
Cuba's "Operation Miracle" celebrated throughout Latin America

23/07/2014



All over Cuba these days there are celebrations of the tenth anniversary of "Operation Miracle." The U.S. public knows almost nothing about this internationalized project involving the restoration of vision for enormous numbers of people.

Set in motion on July 8, 2004, Operation Miracle took shape within the context of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – otherwise known as ALBA – which Cuba and Venezuela established that year also.

Latin American and Caribbean nations joining ALBA engage in mutually beneficial trade-offs, or so-called solidarity exchanges, of educational and medical services, scientific projects, even commodities. ALBA exemplifies the role of Cuba and Venezuela in spearheading regional integration.

Under Operation Miracle, Cubans and Venezuelans alike have benefited from surgical eye care. Tens of thousands of foreign nationals have traveled to Cuba for ophthalmology care. And Cuban ophthalmologists serving in Venezuela took the lead in establishing 26 eye care centers there. Staffed by eye surgeons, nurses, technicians, and other physicians, centers cropped up throughout Venezuela. They serve Venezuelans but also vision-impaired people from 17 Latin American countries plus Italy, Portugal, and Puerto Rico. Then Operation Miracle organizers established centers in 14 Latin American and Caribbean nations. Ten years after its start the program operates in 31 countries, some in Africa and Asia.

The program serves people denied eye care because of poverty and/or geographic inaccessibility. By far the most common cause of reduced vision the teams deal with is cataract. They also provide treatment for glaucoma, strabismus, retina problems, and abnormal growths. Corrective lenses are provided. These far-flung ophthalmology services are available for patients at no personal cost. So too are the transportation and accommodations they utilize.

According to one report, Operation Miracle has improved or restored vision for 3.4 million individuals. That measure

of the project's effectiveness takes on additional meaning through World Health Organization data showing that 39 million people in the world are blind. These figures are actually within reach of one another, especially because most visual impairment – 80 percent – is preventable or curable. It seems that two formerly colonized, dependent nations have taken giant steps toward addressing a major cause of human disability.

Yet this story of human betterment plays out well beyond the range of inquiry and understanding of the great majority of U.S. residents. Maybe for minders of official orthodoxy this remarkable saga poses the threat of a good example. Historian Aviva Chomsky suggested that was the case in 2000 in regard to other Cuban health care achievements. Writing recently for Cuba's La Pupila Insomne web site, journalist Jose Manzaneda laments that international media are ignoring this "spectacular news."

Manzaneda focuses particularly on the Spanish El Pais newspaper as a purveyor of anti-Cuban bias. For example, in his recent report on international assistance to Haiti, El Pais writer Mauricio Vicent failed to credit Cuba for trying to fill Haiti's prominent health-care vacuum. Without mentioning Cuba, he contrasts Haiti's low indices of human development unfavorably with those of the Dominican Republic, a country with an infant mortality rate five times higher than Cuba's.

Manzaneda points out that, in fact, 11,000 Cuban health workers, mostly physicians, have served in Haiti for more than 16 years; 700 of them are there now. They have cared for 20 million patients, performed 373,000 surgical operations, and delivered 150,000 babies. Over 1,300 Haitian young people, recipients of Cuban government scholarships, have graduated from Cuban universities. Currently 322 Haitians are studying medicine in Cuba. Manzaneda refers to triangular South-South cooperation evident in Brazil's funding of three new medical centers staffed by Cuban doctors, also in Cuban-Venezuelan collaboration in remodeling or building 30 community hospitals.

In a 2008 letter explaining his decision no longer to serve as Cuba's president, Fidel Castro stated that, "My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas." Indeed, medical outreach to Haiti, Operation Miracle, and ALBA itself are ideas Cuba has advanced in its struggle. Additionally, there is the idea attributed to Cuban national hero Jose Marti that "Patria es Humanidad" – in English, homeland is humanity. Surely, as demonstrated by these down-to-earth, people-centered instances of international solidarity, Cuba's revolution remains true to its roots.