Update on Cuba's Medical Mission in Republic of Congo
February 2025

Excerpts from
"Forced/compelled labor (trafficking in persons) by the Cuban state: Information for the 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report for the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State," Free Society Project/Cuba Archive, February 2025

Edited excerpts of Update on selected countries' medical brigades: Congo Brazzaville (submitted as an Annex)

The 2024 U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP report) classified the Republic of the Congo as a Tier 2 Watch List country; among others, it specifies that "Cuban government-affiliated medical professionals working in the Republic of the Congo may have been forced to work by the Cuban government." The Prioritized Recommendations for the country include: "Proactively identify trafficking victims, including by screening for trafficking indicators, especially among vulnerable populations, including ... Cuban government-affiliated workers. … screen Cuban overseas workers, including medical professionals and refer them to appropriate services."[1]

The Cuban government has had a close relationship with the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) since the mid-1960s, with considerable influence and presence there.[2] It was one of the earliest targets for Fidel Castro's unique brand of health diplomacy that, since the 1960s, included vaccination of Congolese children for polio. In 1979, Castro claimed that Cuba's "technical assistance" to Congo-Brazzaville was entirely free.[3] There is little information on that, but assuming it were true, at some point, it is fair to conclude that it turned into a business for Cuba.

In 2008, a Cuban medical brigade of 14 was in the country, in the departments of Brazzaville, Niari, and Cuvette.[4] It grew to 72 in 2014 and was reported to have grown to 67 members in 2018.[5] In 2013-2014, Cuba also offered to train 1,000 Congolese students in medicine, with scholarships apparently

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[1] https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/republic-of-the-congo/

[2] In 1965, Castro sent a 250-strong force to Congo-Brazzaville to defend its nationalist government and help Che Guevara, who had established a Marxist guerrilla front in the eastern borders, in Congo-Leopoldville (that failed). The men also began to train other guerrilla groups, in particular, Aghostino Neto's Marxist-Leninist MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola); from Brazzaville, three columns joined the Angolan guerrillas. See Enrique Ros, *La Aventura Africana de Fidel Castro* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1999) and Juan Benemelis, Las guerras secretas de Fidel Castro (Coral Gables: Grupo de Apoyo a la Disidencia, 2003; "Jorge Risquet Valdés," Ecured, https://www.ecured.cu/Jorge_Risquet_Vald%C3%A9s).

[3] Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the struggle for Southern Africa 1976-1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p. 108-109 (citing Memcom (Castro, Neto) Jan. 26, 1979, Consejo de Estado).

[4] Quentin Loubou, "Des médecins cubains au Congo pour renforcer les prestations médicales du pays," Congo-Brazzaville, *Les dépêches de Brazzaville*, Jul. 10, 2008.

[5] "Coopération : une troisième brigade médicale de Cuba en République du Congo," Adiac Congo, Apr. 2014; Lydie Mireille Bouilama, "Le Congo attend une mission de médecins cubains," *Vox*, Oct. 20, 2018.

paid by the government of Congo-Brazzaville; the first group of graduates returned in 2020, but missing 142 who had been deported in 2019 for leading a riot to protest their poor conditions in Cuba.[6]

There is currently a Cuban medical brigade working in the public health system, contracted out to the host government, deployed to at least Brazzaville and the town of Oyo, in the Cuvette Department. Its current number of members is unknown. In addition, around 160 Cuban health professionals — doctors, nurses, and technicians— are working in similar conditions of modern slavery in a private facility in Brazzaville inaugurated on April 15, 2024, the Nouvelle Vie Médicité Hospital.[7] Cuba Archive has received a first hand, well-documented, and convincing testimony to that effect; it is reported as anonymous to protect the source from reprisals.

