



Cuba and the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report of the United States Department of State

July 5, 2021

The 2021 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, pursuant to the 2000 Trafficking in Persons Victim Act (TPVA), covers government efforts on trafficking undertaken in the reporting period April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021. Published on July 1st by the Department of State,¹ the report keeps Cuba in Tier 3 for the second year in a row, along with 16 other countries that do not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and are not making significant efforts to do so.

With this latest report, the U.S. government has: 1.) raised the overall tone on the labor exploitation associated with Cuba's international medical missions; 2.) points to most of Cuba's partner countries in the labor exploitation of mostly medical workers (the level of concern of the language varies by country), and 3.) draws greater attention to the singular role of the Cuban government itself in the business of human trafficking. This has important legal and symbolic value.

For the second year in a row—and more appreciably this year—the TIP report addresses state-sponsored trafficking by eleven states meeting that criteria; in addition to Cuba, these are Afghanistan, Belarus, Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, and Turkmenistan. The emphasis stems from a congressional amendment of 2019 to the TVPA requiring acknowledgement of a “government policy or pattern” of human trafficking, human trafficking in government-funded programs, forced labor in government-affiliated medical services or other sectors, sexual slavery in government camps, or the employment or recruitment of child soldiers.

The TIP report, which lists many human rights' violations associated with Cuba's exported medical workers, refers to a Cuban government policy or pattern “to profit from labor export programs with strong indications of forced labor, particularly its foreign medical missions' program.” It asserts that the Cuban government “has not addressed its exploitative and coercive policies in these missions, which are clear indicators of human trafficking.” Although the text does not state this, Cuba's official statistics would place its government among the three largest labor traffickers in the world along with the governments of North Korea and China. What's more, Cuba runs, commercializes, enforces, and manages this unique scheme of modern slavery in complicity with many other governments and international organizations.

This latest TIP report emanates from an accumulated informational effort of many years and denotes the integrity and professionalism of Department of State officials to honor the law of the land to combat human trafficking. TIP reports for 2015 to 2018 had raised Cuba's ranking to “Tier 2 - Watch List” despite the growth of its medical missions' program during those four years.

For many years, the Cuban government and its enablers have deflected evidence of exploitation by claiming that the internationalist programs are voluntary. Yet, Cuba health workers are a captive labor force earning abject wages driven to sign up for the missions by economic need and coerced to avoid demotions or reprisals affecting their ability to practice their profession. The U.S. Department of State, reflecting the TPVA and

¹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

international law, clarifies the following regarding “consent”: “Human trafficking can take place even if the victim initially consented to providing labor, services, or commercial sex acts. The analysis is primarily focused on the trafficker’s conduct and not that of the victim. ... The trafficker’s coercive scheme is what matters, not a victim’s prior consent or ability to meaningfully consent thereafter. (2021 TIP Report, p. 27.)

The Department of State’s TIP Office, Office of Cuban Affairs, and other offices coordinating U.S. relations with many countries, as well as the U.S. embassy in Havana, have given due attention to Cuba’s trafficking of international medical brigades. The dark reality behind these “missions” has gained progressive acknowledgment despite great pressures to the contrary from Cuba’s allies and apologists. This owes to the growing number of brave victims who, overcoming fear of reprisals, have made their testimonies public, to a chorus of influential voices (including Senators Rubio and Menéndez, other Members of Congress, and the Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro), to persistent media and social coverage, and to the emergence of increasing advocacy/awareness initiatives. Finally, although the TIP report did not mention this, it must have contemplated a number of Cuba’s laws that clearly indicate that the State is responsible for exporting workers as merchandise as well as a few of the bilateral contracts made public during the reporting period that have evidence of the illegalities. (Most of the agreements remain secret.)

The 2021 TIP report should prevent public and private U.S. entities from collaborating with the Cuban missions --the Obama administration did so in at least several countries in Africa and Haiti. It could lead to sanctioning officials directing the trafficking in Cuba and other countries (at least denying entry visas to the U.S. territory), may ease legal avenues against those who traffic, and carries a powerful message for international organizations, governments, and others complicit with Cuba.

