Update on Cuba's Medical Mission in Italy
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 from "Update on selected countries' medical brigades": Italy

The 2024 U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP report) classified Italy as a Tier 2 country because "the Government of Italy does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so." It stated: "There are strong indicators of forced labor in Cuba's labor export program, including the medical missions. In 2023, there were approximately 172 Cuban government-affiliated medical workers in Calabria who may have been forced to work by the Cuban government." Its Prioritized Recommendations included: "Given significant concerns about forced labor indicators in the Cuban labor export program, screen Cuban government-affiliated overseas workers, including medical professionals, and refer them to appropriate services."

As described in greater detail in last year's report, the poorly managed and inefficient Italian national health system that offers its workers poor pay, low pensions, grueling work shifts, inadequate infrastructure, and a cumbersome bureaucracy has fueled a mass exodus of health professionals towards richer countries and pushed many doctors into the private sector or early retirement. Staffing has decreased considerably in recent years,[1]especially in the poorer provinces. During the pandemic, the government relaxed hiring standards to bring in foreign health personnel not certified in the European Union. Two Cuban medical brigades worked for several months in the northern provinces of Lombardia and Piamonte.[2]

Cuba's COVID brigade paved the way for an August 2022 3-year agreement with the government of the southern Italian state of Calabria, one of the poorest in Western Europe, for the deployment of a 500-strong Cuban medical brigade, which was announced as "a first phase." In December 2024, 333 Cuban doctors were reportedly serving in 27 hospitals in five Calabrian provinces, providing services in 23 specialties: 117 in Cosenza, 55 in Catanzaro, 41 in Crotone, 77 in Reggio Calabria, and 43 in Vivo Valentia. They had arrived in phases: 51 doctors in December 2022 (part of a 63-member brigade), a second group of 126 arrived in May or August 2023, and a third group of 120 in August 2023 or January 2024. In September 2024, 66 doctors arrived in Calabria (perhaps replacing the first

[1] "Doctors who go, doctors who come," *Breaking Latest*, Nov. 4, 2023. (The article cites Italian doctors including Paolo Viganò, infectious disease specialist and long-time director of the infectious diseases department of the Legnano hospital.)

[2] See "Cuba in the time of coronavirus: exploiting a global crisis. Part I: Pandemic as opportunity," Cuba Archive, Apr. 7, 2020, https://cubaarchive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Cuba-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-Part-I-FINAL-1.pdf

batch),[3] and presumably 167 other members of the brigade make up the 500 contracted. As with the COVID brigades, the Cuban regime and its friends have splurged on worldwide propaganda for its medical brigade in Calabria. Certainly, having a foothold in the European Union adds considerable credibility to its "medical diplomacy."

In January 2025, *L'Unione Sarda* reported[4] that the Italian island of Sardinia would soon receive 128 doctors and 30 nurses from Cuba, who were already in Italian language training. Yet, no news of this brigade's arrival has surfaced. In September 2024, *L'Unione Sarda* reported that the activists who had

led the effort to bring the Cuban brigade had relaunched it with a letter to the President of the Region, the Health Councilor, and the Regional Council asking to make the agreement operational; it had bipartisan approval in the previous legislature.

Cuba is reportedly paid 4,700 euros a month per collaborator, of which 3,500 euros are paid directly to Cuba while 1,200 euros are paid as a stipend to the workers, of which a certain amount is likely paid locally for food and other expenses. Additional living, travel, and other expenses associated with their stay, if averaged at 73% of their salary (as in the recent Kenya brigade, but not necessarily a reliable figure) would bring the monthly cost per worker to at least $8,131, or $97,572. Meanwhile, the Cuban health workers themselves are grossly underpaid.

Although the current agreement is with a local government, the federal government seems to have no problem with it. On May 23, 2023, Cuba's Health Minister, Jose Angel Portal, and his Italian counterpart, Orazio Schillaci, penned a Memo of Understanding on bilateral cooperation in healthcare and medical sciences at the 76 World Health Assembly in Geneva to strengthen links between the two ministries.

There is a very extensive and active network of solidarity groups with Cuba; one of the prominent entities is the National Association of Italy-Cuba Friendship (ANAIC), which operates through regional circles, and has a widespread network across the country. Numerous local associations, political parties, and trade union organizations also engage in the solidarity movement with the Cuban regime.[5]

The author was invited to speak at an event in the Italian Senate in Rome last May 2024. This led to private conversations on the topic of the medical brigade in Calabria with a few Italian political figures, including at a high level in President Melloni's party,. The feedback was that the region of Calabria is governed by the mafia and there was nothing the federal government could do (or, perhaps, was willing to do?).[6]

Calabria, however, is part of Italy, which is part of the European Union., which has strong legal safeguards to prevent human trafficking. Using the established mechanisms –with the required procedures-- within the legal framework of the EU seems like the proper approach to denounce this brigade. Article 5 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights bans trafficking in persons including

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[3] Catherin López, "Cuban doctors save lives in Calabria," *Radio Habana Cuba*, Dec. 23, 2024: María Josefina Arce, "Reconocen en Italia labor de más de 300 médicos cubanos en Calabria," Roma, Prensa Latina, Dec. 9, 2024.

[4] "Sardinian hospitals in trouble, 128 white coats arriving from Cuba," *L'Unione Sarda*, Jan. 14, 2024.

[5] M. J. Arce, op. cit.

[6] Marinellys Tremamuno, "María Werlau: "Las brigadas médicas cubanas son una vía para infiltrar a la sociedad," *CubaNet*, Jun. 4, 2024.

forced or compulsory labour and the EU's the anti-trafficking directive, adopted in 2011, draws on the UN's Protocol on trafficking in persons and the Council of Europe's Convention against Human Trafficking.[7]

On January 30, 2024, Antonio López-Istúriz, a Member of the EU Parliament, introduced an amendment to the Annual Report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament intending to add the following: "in particular, emphasizes the "Cuban medical brigade" employed in some European countries as a persecution of fundamental rights and freedoms and a way of slavery and forced labour" to the phrase "condemns in the strongest terms, the systematic human rights violations and abuses perpetrated by the Cuban regime." He tweeted about it and asked, "guess who voted against?" Although at least one digital media venue covered the amendment as a fact,[8] it appears it was voted down, as the official documents for the January 20, 2024 meeting and the Annual Report do not reflect it.[9]

Aside from the forced labor violations affecting the Cuban workers, bypassing the accreditation requirements puts EU citizens at risk. That violation should also be channeled through the appropriate mechanisms of the EU by experienced and professional practitioners.

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[7] The EU's work to combat human trafficking, European Council, Council of the European Union.

[8] "El Parlamento Europeo condena la explotación de los médicos cubanos," Madrid, *Diario de Cuba*, Feb 1, 2025.

[9] Draft Report on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy - 2024 annual report (2024/0000(INI), Committee on Foreign Affairs, Rapporteur: David McAllister, Jan. 10.2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-PR-765084_EN.html; "The EU must defend its interests on the global stage," Press Releases, AFET, Jan. 30, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250127IPR26491/the-eu-must-defend-its-interests-on-the-global-stage; Procedure file, 2024/2080(INI), Full procedure, Implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2024, https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2024/2080(INI)#section4.