

Cuba in the time of coronavirus: exploiting a global crisis

Part II: Coronavirus in Cuba: a perfect storm

April 15, 2020

As the pandemic unfolds, the mood inside Cuba has been very distant from the glorifying aura and lauds of Cuba's so-called "humanitarianism" and coronavirus-fighting doctors for the world. The contrasting realities have seldom seemed farther apart.

As most countries rushed to contain the spread of the virus and protect their citizens, the Cuban government refused to shut down schools and curtail activities. Authorities insisted that there were no coronavirus cases in the country despite rumors of secret hospital wings with isolated patients.¹ It was not until March 11th (2020) that the first positive cases were reported but only of four tourists.² Three days later, the Ministry of Tourism held a press conference to highlight Cuba's open borders, seeking to lure tourists. It proclaimed the island "a safe country" "with a strong health system," where the virus would be controlled by monitoring those who entered.³ (Virus hotspots Italy and Spain account for a large share of Cuba's tourist market.) The independent digital newspaper *14 y medio*, reported from Havana that the social media accounts of Cuban companies had increased advertising to attract tourists: "With the motto "Cuba a safe destination" and appealing to the unproven claim that high temperatures curtail the spread of the disease, tour operators such as *Havanatur* and *Cubatur* offer sun and beach packages as a refuge to escape the rigors of cold weather and isolation in countries experiencing a crisis in the spread of the disease."⁴ On March 16th, the governor of Matanzas was declaring Cuba's famous beach Varadero, home to 50 hotels, "a safe and competent location in pandemic prevention."⁵ The Minister of the Economy, Alejandro Gil, reinforced the idea that Cuba has an edge over other countries with this tweet: "We are adjusting the economic strategy to face the new context imposed by Covid-19. Here, we have the strength that neither the market or the international financial agencies decide."⁶ Certainly, this tunnel vision had underlying motives, as the tourist industry had already been suffering; visitor arrivals were falling well before the pandemic and in January of this year 95,856 less visitors arrived compared to January 2019, for a 19.6% decline.⁷

At such a critical time, the government's response amounted to checking incoming visitors at the airports (for respiratory ailments and fever) and forcing suspected cases into isolation. In mid-March, a few complementary measures were announced: medical students would go house-to-house to assess potential cases—initially they could not even wear face masks⁸— and school children were asked to take a small piece of soap

¹ The author received one such report on March 9, 2020 from a trusted confidential source.

² "Cuba se declara "país seguro," op. cit.

³ Benjamín Morales, "Cuba seguirá recibiendo turistas a pesar del coronavirus," *El Nuevo Día*, La Habana, Mar. 14, 2020; "Cuba se declara "país seguro" para recibir turistas pese al coronavirus," *EFE/Clarín*, Mar. 14, 2020.

⁴ "El mundo se encierra pero Cuba se abre al turismo pese al coronavirus," *La Habana, 14 y medio*, Mar. 15, 2020. (Translation from Spanish.)

⁵ Bárbara Vasallo, "Varadero, destino competente para prevenir nuevo coronavirus," *Agencia Cubana de Noticias (ACN)*, Mar. 16, 2020. (Translation from Spanish.)

⁶ Elías Amor, "El profeta Alejandro ya sabe el impacto del coronavirus en la economía mundial," *CiberCuba*, Mar. 21, 2020.

⁷ "Arribo de turistas a Cuba sufre fuerte caída en enero de 2020," *ADN Cuba*, Fe. 27, 2020. Also see: Ricardo Torres, *La economía cubana ante la Covid-19, On Cuba*, Apr. 4, 2020.

⁸ Mario J. Pentón, "Cuba pone a estudiantes de medicina a hacer pesquisas en hogares por el coronavirus, Miami, *El Nuevo Herald*, Mar. 20, 2020.

to school, a confounding measure due to a persistent soap shortage for months.⁹ Just four weeks earlier, Cuba's Minister of Internal Trade had announced that demand for hygiene products would not be met until production could be "stabilized" in April (2020).¹⁰ The same Minister had officially admitted in October 2019 to the shortage of hygiene and cleaning products —showing little creativity in explaining, she blamed the U.S. "blockade," the ever-present scapegoat.¹¹ On April 10th the same Minister broke the news on television that "standardized" availability of hygiene products, essentially soap, would be staggered, and warned that it could take up to three months for toothpaste and detergent to make their appearance.¹² Meanwhile, there was no escaping that many homes all over the country, including entire neighborhoods of Havana as well as prisons, schools and even medical facilities have no running water.

With the average Cuban enduring poverty, rationing, and shortage resulting from imposed socialist central planning, several luxury hotels that cater to foreign tourists —most are owned by the military corporate conglomerate— sought to offload food inventories from low occupancy by advertising on social media food deliveries for the first time but at exorbitant prices. The *Hotel Comodoro* —whose Facebook page exemplifies the extreme contrast between ordinary Cubans and hard-currency bearing capitalist visitors— offered food deliveries for a minimum order equivalent to US\$30.¹³ It represented 71.4% of the average monthly wage of 1,067 Cuban Pesos (US\$42) and, to put it into some context, in the U.S. would be equivalent to a food order for home delivery of \$2,896.¹⁴ As social media flooded with outrage, the authorities knew to backtrack some. The Cuban economist Pedro Monreal tweeted that this was not ethically justifiable, had scarce macro-economic impact, and sent the wrong signal regarding the egalitarianism of the adjustment¹⁵ (referring to the economic measures to adjust for the pandemic). Monreal is taken seriously in official Cuba; he works for UNESCO at its Paris



⁹ José Nacher, "Gobierno de Cuba pide que cada niño lleve su pedacito de jabón a la escuela para enfrentar al coronavirus," *CiberCuba*, Mar. 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Freddy Pérez Cabrera, "Prevén para abril estabilidad de productos de aseo en Cuba, dice Ministra de Comercio Interior," *Granma*, Feb. 5, 2020.

¹¹ Miguel Febles Hernández, "Explica Ministra del Comercio Interior causas de desabastecimientos puntuales de artículos de aseo y limpieza," *Granma*, Oct. 26, 2019.

¹² Ernesto Hernández Busto, "Cuarentena sin pasta dental: podría tardar hasta tres meses, dice la Ministra de Comercio Interior," *CiberCuba*, Apr. 10, 2020.

¹³ Fernando Grimald, "El hotel Comodoro se une a brindar servicios de comida para llevar por el coronavirus," *ADN Cuba*, Mar. 26, 2020.

