
Cuba deploys 'world's finest medics' to Ebola-hit Sierra Leone

24/09/2014



Although Cuba has suffered from a full economic embargo imposed by the United States since the early 1960's, the island remains one of the best training grounds for health care professionals.

"Cuba is known the world over for its ability to train excellent doctors and nurses," WHO said, which has previously described the island nation as "a role-model" when it comes to its proactive medical approach and research.

Cuba's demographic statistics confirm that opinion: the country enjoys the highest average life expectancy in the Americas, at 78 years old. It also has the lowest infant mortality rate, at just 4.2 per one thousand babies born.

'Health a top priority'

"Health has always been the Cuban government's top priority," Latin American expert Jean Ortiz said. According to Cuba's National Statistics Office, the country has the highest share of doctors per capita – one per 137 inhabitants.

According to Stéphane Witkowski, the head of the Institute of Latin American Studies in Paris (IHEAL), Cuba is also "among the world leaders within the pharmaceutical sector", adding that it "houses the largest biotechnology centre in the world, with 20,000 staff".

Cuba's other strong point is the quality of its medical training. United Nations chief Ban Ki Moon recently described Havana's Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) as the "world's most advanced" school for medicine studies. The school has 11,000 students from more than 120 countries.

'Medical diplomacy'

Ever since the Cuban revolution in 1959, the country has a tradition of applying “medical diplomacy” to foster positive relationships with its neighbours and other countries. In all, the communist regime – led by Fidel Castro and his brother Raoul – has deployed more than 135,000 health care specialists to country’s struck by natural disasters and other humanitarian crises.

According to the Cuban health ministry, there are currently 50,000 Cuban doctors and health care specialists in 66 countries around the world.

One of Cuba’s most celebrated medical contributions include “Operation Miracle”, an eye surgery program launched in Venezuela in 2004 to offer Latin American low-income earners free eye surgery and optical care. In exchange for the Cuban contribution, Venezuela provides Cuba with oil.

Since the launch of the program, more than 2.8 million people have received free glasses and contact lenses. The program has since been extended to cover 14 Latin American countries.

Not free

Even though Cuba’s medical sector has been hit hard by the country’s strained economy, Witkowski said “the quality of the country’s doctors, and in particular its psychiatrists and GPs, remains indisputable”.

In Brazil, more than 10,000 Cuban doctors have been deployed to poverty-struck areas abandoned by their local colleagues. Earlier this year, Cuba also launched a malaria vaccination campaign in some 15 countries in West Africa.

But the expertise doesn’t come for free. Cuba’s massive expertise export – including also sport and education specialists – account for the largest source of revenue for the island, bringing in an estimated \$10 billion a year.

The Cuban medical mission in Sierra Leone is expected to last for about six months. WHO has said it hopes the move will “send a strong message of solidarity for Africa to the rest of the world and will catalyse additional offers of support from other countries”.

Cuba is joining the fight against Ebola by sending a 165-strong army of doctors and specialists to West Africa. Despite decades of financial hardship, the communist country remains at the forefront of the world’s medical expertise and know-how.

The team, which includes doctors, nurses, epidemiologists and intensive care specialists, is due to touch down in Sierra Leone in the beginning of October.

Margaret Chan, the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO), has hailed it as the “largest offer of a foreign medical team from a single country” since the start of the outbreak. So far, the deadly Ebola virus has claimed more than 2,600 lives in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.