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By a guest author

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Why Cuba is withdrawing its medical brigade from Brazil

The Cuban Ministry of Public Health has issued a statement explaining the circumstances under which it is withdrawing the Cuban medical brigade that has been working in Brazil for the last five years as part of the program More Doctors for Brazil. The statement was released by the Cuban News Agency.

Declaration of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health

The Ministry of Public Health of the Republic of Cuba, committed to the solidarity and humanistic principles that have guided Cuba's medical cooperation for 55 years, has been participating in the program More Doctors for Brazil since its inception in August 2013. This initiative launched by Dilma Rousseff, who was at that time the president of the Federal Republic of Brazil, pursued the double purpose of guaranteeing medical assistance to the majority of the Brazilian people, following the principle of universal health coverage promoted by the World Health Organization.

The program had planned the inclusion of Brazilian and foreign doctors who would go to work in poor and remote areas of that country.

Cuba's participation in this program was arranged through the Pan-American Health Organization with one distinctive feature, for it was intended to fill the vacancies left by doctors from Brazil and other foreign nations.

During these five years of work, around 20,000 Cuban cooperation workers have assisted 113,359,000 patients in more than 3,600 municipalities. They managed to provide health coverage to up to 60 million Brazilians at a time when they amounted to 80 percent of all

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the doctors taking part in the program. More than 700 municipalities were able to count on a doctor for the first time ever.

The work of Cuban doctors in areas of extreme poverty — in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Salvador de Bahia and the 34 Special Indigenous Districts, particularly in Amazonia — was largely recognized by the federal, state and municipal governments of that country and its population, 95 percent of whom expressed their acceptance, according to a survey carried out by the Federal University of Minas Gerais at the request of the Ministry of Health of Brazil.

On Sept. 27, 2016, the Ministry of Public Health, in an official statement issued on a day close to the expiration date of the agreement and amidst the events associated with the legislative and judicial coup d'état against president Dilma Rousseff, announced that Cuba “would continue to honor its agreement with the Pan-American Health Organization for the implementation of the Program More Doctors, provided that the guarantees offered by local authorities were maintained,” something that so far has been respected.

Jair Bolsonaro, president-elect of Brazil, who has made direct, contemptuous and threatening comments against the presence of our doctors, has declared and reiterated that he will modify the terms and conditions of the Program More Doctors — in full disregard of the Pan-American Health Organization and the agreement reached by this organization with Cuba, since he has questioned the qualification of our doctors and has conditioned their permanence in the program to a process of validation of their titles and established that contracts will only be signed on an individual basis.

The announced modifications impose conditions that are unacceptable and fail to ensure the guarantees that had been previously agreed upon since the beginning of the Program, which were ratified in 2016 with the renegotiation of the Terms of Cooperation between the Pan-American Health Organization and the Ministry of Health of Brazil and the Cooperation Agreement between the Pan-American Health Organization and the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba. These unacceptable conditions make it impossible to maintain the presence of Cuban professionals in the Program.

Consequently, in the light of this unfortunate reality, the Ministry of Public Health of Cuba has decided to discontinue its participation in the Program More Doctors and has so informed the Director of the Pan-American Health Organization and the political leaders of Brazil who founded and defended this initiative.

The decision to bring into question the dignity, professionalism and altruism of Cuban cooperation workers who, with the support of their families, are currently offering their

services in 67 countries, is unacceptable. During the last 55 years, a total of 600,000 internationalist missions have been accomplished in 164 nations, with the participation of 400,000 health workers who, in quite a few cases, have fulfilled this honorable task more than once. Their feats in the struggle against the Ebola virus in Africa, blindness in Latin America and the Caribbean, and cholera in Haiti, as well as the participation of 26 brigades of the “Henry Reeve” International Contingent of Doctors Specializing in Disaster Situations and Great Epidemics in Pakistan, Indonesia, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Venezuela, among other countries, are worthy of praise.

In the overwhelming majority of the missions that have been accomplished, all expenses have been covered by the Cuban government.

Likewise, 35,613 health professionals from 138 countries have been trained in Cuba at absolutely no cost as an expression of our solidarity and internationalist vocation.

All Cuban cooperation workers have preserved their posts and their full salary in Cuba, together with all due labor and social benefits, just as the rest of the workers of the National Health System.

The experience of the Program More Doctors for Brazil and Cuba’s participation in it show that it is indeed possible to structure a South-South Cooperation Program under the auspices of the Pan-American Health Organization in order to promote the achievement of its goals in our region. The United Nations Development Program and the World Health Organization have described it as the main example of good practices in triangular cooperation and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

The peoples from Our America and from all over the world know that they will always be able to count on the solidarity and humanistic vocation of our professionals.

The Brazilian people, who turned the Program More Doctors into a social achievement and, from the very beginning, have trusted Cuban doctors, recognized their virtues and appreciated the respect, sensitivity and professionalism with which they have assisted them, will understand who are to be held responsible for our doctors not being able to continue offering their fraternal contribution in that country.

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