¹⁴ 71.4% of the \$4,046 a month average salary. (In the fourth fiscal quarter of 2019, the median income for a full-time wage or salary worker weekly was \$936, that translates to a yearly income of approximately \$48,672. <https://www.thestreet.com/personal-finance/average-income-in-us-14852178> .)

¹⁵ "Éticamente cuestionables": llueven las críticas por las 'ofertas' de alimentos de hoteles habaneros a los cubanos," *Diario de Cuba*, La Habana, Mar. 25, 2020.

headquarters¹⁶ and is an advisor to the Cuban government cited in the state-controlled media.¹⁷ According to an intelligence defector, he was and probably remains a top agent of Cuba's intelligence services.¹⁸ Even Cuba's official media published readers' complaints and the hotels quickly forgot the minimum order requirement.¹⁹ Nonetheless, even for people who could afford it, the food deliveries were a major headache. Independent journalist Yoani Sánchez, director of the digital newspaper *14 y medio*, posted on her Facebook page from Havana that a friend caring for two elderly family members at home who had decided to "eat her savings" to avoid the risk of infection in the long food lines had called to place an order at the *Meliá Cohiba* hotel and had been told she had to physically go to the hotel to make the payment 48 hours in advance of the food delivery.²⁰



Raúl Castro with his grandson behind, head of his security. Photo: Grnama.cu

Allowing the COVID-19-bearing *MS Braemar* cruise ship to disembark in Cuba compounded the popular discontent with the government's response to the coronavirus—it typically finds expression only in social media or as reported by independent media outlets (which are forbidden and operating mostly from abroad with in-country reporters). As the number of officially reported COVID-19 cases grew, General Raúl Castro, Cuba's Maximum Leader and Secretary-General of the Communist Party, took leave from his semi-retirement and went on national television. Likely seeking to placate the public, he reportedly ordered an about-face; it was set in motion very quickly and in the usual totalitarian fashion. The new Prime Minister, Manuel Marrero Cruz, a civilian figure within the military establishment, became a leading face of the virus containment campaign. According to *CiberCuba's* seasoned journalist Carlos Cabrera, who had access to privileged sources, Castro was furious with President Díaz Canel's handling of the emergency and considered it "abysmal."²¹ On March 20th, Cuba announced it would forbid all incoming flights except for returning residents who would be quarantined for 14 days upon entry and 60,000 tourists in the national territory would be placed in isolation until they could

leave.²² Visitors located all over the country were forced out of the authorized home-based lodgings ("casa particular," Cuba's equivalent of the Bed & Breakfast), placed in designated and considerably more expensive state-owned hotels, —at their cost— and forbidden from leaving the premises until flights could be arranged

¹⁶ According to a former UNESCO official, there are four contract modalities within UNESCO: 1. An official member of Cuba's permanent misión to the organization, 2. To fill the country quota (which depends on things like population and contribution to the organization's budget); 3. As an independent consultant, not staff; and 4. As staff from outside the circuit and not as per 1 and 2. It at least appears that Monreal is not part of Cuba's Mission. (Maria C. Werlau, telephone conversation with Anonymous Source, Apr. 11, 2020).

¹⁷ See, for example, Pedro Monreal, "El plan de la economía cubana para 2019: lo que no queda claro," *Rebelión*, Jan. 11, 2019. Monreal also has the blog <https://elestadocomotal.com/>.

¹⁸ Pedro Monreal is a Ph.D. in Economics who worked at the University of Havana before becoming a Program Specialist for UNESCO (currently in Paris and previously in Jamaica). A former officer of Cuba's intelligence services related to the author that, at least until he defected in the mid-2000s, Monreal was an agent of Cuba's counterintelligence service who was "borrowed" by the U.S. and Canada department of Cuba's Directorate of Intelligence (DI) to receive instructions regarding contacts, work, and travels (of which he provided additional details). He interprets from public information that Monreal remains loyal to the Cuban regime. (Maria C. Werlau, telephone interview with Anonymous Source, Apr. 6, 2020; Maria C. Werlau; https://en.unesco.org/themes/learning-live-together/whos_who.)

¹⁹ "La presión de los clientes obliga el hotel Parque Central a mejorar su oferta de comida a domicilio," *La Habana, 14ymedio*, Mar. 25, 2020.

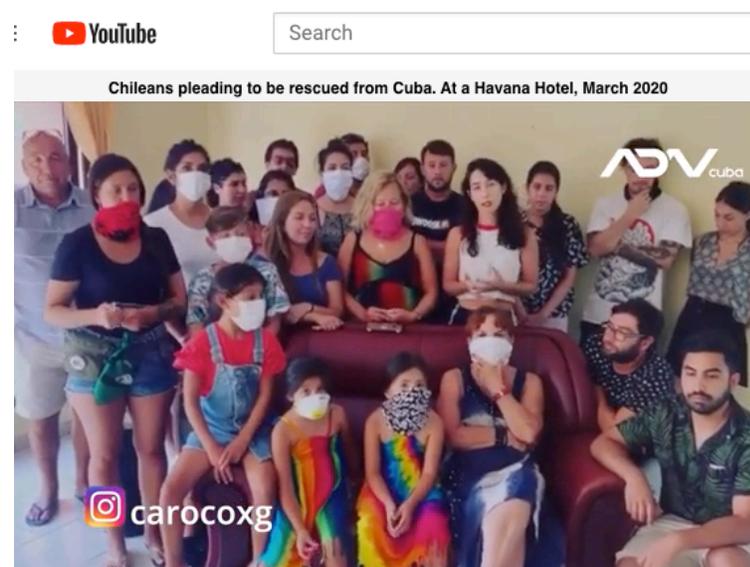
²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/yoani.sanchez>, Apr. 9, 2020.

²¹ Carlos Cabrera Perez, "Raúl Castro cambió la estrategia cubana frente al coronavirus y protegió a los militares," *CiberCuba*, Mar. 22, 2020; and Maria C. Werlau, telephone conversation with Carlos Cabrera, Mar. 23, 2020.