The clinic is run despotically by Tariq Hussein. Its owner is said to be the son of Congo's President, Denis Sassou Nguesso, the country's authoritarian ruler for 39 years. A Cuban doctor from Camaguey, Dr. Pedro Expósito Moreno, who has been in the Congo for over 15 years, recruited the health workers in Cuba. Barely getting by with the miserly salaries paid in Cuba, they seized the opportunity to improve their lot and travel overseas to work independently. The workers were allowed to relocate to Brazzaville with their families, including children, which is impossible in the State-run international missions.

That these workers could obtain a passport and were allowed to leave the country is highly unusual. Many specialists were hired for the private clinic in the Congo, yet, they are considered essential health personnel and "regulados," restricted from traveling without a special authorization that is very hard to get. Before leaving Cuba, the health workers were asked to sign a contract in French, for which they did not get an official or written translation, the opportunity to procure legal advice, or a copy. The contract said they could not work in the Congo other than in the Nouvelle Vie clinic, which they accepted. Upon arriving, at the airport their passports were retained. Once they started working, they found that they had grueling schedules and had to see an inordinate number of daily patients, were assigned repeated guards with very little rest, and were threatened with repatriation if they complained. They have not been provided written authorization to legally work in the country and are concerned about their legal exposure.

Doctors who are specialists received an initial pay in local currency of XAF 600,000 (US$945) per month, which is reportedly around 21-24% of the average salary of a doctor in Brazzaville with 10 to 20 years of experience (the salary of a specialist in unknown); it was subsequently raised to 1,000,000 (US$1,575) or around 40-35% of the local average monthly salary.[8] With that low compensation, they must pay for food and all other expenses except lodging, including school for those who have children. Although their lodging is provided, it is sub-standard; two doctors or four nurses (in 2 bunk beds) must share a small bedroom; 16 to 17 persons share a kitchen and family room per floor.

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[6] "Congo: 142 étudiants congolais expulsés de Cuba rentre au bercail," JournaldeBrazza.com, May 8, 2019; "Dejan Cuba cientos de estudiantes de Medicina del Congo sobrevivientes de la purga de 2019," La Habana, *Diario de Cuba*, May 4, 2024.

[7] See https://nouvelleviemedicite.com/

[8] A doctor in Brazzaville with 10 to 20 years of experience reportedly earns around CAR 30 to 35 million a year. (Average Doctor Salary in Brazzaville, Congo for 2025, World Salaries, https://worldsalaries.com/average-doctor-salary-in-brazzaville/congo/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

A de facto wage confiscation in this private clinic arrangement is apparently operating under a scheme similar to the government-to-government agreements. The clinic might be paying the Cuban regime the portion of the standard wages that is not paid to the Cuban workers or a finders' fee per worker; or the regime and/or high-ranking Cuban officials might have partial ownership of the clinic (which might be under the name of figureheads) and derive a greater profit based on the lower labor costs. Another possibility —that seems less likely— is that the recruitment and exploitation of the Cubans responds solely to individual corruption with the participation of Cuban officials on the Island and in the Congo in a personal capacity. This poses a similar conundrum as trying to determine who is behind the recruitment of Cubans as mercenaries for Russia in the war in Ukraine. Given the lack of transparency, finding who is behind these arrangements has not been possible. What is certain is that in a totalitarian country like Cuba, they cannot happen without high-ranking official participation.

The private clinic modality of forced labor/trafficking of Cuba's export health workers appears to be expanding to more countries, as noted in the report/information submission (see pages 9-10). This model is being implemented in at least a few private facilities in Angola under the standard government-to-government agreement. The Cuban Hospital in Dukhan, Qatar, is also a joint project of the governments of Cuba and Qatar and is inserted into Qatar's public health system, but accepts patients paying privately or covered by private insurance.[9] To date Cuba Archive has not obtained any testimony from Cuban doctors working in seemingly similar circumstances in private facilities in other countries suspected to have these arrangements: Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, France, Mauritania, Peru, Portugal, Serbia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

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[9] The Cuban Hospital, https://hamad.qa/EN/Hospitals-and-services/The-Cuban-Hospital/About/Pages/default.aspx?utm_source=chatgpt.com