Update on Cuba's Medical Mission in Uruguay
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": Uruguay

The 2024 US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP report) classified Uruguay as a Tier 2 Watch List country because its government "does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so." The Watch List status was assigned for a number of reasons including not dedicating adequate resources to combat labor trafficking, but "including potential trafficking crimes associated with foreign-flagged fishing vessels in Uruguayan waters or docked at the Port of Montevideo." Among other things, the report weakly referred to the Cuban medical brigade: "Cuban nationals working in Uruguay may be forced to work by the Cuban government." It also failed to include the issue in the Prioritized Recommendations.

Uruguay has had a Cuban medical mission since 2007. A small team dedicated to orthopedic equipment was pulled out in 2021, but the medical (ophthalmological) brigade remains based at Montevideo's Eye Hospital. In 2024, it was reportedly responsible for 50% of the surgeries at the Eye Hospital and some of its members crisscrossed the country continually to find or operate on ophthalmological patients.[1] The last available breakdown of the number of brigade members is from November 2023, when Cuba's state-owned media reported that the 21-member Cuban brigade at the Eye Hospital included 10 doctors, four nursing graduates, an optometrist, an electro-medicine specialist, a driver, and a cook.[2]

The U.S.-based organization Global Liberty Alliance, GLA, filed a complaint in 2020 with Uruguay's National Human Rights Institution and the country's Ombudsman to investigate the alleged trafficking of Cuban doctors and disclose records related to their hiring.[3] GLA has not received a response.[4] In 2022, Cuba Archive made several efforts with Uruguay's highest level diplomats in the US and wrote a letter to the President of Uruguay, jointly signed by GLA, requesting that the government cease the labor exploitation and other human rights violations implicit in the Uruguay-Cuba agreements and, if need be, hire the Cubans directly. No response was received.

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[1] The brigade's leader is still Dr. Evelyn Almira. ("Uruguayos y cubanos realizan jornada científica oftalmológica", Montevideo, Prensa Latina, Nov. 30, 2024; María Candela, "A médicos cubanos los adoran en Uruguay, dice líder de jubilados," Radio Habana Cuba, Dec. 8, 2024.)

[2] "Eye Surgery Mission celebrates its creation in Uruguay," Montevideo, *Prensa Latina*, Nov. 27, 2023.

[3] https://www.globallibertyalliance.org/uruguay.html

[4] Jason Poblete, telephone conversation with the author, Feb. 6, 2024.

During 2024, Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba, citing government officials of the center-right government of Luis Lacalle Pou (March 2020 to present) insisted that the medical mission had been terminated. However, Cuba Archive continues to receive credible information indicating that the brigade is in place; it also continues to receive effusive and extensive propaganda and support from Uruguay's pensioner association and leftist groups, including several Uruguayan solidarity groups with Cuba that the Cuban regime has nurtured over many years.

President Lacalle is no fan of the Cuban dictatorship and Uruguay is party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons. Yet, he did not end his country's participation in the exploitation. His party was recently defeated in the presidential election of November 1, 2024 and with that, a good opportunity to end the labor exploitation appears to have slipped away. The leftist Frente Amplio returns to power on March 1, 2025 when Yamandú Orsi assumes as President (having won with 52% of the vote). The Frente Amplio has a very strong relationship with Cuba.

The cost to Uruguay of the Cuban brigade is unknown, but agreements going back to 2016, uncovered by legislators or through transparency requests, fix a payment to Cuba for doctors of $4,500 a month and $2,500 for all other collaborators, plus a $1,000 stipend paid locally to doctors and $790 to all others; this would bring the annual cost in wages for 21 workers to $1,094,280. Additionally, if the Kenya brigade is used as a measure, the costs of travel, lodging, food, health insurance, and other expenses add to 73% of the wages per collaborator, bringing the total cost to around $1.9 million a year, minus any increases that might have been agreed to after 2016. The cost of the Cuban doctors, $9,511 monthly each, may exceed the cost of hiring local specialists, who are much better qualified.[5]

While Cuba is paid Uruguay for its health "collaboration" and also receives humanitarian aid from its solidarity network in Uruguay, the US donated to Uruguay over $15 million in a Humanitarian Assistance Program (HAP) since 2004 for different projects including the construction of two clinics and a community center and provided Uruguay, and the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program for 236 members of the Uruguayan military cost $4.96 million from 2015 to 2023. In 2023, the US also donated one large reverse-osmosis machine and six smaller machine to assist Uruguay in purifying water in response to the historic drought in 2023.[6]

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[5] Camila Bello, "La 'operación milagro' rodeada de dudas: médicos cubanos pierden prueba de la Udelar," *El País*, Dec. 8, 2019.

[6] "US Relations With Uruguay: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, US Department of State, Jul. 18, 2024.