²² Cuba anuncia cierre de fronteras, excepto llegadas de residentes en el exterior, *La Habana, Reuters*, Mar. 20, 2020.

for their return home. Cuban citizens were told to call the police to report any tourists on the street.²³ Schools and most venues were closed and it was announced that the failure to heed orders would lead to two years of prison.²⁴

By the following day, Díaz Canel was preparing the population for an expected avalanche of coronavirus cases, declaring for the first time on television: “The actual number of infections is higher than what the official figures indicate because many people are not aware of having the virus and transmit it unknowingly.” He explained that, according to studies, the number of detected cases was between six and ten times lower than the real numbers. The global situation, he added, offered another lesson: “The sudden increase in seriously ill patients who desperately need intensive care burdens health systems in a very short time and causes their collapse.”²⁵ The government also made it a legal requirement to wear face masks for a large number of activities and recommended to hand-make them at home in cloth.²⁶ Four days later, the director of the National Institute for Water Resources went on the record to promise repairs and even listed specific areas without water service: 111 “affected” water supply zones (affecting 468,721 persons) in the capital city of Havana, around 23,000 in central Cuba, and 21,000 in eastern Cuba.²⁷ Having reported around half a million persons without water, some observers believed this was just the tip of the iceberg.



Even the highly-prized tourists experienced a window into the shortages and hardships part of the daily life of most Cubans and felt the heavy hand of the police state. An Italian tourist with COVID-19 symptoms that had been sent to isolation at the Pedro Kourí Hospital of Havana complained on social media of the nightmare she was living even after having tested negative for the virus: “no information, terrible sanitary conditions, no toilet paper, and no spoons” for the soup she was fed.²⁸ Two hundred thirty Chileans were among those stranded by cancelled flights.²⁹ One Chilean tourist reported to *Diario de Cuba* having been forced to pay \$300 a night for a room at a hotel in Havana, which she could not afford, while being required to eat all meals there; the hotel had been chosen in their embassy’s “negotiation” of with Cuban authorities.³⁰ Another group of Chileans had been sent to the allegedly 5-star *Hotel Bella Habana* and filmed a video denouncing the awful conditions of the facility—including unclean rooms with cockroaches

²³ “Cubanos informan a la policía cuando ven turistas en la calle debido a crisis de coronavirus,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 27, 2020.

²⁴ “En vivo: General de Ejército y Presidente de Cuba indican activación de los Consejos de Defensa ante amenaza de la Covid-19 (III),” *Granma*, Mar. 23, 2020.

²⁵ Milagros Pichardo, Alejandra García Elizalde, Juan Diego Nusa Peñalver, “Fuerza, Cuba, que viviremos y venceremos,” *Granma*, Mar. 21, 2020. (Translations from Spanish.)

²⁶ “Coronavirus en Cuba: El uso de nasobucos es una medida sanitaria obligatoria,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 29, 2020.

²⁷ “Déficit de agua complejiza enfrentamiento de Covid-19 en Cuba,” *La Habana, Prensa Latina*, Mar. 24, 2020.

²⁸ “Turista ingresada en el IPK de Cuba por sospechas de coronavirus denuncia las terribles condiciones del hospital,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 15, 2020 (Translation from Spanish.); M. O’Grady, op. cit.

²⁹ “Más de 200 turistas chilenos varados en Cuba piden ayuda para regresar a casa,” *Asere Noticias*, Mar. 30, 2020.

³⁰ “Turistas varados en Cuba: ‘El hotel más barato nos cobraba 300 dólares por noche’,” *La Habana, Diario de Cuba*, Mar. 26, 2020.

and rats— and begging their government to send a plane for them immediately.³¹ Another group of Chileans was meanwhile sleeping on the floor at the airport on pieces of cardboard, using dirty bathrooms often lacking water, consuming sub-par food, subjected to frigid temperatures, forbidden from leaving the premises, and with no telephone or internet service. (Expectedly, they were told this was due to the U.S. “blockade.”) After a week, they managed to send out a video with a plea for their government to rescue them from the “inhumane conditions” that put them “at risk of getting sick.”³² Three days earlier, a Mexican tourist had posted a video online with a similar rant: “I don’t know what’s happening at the Havana airport, they don’t solve anything. We are cold, we are hungry, we have to lay on the floor, there’s people here with disabilities as well as children.” Many Cubans, meanwhile, posted comments with little sympathy and remarking this was the usual fare for locals.³³

Since March 11th, Cuba’s Ministry of Health has reported on a daily basis a steadily growing number of COVID-19 cases as well as of persons in isolation, however, it insisted for almost a full month that there was no community spread³⁴ and that all cases were imported because Cuba’s system of primary attention had “controlled the spread of this virus.”^{35/36} Despite the obvious rise in positive cases and growing proportion of local cases, the government refused to acknowledge an epidemic. It was not until April 7th when, officially reporting 457 confirmed cases and 12 fatalities, it announced for the first time “limited local spread” explained as confirmed cases without an established link with travelers from affected areas but “limited to small conglomerates in localities or institutions in the country.”³⁷ As of April 13th, Cuba’s Minister of Health had confirmed 766 cases (40 more than the previous day), 2,501 patients admitted to hospitals for clinical epidemiological surveillance, 7,157 people monitored in their homes, 21 fatalities, 9 patients in critical condition and 3 in grave condition, as well as 132 discharged from the hospital.³⁸ As of April 11th, 4% of the 15,057 tested samples had tested positive. ³⁹None of the daily Ministry of Health reports have mentioned using Cuba’s “wonder” interferon, which is an odd omission given the touted effectiveness of the drug. (Part III of this series is an in-depth look at the drug and Cuba’s biotechnology industry.)

It’s impossible to ascertain the actual spread of the virus. A lack of transparency and credible statistics permeate all areas of society, including public health. Rodolfo J. Stusser, M.D., who taught and practiced Medicine in Cuba from 1962 to 2010 has written: “Since 1962, laudatory reports about Cuba’s health system transmitted from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to the world were the creation of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and of the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) and Schools of Medicine (SOM) and Public Health without regard for dissenting views from insiders, who faced potential charges of treason to the motherland for expressing their views. Misinformation about Cuba’s public health system has continued to date

³¹ Alberto de la Cruz, “COVID-19 strands Chilean leftist and Castro regime supporter in socialist Cuba,” pleads for help to escape,” Babalú Blog, Mar. 31, 2020; “Entre cucarachas y ratones, así viven los chilenos varados en Cuba por la pandemia,” *Periódico Cubano*, Mar. 25, 2020.

³² “Chilenos varados en aeropuerto de La Habana piden ayuda para regresar: “Estamos en condiciones inhumanas,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 29, 2020. (Translations from Spanish.)

³³ Pablo González, “Mexicanos varados en aeropuerto de La Habana piden ayuda para salir de Cuba,” *CubaNet*, Mar. 27, 2020.

³⁴ Nuria Barbosa León, “Ministerio de Salud Pública: Cuba continúa sin transmisión de la Covid-19,” *Granma*, Mar. 25, 2020; Jose Nacher, “Cuba confirma cinco nuevos casos de coronavirus: la cifra total asciende a 40,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 23, 2020, Coronavirus en Cuba: Minsap informa que cifra de contagiados asciende a 35, *Granma*, Mar. 22, 2020.

