is not possible. Moreover, the Cuban state traditionally disregards human rights' commitments it has ratified in international instruments, a practice avowed by Cuba's Constitution. The sole remedy is to escape. Thousands of health professionals have deserted worldwide and many, perhaps most, have made their way to the United States.

Slavery

The use of forced labour has been condemned by the international community as a practice similar to but distinct from slavery. The practice of slavery has been universally accepted as a "crime against humanity" when committed by public officials against any person irrespective of circumstances and diversity of nationality.

Trafficking in Persons

Trafficking in Persons Protocol (2003) supplementing the United Nations' *Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (one of the three Palermo Protocols):

- "Trafficking in persons" is defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs." (Art. 3, subpara (a.).
- "The consent of the victim to the intended exploitation is irrelevant once it is demonstrated that deception, coercion, force or other prohibited means have been used." (Art. 3 subpara.(b.)

Servitude

Early drafts of the Trafficking in Persons Protocol defined servitude as the status or condition of dependency of a person who is unlawfully compelled or coerced by another to render any service to the same person or to others and who has no reasonable alternative but to perform the service.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 29 concerning forced or compulsory labor (1930)

- Forced labour is defined as: "All work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which said person has not offered himself voluntarily."

ILO Convention No. 95 on the Protection of Wages (1949)

- Article 6 : "Employers shall be prohibited from limiting in any manner the freedom of the worker to dispose of his wages."
- Article 8: "Deductions from wages shall be permitted only under conditions and to the extent prescribed by national laws or regulations or fixed by collective agreement or arbitration award."
- Article 9: "Any deduction from wages with a view to ensuring a direct or indirect payment for the purpose of obtaining or retaining employment, made by a worker to an employer or his representative or to any intermediary (such as a labour contractor or recruiter), shall be prohibited."

Violations of the right to enter and leave one's country

Article 216 of Cuba's Penal Code forbids citizens from leaving the country without government permission and punishes attempts to do so with 1 to 3 years of prison. Entry and exit restrictions are even harsher on health and other professionals and their families. These violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, other international agreements and customary international law.

Concerns for countries hosting medical missions

1. Questionable credentials. The massive and accelerated training of Cuban health professionals for export had led to lacking training. There are reports that "doctors" are sent to serve abroad without completing the last two years of medical school and veterinarians are put through a 6-month training and sent as "medical doctors." Medical associations of many host countries have protested that Cuban doctors are allowed to

practice without meeting local requirements and have reported on the deficient training of doctors from their countries educated in Cuba; upon completing their studies, most do not pass Board exams required to practice at home.

2. Lacking accountability. Patients have little or no legal recourse for malpractice (individual cases have been reported by the media of some countries).
3. Intentional distortions in the host economies. Some host countries have sufficient doctors, including unemployed or underemployed doctors, yet, for political reasons, the Cuban doctors are imported. In some countries, the local government pays much more to employ the Cuban doctors than what it pays local doctors. In Venezuela and Ecuador, for instance, homegrown doctors have been fired and replaced with Cubans.
4. Questionable results. A serious or comprehensive analysis of health results of the Cuban medical missions is impossible because statistics are systematically tampered with and most reports by Cuban official sources are loaded with revolutionary hyperbole and are inconsistent, even contradictory.
5. National security concerns. Some of the health workers sent abroad are trained by Cuba's intelligence services to monitor the host country and diffuse opposition to the socialist model.
6. International security concerns. Some internationalist missions have a proselytizing role and are used to spread propaganda and exert political influence to undermine democracy. In Latin America, the program is part of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which seeks to undermine democracies with the political, economic, and social integration of the Caribbean and Latin American countries in the neo-communist "21st c. socialism." In Venezuela, Cuba's extreme dependence on service exports to that country implies great incentives to keep propping up the Maduro authoritarian government by all means possible. Aside from a very large Cuban presence in Venezuela's military, security, and all other important sectors of the economy and society, hundreds of members of paramilitary groups from Cuba have received intensive instruction in technical and medical specializations to serve in Venezuela and help maintain political control.

Negative impact on the Cuban people of Cuba's internationalist medical missions

1. Grave and varied human rights abuses

Aside from the grave violations described above, the export of workers causes extended family separation (affecting workers, their children, spouses, elderly parents, etc.), great emotional suffering, psychological traumas, forced exile, and the hijacking of professional skills by the state. (See www.nosomosdesertores.com.)

2. A public health crisis.

Most of Cuba's doctors have been sent abroad, to the detriment of the local population. This causes grave problems and heart-wrenching stories abound. Moreover, many health cooperation agreements include the provision by Cuba of medication and medical supplies the local population lacks. (In Cuba, there is a chronic lack of supplies and equipment and under-investment in the infrastructure of the health system.)

3. Excessive external dependence.

Around 75% of Cuba's GDP derives from export services. This dependence greatly diminishes pressure to make needed structural reforms to the economy and thwarts the allocation of resources to more stable and development-inducing productive activities. It also makes the Cuban economy extremely vulnerable to an external factor that would quickly disappear, with grave consequences.

For links to Cuba Archive' work on this issue, see:

<http://cubaarchive.org/files/Cubas-Human-Trafficking-Business-A-Huge-State-Run-Enterprise.pdf>

<http://cubaarchive.org/files/LINKS-TO-CUBA-ARCHIVES-WORK-ON-TRAFFICKING-IN-PERSONS-AND-HUMAN-EXPLOITATION.pdf>



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