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**CUBAN DOCTORS IN BRAZIL: Appreciation, the greatest reward**

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For those of us who saw the first 1,214 Cuban doctors leave for Brazil in August and September 2013 - as part of the initial group of the Cuban collaborative mission More Doctors together with more than 10,000 who went later - it seems like time has flown by.

This is the sensation we felt this summer when those same doctors began to return home to Cuba for a well deserved holiday. Some couldn't contain their emotions as they stepped back on Cuban soil, describing their arrival as such, "You feel as though the distance is too great, that a lot of time has passed since the last time you saw your loved ones; that you need to touch your land and embrace the customs of your homeland..."

Work often covers - like a shield - the emptiness created by absence, sometimes minimizing it until the moment of departure. Some manage to contain it until just before landing, from which height they can make out the royal palms which appear slimmer.

Only those who have been far from the country can understand the loneliness one feels, even when surrounded by friends; the weight of separation from family, neighbors; the longing for the safe Cuban streets, the fraternal discussions in Spanish about the latest baseball game; warm nights sitting on the Malecón - awaiting the traditional cannon fire at 9pm - or in the main park of any Cuban town.

Dr. Ivía Ávila Aguilera said, "What keeps us going are their attitude, their appreciation and solidarity despite their poverty." Photo: Jose M. Correa.

All of these large and small voids are filled by the sacred mission to treat, protect and save the most humble people wherever they are, in the most difficult to reach and inhospitable places in any part of the world.

Dr. Iraide Ivette Lozano Hildago, comprehensive family medicine practitioner from the province of Holguín said, "We have had to face, as well as nostalgia for our loved ones, a new language, a new cultural and food situation,

diseases which no longer exist in Cuba but are predominant here; but honestly the satisfaction of contributing to healing a person who has never visited a health professional, simply due to the distance of their community, is immense."

Since their arrival in Brazil, Cuban doctors have treated a great number of people with chronic illnesses in advanced stages which had not even been diagnosed.

Dr. Wilma Zamora from Artemisa, despite having participated in previous missions to Guatemala and Bolivia, was impacted upon her arrival to the indigenous region of the Amazon. Photo: Maylin Guerrero Ocaña.

Another important topic, addressed by the Brazilian press, is the impact of Cuban doctor's treatment on their patients. On this issue, Dr. Ivía Ávila Aguilera, also from Holguín, stationed in the state of Ceará and part of a team which works in seven remote health centers with a population of approximately 1,350 people stated, "Many doctors are working in these conditions. What keeps us going are their attitude, their appreciation and solidarity, despite their poverty. Their way of showing appreciation is sharing with us the little they have, and making us feel more comfortable everyday."

For Dr. Yasmit Aday, who works in the municipality of Joinville (state of Santa Catarina) it has been "a great experience to work in this country, where so much competition exists between the private and public health sectors that sometimes it impacts negatively on the care the people receive. But Dilma Rousseff's government has been able to bring health care, through this project, with our doctors and those from other places such as Spain, Portugal and Mexico, to this sector which had been neglected," stated Aday.

One of the things which most astounded the majority of doctors interviewed was the social disparity which exists in Brazil. "There are many differences, people with a lot of money and others with nothing, who are isolated and discriminated against. The population is very thankful for and satisfied with our efforts, we treat everyone, without distinction, from the most humble to those from the most privileged class. At the beginning it was difficult, we faced some resistance from some sectors, but little by little we were able to integrate ourselves," stated Dr. Yamila Valdés, who also worked in the state of Santa Catarina, but in the municipality of Jaraguá.

Enrique Capote La O believes, "More Doctors is a complete success, because with our presence we have changed the health situation in the most remote and neglected areas." Photo: Maylin Guerrero Ocaña.

Shortly, Dr. Enrique Capote La O, from Santiago de Cuba, will begin counting the days he has left in his home town together with his loved ones - where he arrived after a year of hard work in Macapá, capital city of the state of Amapá, in the Amazon region - but at the same time anxious to continue treating his patients.

Upon his arrival, he reflected on the essence which distinguishes Cuban health professionals: their daily devotion. Therefore, in his opinion More Doctors is a success, "because with our presence we have changed the health situation in the most remote and neglected areas. Upon our arrival certain powerful groups unleashed a media war against our presence and the program implemented by the government of Dilma Rousseff. But the quality of our doctors and the nature of the work which we carry out have quashed this campaign. Reality has demonstrated the importance of More Doctors, and the thousands of people treated are the most concrete testament to this reality."

The opinions of the recent arrivals expressed to the national press reiterate that Cuban doctors enjoy global recognition, not only due to their professional training but also for their human quality and willingness to go to wherever there are those in need.