³⁵ Nayara Tardo, Cuban official declaring from Havana. See “Envía Cuba brigadas médicas a países caribeños para enfrentar Covid-19,” *TeleSUR TV*, Mar 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhqIPXdrdxE>. (Translation from Spanish.)

³⁶ Yisell Rodríguez Milán, “Ministerio de Salud Pública: No está declarada Cuba en la fase epidémica,” *Granma*, Mar. 29, 2020.

³⁷ Leticia Martínez Hernández, “Ante nueva etapa epidemiológica, Cuba refuerza su batalla contra la COVID-19,” *Granma*, Apr. 7, 2020.

³⁸ “Ministerio de Salud Pública: Ascienden a 766 los casos confirmados con la COVID-19 en Cuba,” *Granma*, Apr. 14, 2020.

³⁹ “Ministerio de Salud Pública: Asciende a 457 el acumulado de casos de COVID-19,” se reportan 27 altas, 12 fallecidos y 3 evacuados, *Granma*, Apr. 8, 2020.

due to the scarcity of in-depth independent studies.⁴⁰ A doctor who was once assigned to a clinic in the rural part of eastern Cuba reports that he had to test for malaria all patients with a fever lasting three days but never saw the results, as only the regional supervisor — a Communist Party apparatchik— was privy to that information.⁴¹ The case of Dr. Dessy Mendoza is an extreme example of censorship in public health information; in 1997, Dr. Mendoza told foreign journalists of a dengue outbreak in Santiago de Cuba and was sentenced to eight years of prison for “enemy propaganda.”⁴² Sherri Porcelain, Ph.D., a senior lecturer in global public health at the University of Miami, wrote in 2013: “Cuba’s deteriorated water, sewage, sanitation and housing systems all create the ideal environment for rapid disease spread. ...While imported cases of malaria are not new, the history of Cuba’s denials of other re-emerging diseases compels one to question the veracity of the government’s official report.” She quoted Luis Suarez Rosas’, a physician with Cuba’s National School of Medicine, describing Cuba’s official position on reporting disease outbreak information as “epidemiologic silence.”⁴³

What does seem evident is that the vast majority of the Cuban population is in a precarious situation to face the pandemic. Although Cuba is among the most state-controlled economies in the world —perhaps second to North Korea’s— relief measures announced by the government on March 20th only guarantee 50% of wages to those hospitalized for coronavirus and for workers who lose their jobs, 100% of wages for the first month and 60% subsequently. Employers in the non-state sector are ordered to pay workers who continue on the job no less than the minimum wage.⁴⁴ With the average wage US\$42 a month (1,067 Cuban pesos) and the minimum wage US\$16, a month (400 CP),⁴⁵ this is a recipe for starvation. Additional relief measures are minor palliatives and include tax filing extensions for businesses that suspend operations, a 50% reduction in monthly tax payments for gastronomic businesses, a reduction of monthly tax payments to local government in the tourism hubs, and a suspension and restructuring of loan servicing.



Havana, Mar. 2020. Photo: CiberCuba

Aside from the generalized scarcity of hygiene products, most homes don’t have air conditioning and the weather is getting hotter. Access to WiFi and cable TV are extremely rare, which makes news and entertainment dependent on the state-controlled stations. Compounding the hardships, a severe housing deficit forces most families —often several generations living together— into overcrowded quarters that are

⁴⁰ Rodolfo J. Stusser, “Cuba’s long tradition of healthcare policies: implications for Cuba and other nations,” *Cuba in Transition*, Vol. 23, Papers and Proceeding of the 30th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, Miami, Aug. 13 – 15, 2013.

⁴¹ Maria C. Werlau, telephone interview with Anonymous Source, Apr. 3, 2020.

⁴² See “Dengue in the Americas—time to talk,” *The Lancet*, Vol. 350, Issue 9076, Aug. 16, 1997; Dr. Dessy Mendoza and Ileana Fuentes, ¡Dengue!, *Center for a Free Cuba*, Washington, D.C., 2001.

⁴³ Sherri L. Porcelain, “Cuba’s silence on cholera dangerous to your health,” *The Miami Herald*, Aug. 17, 2013.

⁴⁴ Daniella Pérez Muñoa, “Nadie en Cuba va a quedar desamparado, dice ministra de Trabajo y Seguridad Social,” *Agencia Cubana de Noticias*, Mar. 20, 2020.

⁴⁵ Ivette Pacheco, “¿Cambió algo en Cuba con el aumento salarial?,” *Radio Televisión Martí*, Aug. 7, 2019.

often in disrepair. This scenario does not bode well for a quarantine. However, the most critical question in Cuba is having enough to eat. Most families survive by having at least one member lining up daily to buy whatever is being sold, whether rationed—sold by the government at “subsidized” Cuban pesos—or at hard currency-pegged stores not corresponding with local wages and only possible with assistance from family abroad.⁴⁶ The exceptions are the privileged few within the highest ruling elite and those earning foreign currency through successful self-employment from an allowed list of trades.⁴⁷ But even the latter have no well-stocked food markets or drugstores to go to for vitamins, hand sanitizer, and most consumer goods taken for granted in most of the world.⁴⁸ (Cubans wouldn’t even think of hoarding toilet paper, which has long been a luxury of the few.)



To compound a difficult situation, the Cuban drama of obtaining some protein has been playing out these days in long lines for chicken,⁴⁹ creating a fertile ground for the spread of the virus and heightened frustration. Because beef and seafood have long been extremely rare in revolutionary Cuba, most Cubans rely on chicken for their average diet but in recent months it has been particularly scarce, as only the cash-strapped government is allowed to import everything and anything including all the food.⁵⁰ The decreed ration in Havana is one pound of chicken per person sold at 1.20 Cuban pesos within the subsidized ration that that is supposed to guarantee a basic food basket but has fallen very short for many years. Those on medically-managed diets may buy 1.5 pounds one month and 2 pounds the following month, then back to 1.5 pounds on the third month. More chicken, if available, is sold at 20 pesos per pound. In the stores called “shopping,” chicken is sold at 3.25 CUC per kilo (around US\$6.4 per pound in convertible units equivalent to the U.S. dollar) but in recent times

⁴⁶ A huge diaspora lives in the U.S., Spain, and all over the world, as Cubans have been fleeing and emigrating for decades for freedom and better lives abroad.

