

Cuban solidarity: More than a dream

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Guy Malaterre, with a PhD in Law, has been working in solidarity with Cuba, its people and Revolution for almost forty years, and admires the tenacity and resolve of a country that continues to work to fulfill its dreams of social justice and solidarity with other nations, in an unequal and complex world.

Born in France in 1940, Guy has been a global solidarity activist all his life. For example, in 1962 he participated in the creation of the National Administration School in the Republic of Guinea (Conakry), an initiative launched by then President Ahmed Sékou Touré (January 9, 1922 – March 26, 1984).

The French native is also currently President of the Turquino Non-Governmental Organization, a member of the France-Cuba Friendship Association and Friends of the 1871 Paris Commune Association.

A friend of the most disadvantaged communities worldwide, his commitment and compassion led him to create audiovisuals about Cuba's solidarity efforts with other peoples around the world, including Cuban doctors in Pakistan, and the Children of Chernobyl in Tará.

Meanwhile, during the difficult period of the 1990s, he organized donations to be

sent to Cuban hospitals and other institutions and is currently preparing to publish a book about the extraordinary work of the island's healthcare professionals in Haiti, following the January 2010 earthquake and subsequent cholera outbreak which devastated the country.

Granma International took the opportunity to speak with this friend of Cuba during one of his visits to the island to attend the Fourth Comprehensive Adolescent Healthcare Conference Adoleca 2017, recently held in the city of Cienfuegos, and during which he gave a key note speech entitled 'Health and Solidarity.'

When did your relationship with Cuba begin and why?

I first visited Cuba as a tourist in 1978 with a group from the company I worked with at the time.

In Europe, the Cuban Revolution was seen as something new, with some young bearded men and two charismatic leaders: Fidel Castro Ruz and Ernesto Che Guevara.

I immediately felt at home on the island, surrounded by a joyful people, in this homeland of witty double entendre, which keeps on smiling even in the most difficult moments.

I returned the following year to get to know the country a bit better and learn about the lives of friends from Havana and Cienfuegos that I had met during my first visit. Many years passed after that, but I knew that I would return.

And I did in 2000, but this time not as a tourist. I knew about the economic problems that the country was suffering coming out of the so-called Special Period in times of peace, caused by the tightening of the economic blockade and fall of the socialist camp in Europe.

During a visit to the Juan Manuel Márquez Pediatric Hospital in the Havana municipality of Mariano, I had the opportunity to offer my solidarity by delivering a donation of medicines for Cuban children. I have visited Cuba around 40 times.

What do you admire most about the Cuban Revolution and its people?

Ever since I was young I have always supported the weakest in every battle. That's just how I am and will always be. But I feel even greater sympathy when it's a poor country, not afraid to challenge the masters of the world to achieve its freedom.

And I can't help but admire this country which, despite the economic blockade and lacking in resources, helps other poor countries around the world.

Solidarity runs in the veins of the Cuban people, its part of their DNA. Saving lives

is the ethos of Cuban doctors.

For you, what is the most important example of Cuba's solidarity with the so-called Third World?

You have to be poor to understand the needs of the poorest and help them in an effective way.

An unbreakable willingness to offer solidarity is extremely important, and no one was more willing than Fidel Castro. The creativity of this Caribbean nation builds a work of solidarity that is more beautiful every day.

Following devastating natural disasters, Cuba began to help victims of hurricanes and earthquakes. It sent its doctors to the most remote areas, where the poorest people lived. And its efforts didn't stop there, but continued with the creation of the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Havana to train doctors from poor countries and even disadvantaged communities in the United States. Something that had never been seen before.

And the best thing this small island did was create the Henry Reeve International Contingent of Doctors specialized in disaster situations and serious epidemics, the only one in the world trained to combat the most severe natural disasters or epidemics which affect underdeveloped nations in the so-called Third World.

Meanwhile, the Henry Reeve Contingent was the well-deserved recipient of the Dr. Lee Jong-wook memorial prize presented by the World Health Organization during its 70th Assembly last May, in recognition of its work tackling natural disasters and serious epidemics.

And Cuban solidarity has gradually developed effective tools to improve the lives of the poorest on this planet, not only during catastrophes and epidemics, but also by training doctors; restoring the eyesight of millions of people with the launch of the free eyesight rehabilitation program Operation Miracle; helping to design primary healthcare systems; and teaching millions of illiterate people to read and write through the Cuban developed 'Yo, sí puedo,' (Yes, I can) literacy method.

All of these tools are very unique, creative and are designed for poor countries with few resources.

You live in a rich country like France, but actively work to improve the lives of the poor, why?

Like I explained, ever since I was young I have supported the weakest. Luckily, to date, there are no geographic borders to feelings of social justice and solidarity.

There are people that support the poor even in a developed capitalist society. What is more I am Catholic and our primary duty is to help the poor and destitute.

Pope Francis is an example, a staunch defender of the poor, just like many prelates from Latin America and the Caribbean, like the Bishop of the Poor, Helder Pessoa Câmara, from Brazil, archbishop emeritus of Recife, a human rights defender and a prominent figure within liberation theology, or Óscar Arnulfo Romero from El Salvador, metropolitan archbishop of San Salvador.

Why do you believe that only solidarity can save mankind?

I was in Haiti twice following the devastating earthquake in January 2010 and during the grave cholera outbreak at the end of the same year. You were with me last time I was there and together we travelled around the island and saw all the suffering there. The misery in Haiti should make the world feel ashamed; the serious humanitarian situation in the country is proof of the lack of willingness by rich countries of the international community to help.

Cuba was the first to respond to the call by the United Nations to help victims of the earthquake and cholera outbreak.

The Cuban medial brigade's Active Search Groups were decisive in the struggle against the serious epidemic.

And in the cruel world we live in today, the poor continue to suffer, while economic crises and climate change will no doubt make life harder for them. The poor will continue to pay for the sins of others.

I truly believe therefore that solidarity is vital for humanity's survival, as Cuba has shown.

But we must continue to dream, salvation will come from the poor, or it won't come at all.

Last November 25 marked the first anniversary of the death of Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz. What has his figure meant to you personally?

A giant like Fidel never disappears. Securing his country's freedom in the face of the master of the world is his crowning achievement. Resisting the economic blockade alongside his people for over 50 years is his second greatest feat. And Cuba's solidarity efforts with poor countries go beyond any dream.
