Update on Cuba's Medical Mission in Timor-Leste
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": Timor Leste

The 2024 US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP report) classified Timor-Leste a Tier 2 country because its government "does not fully meeting the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but making significant efforts to do so." However, it acknowledged that there were approximately 160 Cuban medical workers there in 2023 who "may have been forced to work by the Cuban government," and included among its Prioritized Recommendations: "Screen government-affiliated Cuban workers, including medical professionals for trafficking indicators."

Cuba indeed has a medical brigade of 160 workers in Timor-Leste (East Timor), a Southeast Asian country of only 1.3 million inhabitants. The Cubans are present at a hospital and a medical school in the capital of Dili, as well as in every municipality.[1] According to doctors who served in the Timor Leste mission until 2024,[2] it operates like all other missions: the health workers have the greater part of their wages confiscated, are subjected to labor exploitation, hardships, arbitrary restrictions, vigilance, threats, repression, and more abuses. At least eight reportedly deserted the mission in 2024: seven doctors and one nurse.

The doctors who deserted from the mission in Timor received a salary of around $900 a month, which they believed to be around 20% of what the Cuban government was receiving for their services. With that, they had to pay for all their expenses including food, although housing and utilities were covered for them. They were assigned to live next door to the hospital where they worked, in a small bungalow of 2 bedrooms and 1 bathroom shared with another Cuban doctor they met after arriving. It was made of some kind of plastic and had no air conditioner, so it was very hot. One, a certain specialist, had to work extremely long hours for endless days without rest and was suffering from exhaustion; he was not allowed to complain and was threatened with being sent back to Cuba if he did. Their passports were retained right after their arrival. Their one-month vacation after eleven months of service —a contractual obligation by the Collaboration Unit of Cuba's Ministry of Health— was a formality; they had to work for many more months without any breaks before they were flown home on vacation (they were not allowed to travel anywhere else). They understand that the $900 wage for the month

[1] Tania Izquierdo Pamias, "Colaboración médica cubana en Timor Leste," CNICM-Infomed, Jan. 21, 2025, https://www.scu.sld.cu/pol30nov/2025/01/21/colaboracion- medica-cubana-en-timor-leste-fuente-cnicm-infomed-21-enero-2025-0-comentarios-responsable-tania-izquierdo-pamias/

[2] Cuba Archive has had extensive contact with these doctors, has seen documents proving their credentials and obtained their detailed testimony. Their identity is undisclosed to avoid reprisals.

of vacation is now being paid after the doctors return from vacation in Cuba, as an added obstacle to prevent defections (there are no Cuba-Timor direct flights and the minders have not been able to control their every move during overnight stopovers).

Cuba also trains medical students from East Timor and reports having already graduated over 1,100 doctors. The country had just gained its sovereignty and independence in 2002 after a long conflict when Fidel Castro seized a unique opportunity to share his special brand of "health diplomacy," seeking to obtain influence, gain political capital and deploy an effective vehicle to plant intelligence agents and collaborators. He committed with its new president and current president,[3] then Minister of Foreign Business, to train 1,000 doctors.

There is another medical brigade from China that is working jointly with the Cuban doctors. According to one of the doctors who worked there: "the Cuban regime spreads its tentacles to penetrate the social fabric of the country."[4] Its influence is such that "when President Ramos Horta and other personalities in the country fall ill, they are cared for by selected doctors from the Cuban Medical Mission under the Chief of Mission's command."[5]

A study of Human Resources for Health (HRH) in post-independence East Timor in 1999–2018 confirms the strategic importance of Cuba's tactical investment: "In terms of actors, there was a shift over time as the relevance of external players faded in favour of that of internal actors and institutions. As in other settings during the immediate post-conflict phase, Western donors and multilateral organisations were essential and influential in the aftermath of the violence to provide financial and technical support to the nascent Republic, including supporting HRH systems. Later, Cuba became a prominent player, and despite their professed disengagement from 'politics', their views and approaches (e.g. gender and geographical balance of students selected) undoubtedly influenced policy-making."[6]

The United States has been one of those initial major donors sidelined by Cuba, that, in turn, gets paid for its services. In 2023, the US provided approximately $28.89 million in official development assistance to Timor-Leste, making it the country's second-largest donor after Australia.[7] Since 2002, the US has provided $500 million in assistance for, among others, staff training at the Ministries of Finance, Health, Tourism, and Agriculture, support for farming and agriculture, nutrition, healthcare, military education and training, governance, tourism, private sector productivity, and digital connectivity. In addition, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreed in July 2022 to invest $420 million for a $484 million for water sanitation and education project for which Timor-Leste will invest only $64 million.[8] The MCC was created by the US Congress to provide time-limited grants promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, and strengthening institutions for the world's poorest countries "that are committed

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[3] José Ramos-Horta was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for advancing his country's self-determination and Indonesia's eventual withdrawal after an occupation from 1975-1999 following its independence from Portugal. "José Ramos-Horta, Facts," The Nobel Peace Prize, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1996/ramos-horta/facts/

[4] Text from Anonymous Source #8 to the author, Feb. 5, 2025. (Translation from Spanish by the author.)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Maria Paola Bertone, Joao S. Martins, et. al. "Understanding HRH recruitment in postconflict settings: an analysis of central-level policies and processes in Timor-Leste (1999–2018)," *Human Resources for Health*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-018-0325-5

[7] https://foreignassistance.gov/cd/timor-leste/current/obligations/

[8] "Timor-Leste: Background and US Relations," Congressional Research Service, Jul. 26, 2024.

to just and democratic governance, economic freedom and investing in their populations."[9] The US is also a major donor to several multilateral agencies active in Timor-Leste, such as the United Nations, Asian Development Bank, and World Bank.[10]

This largesse seems to have been of no consequence in preventing the Government of Timor-Leste from exploiting Cuba's health workers in its territory, a practice the US government must monitor and combat by law. To the contrary, in June 2024, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez sent a letter of thanks to the President of East Timor, José Ramos-Horta, for his "rejection of the US government's inclusion of the island in the list of nations allegedly sponsoring terrorism."[11] Ramos-Horta had sent a letter urging the US government to definitively stop the sanctions against Cuba, enter into a dialogue with Cuba, and normalize relations. He noted that, "for decades, Cuba had sent tens of thousands of doctors to various countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia" and saved millions of lives.[12]

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[9] https://www.mcc.gov/about/ and https://www.mcc.gov/about/values/

[10] "US Relations With Timor-Leste: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. US Department of State, Apr. 25, 2022; "About MCC," https://www.mcc.gov/about/

[11] Beatriz Montes de Oca, "Cuba appreciates Timor Leste's support against US hostility," Havana, *Radio Habana Cuba* (RHC), Jun. 22, 2024. (Translation from Spanish by the author.)

[12] Ibid.