⁴⁷ As of September 2019, 617,974 Cubans were in the self-employed sector, roughly 15% of the officially reported active labor force. (Yenia Silva Correa, “Nuevas normas jurídicas para el trabajo por cuenta propia,” *Granma*, Nov. 5, 2019; “Will Cuba’s “Self-Employed” Advance in 2019?” *El Toque/Havana Times*, Jan. 7, 2019.)

⁴⁸ Nora Borges, “Testimonio en La Habana: ‘A los cubanos nos va a matar el hambre, no el coronavirus,’” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 25, 2020. (Translated from Spanish.)

⁴⁹ That is how, in a nutshell, *CiberCuba* journalist Carlos Cabrera explained the situation with chicken in Cuba.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, the video in “Largas colas para comprar pollo en La Habana pese a riesgo de coronavirus,” *CubaNet*, Mar. 18, 2020. Also see “Prevén escasez de pollos en Cuba por disminución de importaciones desde Estados Unidos y Brasil,” *CiberCuba*, Feb. 6, 2020.

stores are only allowed to sell two kilos per person.⁵¹ Fidel Castro died in 2016, but his legacy is alive and well in the social control embedded in the convoluted system to obtain food and all consumer goods in Cuba.⁵²

As an indication of the festering mood on the ground, on March 26th a street protest erupted as people lined up to buy chicken, flaunting the recommendations on social distancing, and some threw rocks. It was disbanded by security forces with pepper spray. The police presence was immediately enhanced at similar locations⁵³ and by the end of March the state-owned chain of retail stores *Tiendas Caribe* increased the supply of chicken and other high-demand products for sale such as ground turkey, sausage, soap, detergent and toilet paper.⁵⁴ By April 9th, support teams had been formed for the police with members of mass organizations—essentially meaning regime or Communist Party stalwarts—to help police control the crowds at the stores.⁵⁵ The government had already announced that anyone who spreads “false news or malicious predictions that cause alarm or discontent in the population or public disorder” will face four years of prison.⁵⁶ Censorship and repression were also alive and well against those informing to the outside world; among other such cases, several members of a civil society group that advocates freedom of expression and of the press, had been detained for hours, interrogated, threatened, and ordered to stop informing on the pandemic and the situation in the country.⁵⁷

Despite the propaganda of Cuba as a medical powerhouse, the health system is one of apartheid—exclusive facilities for the nomenklatura (top Communist Party members) and hard-currency paying foreigners but decrepit and filthy facilities lacking essential medications, medical supplies or equipment for the general population. Cubans must even bring their own bed sheets and food to the hospital and some facilities even lack running water. Stories abound of the desperate situation at hospitals all over the country—in mid-March the author, in casual conversation with friends, heard of an elderly woman unable to get her fractured arm cast at a hospital in Holguín that had no bandaging material⁵⁸ and of no sedatives for a woman having a gastroscopy at a hospital in Matanzas.⁵⁹ The situation is dire considering Cuba is one of the countries with the largest elderly population in Latin America,⁶⁰ the most vulnerable to COVID-19. Sending doctors and nurses overseas, especially with fanfare, as coronavirus spreads and deaths increase is further loading a ticking time bomb. Although the government reports having sufficient medical personnel, Cuba’s official statistics show a decrease of 73,675 health workers (28%) from 2008 to 2018 (from a total of 329,669 to 261,947), including 22,029 less nurses and 80,320 less technicians and assistant), despite adding 20,935 doctors.⁶¹ Regarding a reported 95,487 of doctors in 2018 (the latest official statistic), most of these, if they actually exist, are presumably working for

⁵¹ Carlos Cabrera, a journalist for *Ciber Cuba*, by telephone and text message, Apr. 11, 2020.

⁵² Venezuelan General Guaicapuro Lameda, former head of the Venezuelan oil conglomerate PDVSA under Chavez called it “Fidel’s recipe.” (See M. Werlau, *Cuba’s intervention in Venezuela*, p. 133-134.)

⁵³ “Cubanos protestan y tiran piedras en una cola en Centro Habana en medio de la crisis por coronavirus,” *CiberCuba*, Mar. 26, 2020.

⁵⁴ “El Gobierno inicia la venta regulada de ‘alimentos muy demandados’ en Cuba,” *Diario de Cuba*, La Habana, Mar. 30, 2020

⁵⁵ “Miembros de organizaciones comunistas controlan colas en Cuba durante la crisis del coronavirus,” *CiberCuba*, Apr. 9, 2020.

⁵⁶ Michel E. Torres Corona, “Inmunizarse, pero no solo contra el virus,” *Granma*, Apr. 8, 2020. Also see Yudy Castro Morales, Ante la Covid-19, que la rigurosidad también salve, *Granma*, Mar. 23, 2020. (Translation from Spanish.)

⁵⁷ “Policía Política prohíbe a periodista del ICLEP informar sobre la pandemia,” Instituto Cubano por la Liberación de Expresión y Prensa, Apr. 13, 2020.

⁵⁸ María C. Werlau, telephone conversation with the woman’s daughter, who lives in the U.S., March 15, 2020.

⁵⁹ María C. Werlau, telephone conversation with the woman’s friend, who lives in the U.S., April 7, 2020.

⁶⁰ According to the 2012 census announces, 18.3% of the Cuban population had already reached its sixth decade of life, making it one of the oldest populations in Latin America. (Edilberto Carmona Tamayo, Lisandra Romeo Matos, Lisandra Fariñas Acosta, “Cuba en Datos: ¿Cómo envejece la población cubana?,” *Cuba Debate*, Jan. 24, 2020.)

⁶¹ All statistics in this paragraph are from: *Anuario Estadístico de Salud 2018*, Ministerio de Salud Pública, La Habana 2019, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (one.cu), República de Cuba.



Camilo Cienfuegos Provincial Hospital, Sancti Spiritus, Cuba - Apr. 2020

Jose Castro

April 7 at 11:48 AM · 🌐

"This is today at the Camilo Cienfuegos Provincial Hospital of Sancti Spiritus, Room 3E, Bed 13... This man, nicknamed Pichirilo, lives in the Olivos 1 Nursing Home. ...He is completely naked, barefoot, and on a bare mattress... He had surgery five days ago and had not been bathed for three days. Is this the medical power? Is this the humanity flaunted by taking in a British cruise ship with Covid 19 in exchange for 2 million dollars? ... He's been naked for five days, as there are no pajamas to give him and they've only now bathed him because fellow patients complained. They used his sheet to dry him as there is no towel and told him he could have his bed again when the sheet dries... (Facebook, Apr. 7, 2020. Translated from Spanish.)"

the state in the overseas medical missions. The sharp decline in health personnel is particularly concerning given that nurses represent the majority of the medical staff Cuba has sent to date to at least 17 countries in the brigades to fight coronavirus.