This forced labor scheme evidently violates the Palermo Protocol against Trafficking in Persons, which is part of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, several conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO), and other international agreements to which most countries receiving Cuban worker brigades are parties. (See more details in Cuba Archive’s latest report to the State Department’s TIP office.²)

Much remains to be accomplished

Despite a growing choir of objections, Cuba reports having around 31,000 health workers in more than 70 countries and of having sent 57 emergency medical brigades to 40 countries for the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020 alone. (See Table.³) The latest data from Cuba’s Office of National Statistics reports revenues of around US\$7.2 billion in 2019 from export services excluding tourism, which constitutes the largest source —by far— of officially-acknowledged revenues of the Cuban State. Among other things, this figure points to a likely and considerable under-reporting of the number of workers Cuba exploits overseas.

This scheme of modern slavery must be combatted effectively so that: 1. the trafficking actually stops and countries seeking to hire Cuban workers respect international law and their own legislation by, for instance, offering them independent contracts; 2. the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), as well as the world’s democracies, stop endorsing and subsidizing Cuba’s so-called “health collaboration” schemes that exploit Cuban workers; and 3. the world turns its attention to protecting the rights and needs of the Cuban people, ravaged by the export of Cuba’s medical workers and supplies that finances a dictatorship that destroys the nation.

²<https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-TIP-Cuba-Information-Submission-Final.pdf>

³<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ubMeQPv5APGPr7fy49AS8vCITP4G0CiCnkN4uuFFirg/edit>

With respect to labor trafficking, awareness must also be raised on forced or coerced uncompensated labor in Cuba, such as in the military and penal system, as well as that of workers in fields beyond health exploited by the Cuban State overseas. The Cuba country section of the 2021 TIP report refers only very briefly to the latter

as follows: “In addition to the medical missions, the government profited from other similarly coercive labor export programs, including dance teachers and sports coaches in Venezuela, engineers in South Africa, forestry technicians in Angola, and merchant mariners across the world.”

Finally, the 2022 TIP report will hopefully hold accountable all states that continue harboring Cuba’s exploited workers, reflecting this in their ranking, especially those currently ranked as Tier 1 and Tier 2 countries.

Following is the list of states with medical brigades according to their classification in the 2021 TIP report.

STATES THAT HOSTED CUBAN MEDICAL MISSIONS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD APRIL 1, 2020 – MARCH 31, 2021

A. States with Cuban medical missions included in the 2021 TIP report

***States not marked for trafficking of Cuban workers in the 2021 TIP report but reported by Cuban state media or other credible sources as hosting Cuban medical workers/brigades during the reporting period.*

Tier 1

1. Bahrain
2. France (Territory: Martinique)
3. Guyana
4. Namibia
5. United Kingdom – Montserrat** (Territory)
6. United Kingdom – British Virgin Islands** (Territory)

Tier 2

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 7. Angola | 22. Mexico |
| 8. Antigua and Barbuda | 23. Mozambique |
| 9. Botswana | 24. Niger |
| 10. Cabo Verde | 25. Panama |
| 11. Eswatini | 26. Peru |
| 12. Fiji | 27. Qatar |
| 13. Gabon** | 28. Saint Lucia |
| 14. Ghana | 29. St. Vincent and the Grenadines |
| 15. Guatemala | 30. Saudi Arabia |
| 16. Honduras | 31. Seychelles |
| 17. Italy | 32. Sierra Leone |
| 18. Jamaica | 33. Suriname |
| 19. Kenya | 34. Togo |
| 20. Kuwait | 35. United Arab Emirates |
| 21. Mauritius | 36. Uruguay |

**Dominican Republic, a Tier 2 country, was noted for hosting non-medical Cuban workers.*

Tier 2 - Watch List

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 37. Azerbaijan** | 42. Equatorial Guinea |
| 38. Barbados | 43. Ethiopia |
| 39. Belize | 44. Gambia |
| 40. Burkina Faso | 45. The Guinea |
| 41. Chad | 46. Haiti |

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| 47. Lesotho | 54. Tonga |
| 48. Liberia | 55. Trinidad and Tobago |
| 49. Palau | 56. Uganda |
| 50. Sint Maarten | 57. Vietnam |
| 51. South Africa | 58. Zambia |
| 52. Tanzania | 59. Zimbabwe |
| 53. Timor-Leste | |

**Mali, a Tier 2- Watch List country hosts a sports brigade from Cuba that was not noted in the Country report.*

Tier 3

- 60. Algeria
- 61. Guinea-Bissau
- 62. Nicaragua
- 63. Venezuela

B. States with no Country TIP reports that hosted Cuban medical missions

- 64. Andorra**
- 65. Anguilla**
- 66. Dominica**
- 67. Grenada**
- 68. Sao Tome & Principe**
- 69. St. Kitts & Nevis**
- 70. Turks & Caicos**



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