Michelle Bachelet, the High Commissioner for the U.N. Human Rights Council, called for suspending sanctions and embargoes on Cuba, Iran and Venezuela, while the chorus of anti-embargo voices has proposed humanitarian palliatives for Cuba. Bachelet, who was President of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018) as head of the Socialist Party, has been a supporter of the Castro dictatorship and was one of the founding members of the *Foro de Sao Paulo*, created by Fidel Castro to spread Communism á la Fidel in the region.^{62/63} She and other advocates of engagement with the Cuban regime cannot be found on the record demanding an end to impunity for the crimes of the Cuban dictatorship⁶⁴ or asking it to respect the fundamental rights

of its people that would, among other things, allow them to hold their government accountable for this situation. None of them have echoed the demands of a social media campaign for Cuba's state telecommunications monopoly ETECSA to lower the price of internet services (to which ETECSA referred to

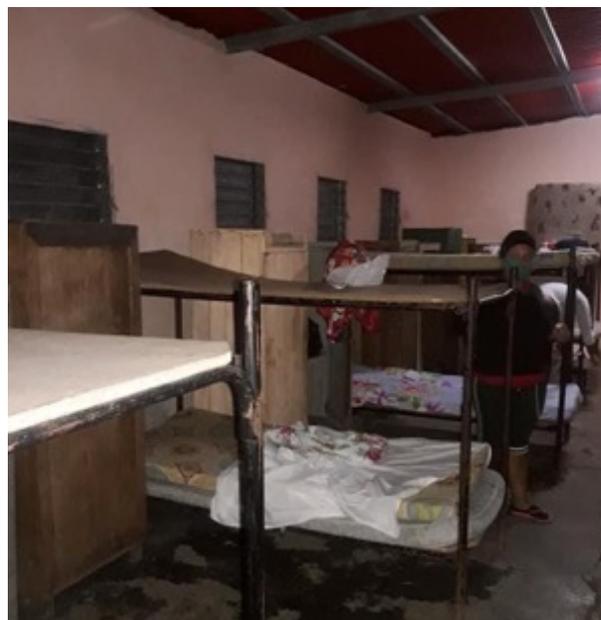
⁶² Aside from her public statements and actions in support of the Cuban regime, reportedly, Bachelet also participated in the Cuba-sponsored terrorist group Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front. (See "Questions for new UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet over Cuban & Venezuela policy," UN Watch, Aug. 10, 2018; and Gian de Biase, "Bachelet: comunista, terrorista y corrupta," *Panampost*, Nov. 9, 2018.)

⁶³ Fidel Castro created the Foro de Sao Paulo to reframe, revive, and coordinate the radical left after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the demise of Soviet Communism. He gave up on Cuba's three-decade commitment to exporting overt armed struggle to make revolution "silently" —furtively and opportunistically. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva —then head of Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores and future president of that country (2003-2011)— hosted the first meeting in Sao Paulo in July 1990. The Foro has proposed reaching power pretending to be anti-communist and using the mechanisms of the constitutional regimes in place to win elections and take states over through their own institutions. Since the Fall of 2019, it appears that given major setbacks, the Foro has changed tactics to promote violent insurrections in the region. (See M. Werlau, *Cuba's intervention in Venezuela*, Chapter VII, pp.133-148, op. cit.)

⁶⁴ There are many examples of the diverse, systematic, and ongoing crimes of the Castro regime, including those highlighted on the website of Cuba Archive, the organization publishing this piece. See CubaArchive.org.

the petitioners as “mercenaries”).⁶⁵ They have made no demands for the softening of internal restrictions that would allow Cubans to form small and medium-sized private companies, directly import goods, or lift restrictions on cooperatives and private farmers so agricultural production can increase.^{66/67} And academics, activists, and politicians praising Cuba’s for its global humanitarianism have completely ignored the plight of the Cuban people during the coronavirus pandemic and before.

The U.S. government pushed back on the campaign to lay blame for Cuba’s problems on the United States. Mara Tekach, Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, disseminated a short video on the Embassy’s social networks where she stated, in perfect Spanish, that in the last two decades the United States had exported to Cuba millions of dollars in medicines and medical equipment and called for stopping “disinformation campaigns without sources or attributions.”⁶⁸ The U.S. Undersecretary of State for Western Hemisphere, Michael Kozak, had tweeted last November (2019): “Cuba claims its food & medical supply issues stem from the embargo. Newsflash! The embargo permits U.S. food, medicine, and medical devices to be exported to #Cuba- however, the regime chooses to import just a small fraction of the authorized goods. #EmbargoFacts #BloqueoInterno.”⁶⁹ This news story does not make it to mainstream media or blogs willing to cover face-value the anti-embargo narrative and the pandemic talking points explained in Part I. Google searches (for Cuba, U.S., coronavirus, Covid, State Department, Tekach, Kozak) have come up with just four hits, all in Spanish and from independent news sources dedicated to Cuba with circulation within a narrow audience.



A doctor in Baracoa, eastern Cuba, sent 21 pictures such as this one of the conditions where she and her children had been ordered into isolation for 14 days together with other health professionals who had been in contact with COVID-19 patients. (Facebook post by Angel de la Rosa Angel, Apr. 11, 2020.)

The fact is that since the Cuban Democracy Act was passed in 1996, the U.S. embargo has exempted assistance or licensed sales of medicines and medical supplies and the U.S. has approved many times more in exports than Cuba has ended up importing.⁷⁰ Prior to that, U.S. corporations could sell to Cuba from

⁶⁵ The state telecommunications monopoly ETECSA lowered its Wi-Fi prices beginning January 4, 2020 to .70 CUC from 1 CUC per hour as “a salute to the 61st anniversary of the Revolution”. This means that the average Cuban will now have to spend 50% instead of 70% of their entire monthly wage (an average of US\$42) to buy an hour of connectivity each day. Most people have no Wi-Fi service at home and can only access Wi-Fi on a per hour basis at select locations, mostly with their phones, as few own computers. Wi-Fi service was introduced in recent years for homes in certain areas but the monthly cost is very high, currently 1.5 mg at US\$24 or 4gb at US\$45. (http://www.etcusa.cu/telefonía_movil/tarifas/; <https://www.dimecuba.com/revista/noticias-cuba/nueva-tarifa-nauta-2020/>).

⁶⁶ See Nora Gámez Torres, “Food shortages, a decrepit economy, and now the coronavirus: harder times ahead for Cuba,” *The Miami Herald*, Mar. 28, 2020.

⁶⁷ Cuba has to import more than US\$2 billion a year in food (around 65% of consumption), of which, according to Cuban government reports, could be reduced by \$6,600 to \$800 million if the land was used more productively. Eighty percent of the land is owned by the state and 70% is managed by cooperatives or small farmers. (Oscar Figueredo Reinaldo, Lissett Izquierdo Ferrer, Edilberto Carmona, “Cuba en Datos: Agricultura, sector estratégico que precisa despuntar,” *Cuba Debate*, May 17, 2019.)

⁶⁸ “Estados Unidos aclara que exporta millones de dólares en medicinas y equipos médicos a Cuba,” *CiberCuba*, Apr. 7, 2020.

⁶⁹ <https://twitter.com/WHAAsstSecty>, Nov. 6, 2019.

⁷⁰ Regarding U.S. economic sanctions to Cuba, the website of the Bureau of Industry and Security of the U.S. Department of Commerce: states: “There is a general policy of denial for exports and reexports to Cuba of items subject

subsidiaries in third countries. From 2003 to 2019, the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council reports \$25.7 million in sales of medical equipment, medical instruments, medical supplies and pharmaceutical exports as well as \$30.7 million from 2014 to 2019 in licensed humanitarian shipments of donations (food, healthcare, clothing, reading materials, etc.).⁷¹ Moreover, cash remittances for Cuba from the U.S. (mostly from the Cuban diaspora) are authorized under a general license from the U.S. Treasury Department and are estimated to have totaled over \$29.9 billion in ten years up to September 2019 and around \$6.5 just in 2018.⁷² In addition, from 2001 to 2019, Cuba imported \$6.1 billion in agricultural/food products from the U.S., authorized under the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSREEA), that since 2000 exempts ag products from the embargo as long as they are paid in cash (it does not allow credit). Yet, in February 2020, U.S. exports of agricultural/food products to Cuba had declined 44.5% from the year,⁷³ likely indicative of Cuba's cash crunch. The Cuban government and its advocates claim that medical sales to Cuba are discouraged by complex licensing requirements and delays.⁷⁴ The author is not aware of a detailed comparison of costs for Cuba to import medical supplies and equipment from Latin America, Europe, Asia, etc., especially in relation to the assistance Cuba receives to compensate the alleged costs of the embargo or accounting for the massive aid from the U.S. In fact, high-ranking Cuban officials have remarked that Cuba is not interested in importing pharmaceutical products from the U.S. because they are more expensive.⁷⁵

The Cuban government claimed that an important donation of medical supplies from China's Jack Ma Foundation (belonging to the founder of Alibaba) had been impeded by the U.S. embargo, as the transportation company had declined from delivering the shipment owing to the "blockade."⁷⁶ The story was repeated by media venues around the world seemingly without any fact-checking—as it turns out, the airline chosen by the Jack Ma Foundation to deliver in Latin America, Avianca, had announced in October 2019 that it was suspending all its flights to Cuba in January 2020 until it clarified how to meet US embargo regulations due to a change in ownership scheme from Colombia to the U.S.⁷⁷ In fact, as a rule, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security exempts from economic sanctions on Cuba—which are codified

to the EAR, as described in Section 746.2(b) of the EAR. However, there are exceptions to the general policy of denial, Medicines and medical devices, whether sold or donated, are generally approved. The License Exception Support for the Cuban People (SCP) (Section 740.21 of the EAR) authorizes the export and reexport of certain items to Cuba that are intended to improve the living conditions: (viii) Gift parcels and humanitarian donations (GFTI) (see §740.12 of the EAR). (1) Medicines and Medical Devices. Applications to export medicines and medical devices as defined in part 772 of the EAR will generally be approved, except: (i) To the extent restrictions would be permitted under section 5(m) of the Export Administration Act of 1979, as amended (EAA), or section 203(b)(2) of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act; (ii) If there is a reasonable likelihood that the item to be exported will be used for purposes of torture or other human rights abuses; (iii) If there is a reasonable likelihood that the item to be exported will be reexported; (iv) If the item to be exported could be used in the production of any biotechnological product; or (v) If it is determined that the United States government is unable to verify, by on-site inspection or other means, that the item to be exported will be used for the purpose for which it was intended and only for the use and benefit of the Cuban people, but this exception shall not apply to donations of medicines for humanitarian purposes to a nongovernmental organization in Cuba. (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, Apr. 6, 2020 (<https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/country-guidance/sanctioned-destinations/cuba>).

⁷¹ *Economic Eye on Cuba*, Dec. 2019, *Economic Eye on Cuba & Special Reports, 2015-2019*, cubatrade.org.

⁷² Emilio Morales, "Remesas, ¿una ruta de inversión para los cubanos?" *The Havana Consulting Group*, Sept. 27, 2019. <http://www.thehavanaconsultinggroup.com/es-es/Articles/Article/69?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>.

⁷³ U.S. Ag/food exports to Cuba decrease 45.2% in February 2020; A 44.5% Year-To-Year, *Economic Eye on Cuba*, Apr. 3, 2020, https://www.cubatrade.org/blog/2020/4/3/us-agfood-exports-to-cuba-decrease-452-in-february-2020-a-445-year-to-year?fbclid=IwAR2rFqpb0_ngGZUYdp9bbSfYRRx1ZUWNKgUU_6sIYY_MVnlNKNJkfiIP24s.

⁷⁴ <https://www.medic.org/resources/documents/embargo/Chapter%20Three.pdf>

⁷⁵ The author specifically remembers Ricardo Alarcón, former Vice President of Cuba, making this remark to the media but has not found the news article online.

⁷⁶ Yisell Rodríguez Milán, "La historia no contada de cómo un avión con suministros médicos desde China no ha podido entrar a Cuba," *Granma*, Apr. 1, 2020. (The piece was based on a blog post by Cuba's Ambassador to China, Carlos Miguel Pereira Hernández.

⁷⁷ Katia Monteagudo and Mayli Estevez, "Las mentiras y medias verdades de una donación de China a Cuba para luchar contra el coronavirus," *CubaNet*, Apr. 14, 2020.

into law—the export and re-export to Cuba of “items to ensure the safety of civil and the safe operation of commercial aircraft engaged in international air transportation” and the U.S. Treasury Department continues to allow U.S.-owned airlines “permissible travel, cargo, or trade.”⁷⁸ Several U.S. airlines have licenses to fly to Cuba.

The coronavirus crisis has arrived at a most delicate time as Cuba’s parasitic, unproductive, and technically bankrupt economy faces several critical external factors. The Maduro regime of Venezuela is hanging by a thread and its financial support for Cuba has been declining for years. Tourism has been shrinking for months and remittances and assistance will surely decline considerably as hundreds of Cubans in the diaspora have lost their jobs.⁷⁹ Since 2018, several medical brigades have been terminated (in Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Honduras), representing a loss to the regime of many millions of dollars. Meanwhile, with the entire world facing COVID-19, international assistance will be scarce. On April 7th, official Cuban media announced the gesture of “invaluable friendship” from the Chinese government, a donation of \$200,000 and PPE (personal protective equipment) and an “initial shipment” —with no details on further commitments— that included just 112,000 face masks, 12,000 protective suits, 500 infrared thermometers, 2,000 protective glasses, 2,000 pairs of surgical gloves and 2,000 pairs of isolation shoes,⁸⁰ a mere drop in the bucket for a country of eleven million lacking almost everything. With Cuba shut out of capital markets and commercial credit due to its non-payments, attempting to compete for scarce medical supplies and equipment seems impossible. The regime’s only hope, it seems, is for a win by the Democrat Party in the U.S., for an expected lifting of sanctions, and for the radical insurgencies it promotes in the region, especially in Chile and Colombia, to succeed in attaining power.⁸¹ Both can take months, if not years, to come to full fruition.

Cuba’s sale of even a few thousand export workers or gallons of interferon —in the best of cases— for the pandemic can only put a small plug into a rapidly deflating balloon. Cuba’s interferon export boom will not last after the current inventory is peddled as a package deal with the doctors and as it becomes clear that it is no cure for the disease and perhaps not even that useful in boosting the immune system given its side effects and the gamut of alternative treatments. Even if Cuba exported 5,000 doctors for the pandemic, assuming a six-month deployment, it would at best bring \$5,000 a month per worker, adding to \$150 million less costs. If an additional 5,000 health workers are deployed to Mexico and Argentina at half the cost, assuming allies get a discount, they would generate an additional \$150 million per year less costs. Aside from all the direct costs, there is the huge expense of supporting the gigantic apparatus of influence and propaganda detailed in Part I needed to make it possible. In these best-case scenarios, Cuba’s medical exports —people and drugs— are like trying to stop a hemorrhage with a Band-Aid.

As a perfect storm is brewing for the Cuban regime,⁸² the state propaganda-disinformation machinery is working non-stop. Locally, it churns out pieces with titles and bylines like this one: “Only socialism saves! Cuba today raises another beacon, of light and moral hope, as well as objective proof of how necessary socialism is, however it is built in every corner of the world.”⁸³ Cuban television is full of scary images of the impact of coronavirus in the U.S. with somber music in the background and the population is constantly being told that “in countries where Cuban doctors are present, things are under control, and in those where the 'enemies rule,

⁷⁸ “Cuba,” Bureau of Industry and Security, US Department of Commerce, <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/country-guidance/sanctioned-destinations/cuba>

⁷⁹ “Shutdown in Cuba due to coronavirus leaves hundreds without work in Miami,” *The Miami Herald*, Mar. 25, 2020.

⁸⁰ Walkiria Juanes Sánchez, “Arribó a Cuba donativo enviado por el gobierno de la República Popular China,” *Granma*, Apr. 6, 2020.

⁸¹ See M. Werlau, *La intervención de Cuba en Venezuela*, op. cit., Ch. VII, sub-chapter “La ofensiva insurreccional del 2019: un cambio de tácticas ya ensayado”, pp. 165-180.

⁸² Dimas Castellanos’ piece is translated to English and worth a read: “Cuba, Social Discontent and the Coronavirus,” *Diario de Cuba*, Apr. 2, 2020.

⁸³ Carlos Luque, ¡Solo el socialismo salva! *Granma*, Apr. 6 2020. (Translation from Spanish.)

there is chaos, destruction, and an uncontrollable pandemic.”⁸⁴ Meanwhile, in Kenya, a leading human rights’ figure, Alice Wairimu Nderitu,⁸⁵ was taking the pro-Cuba hyperbole to a new level in a Kenyan digital news daily: “I watched, with a lump in my throat, the sight of Cuban doctors carrying their national flag, striding into airports in Italy and Spain ... I wondered what it takes, for a small country like Cuba known for its socialist ideology and subsequent isolation, trade embargoes and expulsions from world bodies to consistently produce large numbers of quality medical personnel and maintain a robust healthcare system and send doctors to more than 60 countries worldwide ... As we marvel on what it took for Cuba to produce such a versatile medical fraternity, it is important to ask, would it not be a fitting tribute for Cuban doctors, or more generally healthcare providers worldwide to be recognised through the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize?⁸⁶ The contrast could not be starker from the commentary from Cuba part in a Facebook post containing the video of unrest at a line to buy chicken: “Hunger and despair take over the Cuban people. ...The regime cannot demand isolation when it does not guarantee food, personal hygiene products, or wages. Its repression cannot control hunger.”⁸⁷



This article is from the four-part series “Cuba in the time of coronavirus: exploiting a global crisis,” by Maria C. Werlau:

Part I: Pandemic as opportunity

Part II: Coronavirus in Cuba: a perfect storm

COMING SOON

Part III: Interferon, Cuba’s so-called “wonder drug,” and the dark side of Cuba’s biotechnology industry.

Part IV: The real story of Cuba’s medical diplomacy.



Cuba Salud is a project of Cuba Archive in collaboration
with Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation
www.CubaSalud.org

⁸⁴ Mario J. Pentón, “Cuba muestra imágenes caóticas de la epidemia de coronavirus en los Estados Unidos,” *El Nuevo Herald*, Apr. 10, 2020.

⁸⁵ Alice Wairimu Nderitu is a former commissioner of the National Cohesion and Integration Commission and a co-founder of the Uwiano Platform for Peace, which led efforts to ensure a peaceful process during Kenya’s 2010 constitutional referendum and 2013 elections. She has served as lead mediator in armed conflicts in Nigeria. In 2017, Ms Nderitu received a Global Pluralism Award. (<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/2456-4653600-view-asAuthor-dyd0ru/index.html>)

⁸⁶ Alice Wairimu Nderitu, “Cuban doctors prompt response to Covid-19 deserves nobel prize,” *The East African*, Apr. 9, 2020.

⁸⁷ “Cubanos protestan y tiran piedras,” op. cit. (Translation from Spanish.)