

“Having our People Speak of us that’s the Greatest Recognition”

20/03/2015



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The Cuban Medical Brigade in Liberia is a united community. In these days tensions have eased a bit, and suitcases are readied to return. This careless Monrovia is not the one they met on the first days of stay. The market noise in the main streets announces, paradoxically, the calm. I talk with the doctors and male nurses, and I comment what they already know: Cuba was aware of them and they are expected there. But they refuse to be considered heroes, perhaps because they are indeed. The day Cuba’s decision was announced, a decision that was actually of its men, of these men, of traveling to the hot zones of Africa, where the Ebola virus was wreaking havoc, Cubans become a single family. We feel them as one of us, as parents, siblings or children, and we cared about their health, of their saved or lost patients. I have spoken to almost all of them and none of them look like the other. They are so different, as equal at some point: these men are Cubans of the Revolution. I want to present you the testimony of Doctor Leonardo Fernandez, 63 years old, specialist in Intensive Therapy and Internal Medicine, Master in Medical Emergencies, and Intensive Cares, assistant professor at the Medical Sciences of Guantanamo. It’s only him who speaks to me.

“My family is already used to, because I’ve been to several missions which I have completed, but also, we share values. It’s a short family, and all revolutionary: wife and two children, an aunt, two uncles. My wife is retired, one of my daughters is graduated in clinical laboratory, she finished a mission in Venezuela, and my son is ambulance driver. A short family, but very united.

WITH FEAR, BUT WITH COURAGE

“I believe in the youths. Why not! The youth is change, revolution. I tell my younger partners: I cannot think like you, I was raised in another time, in another society, with other needs, now there are other views, things are easier. The youth is change. What we must do is shape the values, principles. Most of the brigade members are young. The old ones are just four or five. And they have been very brave, mainly the male nurses, and people have worked hard, with fear, we are all scared, before departing, here... and we are still afraid, because we can get infected even in the last day here. With fear, but with courage. I believe the training we took in Cuba was very good, I’d say defining, because we were spoken with transparency and the truth, we were told the gold of our task here and the risks we run, we were trained well. I really appreciate the training of WHO, but the training we took in Cuba at the Central Unit of Medical Collaboration and at the Institute of Tropical Medicine Pedro Kourí didn’t fall

short. Then, we left knowing what we were facing, knowing the dangers, psychologically and technically prepared for the work to do. That was essential. And then the farewell given by the General (Raúl Castro’s speech), encouraged everybody.”

BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND SOLIDARITY

“When we arrive we found a country, a deserted city. There were almost no cars on the streets, neither people, no one to be seen. Even at the hotel where we had lunch and dinner, we only saw Cubans and three UN officials. We were commenting that just now, a big difference let tell you..., then we depart we that hint of pride: I did something to make this city crowded with people again. People in the street greet us, when we are out to dine or shopping, they treat us with great affection. The cars on the street stop to allow Cubans to pass.

“We saw the creation of the Unit. In the first week we entered with real fright, but as time went by we had to remember the assignment to a group since they wanted to do more than it was asked of us. We saw entire families die, children who were alone, the mom, the dad, and the three dead brothers, terrible... But we also saw other Ebola survivors when leaving they adopted the abandoned children. There is not better payment for us that to see that solidarity of Liberians among themselves.

We set out under a volunteer principle, and while in Cuba we were never spoken of any kind of reward. There was a draft in my hospital, and they warned us on the possibility of not returning and I raise my hand; nobody said a word about how much money we will receive, or any other offering. That is the concept of most of us.”

FEELING LIKE A HERO?

“Look, the media impact of this mission, the propaganda spread in Facebook, and Internet, has made some of us think that we have done something extraordinary which we joined as heroes. I think we have fulfilled a duty, with a revolutionary and medical ethics. What is the difference with those working in the forest of Brazil?, or those working in the forest of Venezuela who work single in indigenous communities for months?, what is the difference with those staying in villages of Africa? I’m lucky to have known part of Africa. I lived, for example, in the capital of Mozambique, I worked at a provincial Intensive Therapy, but were colleagues who lived in the border, in the forest, with temperatures of 48°... What is the difference? The difference is that this international mission had broad media coverage, carrying great importance, because you really need to be brave to step forward, and face it, it’s undeniable, but it was just one more task.

“We don’t need rewards, recognition is enough, the fact they agreed to have us here and that our people speak of us is the greatest recognition. If something material comes along, welcome it is, neither we have all needs covered, but it is not like I think I deserve it that I must have it. The Five were 16 years prisoners and they didn’t think of anything else at the moment.

“People need men who set the example. I’ve been lucky, the personal pride to have shared with Vilma, with Raúl, he may not remember it because I was doctor in the caravan with them. I have been next to Fidel three or four times, like I’m talking to you now. And they are true heroes and I don’t see them talking about their heroism, of their courage. You don’t need to be a hero to be respected. What I really like to be recognized for is that I am a revolutionary through and through, faithful to my principles. That’s enough. And there are plenty in Cuba. Those who wake up every day at midnight to bake bread I will eat in the morning, those who cut sugar cane for several years so we could have food, those are heroes no doubt about it.”

I RAISE MY HAND AND AFTERWARDS I WONDER WHAT FOR...

“I finished mission in Nicaragua in 1979, in the month of the victory of the Revolution. They triumphed on July 19 and on August 17 the first Brigade started working there. I remained there until 1981, in Puerto Cabezas, the Atlantic Coast. Imagine I was the doctor assigned by Daniel Ortega to Fagoth, the leader of the counterrevolution in the Atlantic Coast. When I attended the ALBA meeting I was excited, because Daniel hugged me at the end. It was in Nicaragua where I became a true revolutionary. When I was 17 years old, the Beatles’ songs were forbidden, neither going to a bar or staying late in the evening. And although my family had belonged to the 26 de Julio Movement that my dad and my sister were in the Sierra Maestra, I was a rebel, I didn’t understand. I liked rock and had long hair. But I was taught in the principles of the Revolution and one day they told me: there is this situation, I raised my hand and I began. And I learned how to value Cuba. I learned how to value the Revolution being outside Cuba. After that I never got registered on the collaboration lists, it seemed absurd to me. Until Fidel made a call to doctors to go to the United States, when hurricane Katrina hit. We were selected among the first 150. Then the Brigade grew up to 1 500.

In the end we didn’t go to the United States, for many reasons, but Fidel summoned the people in the Sport City that I still keep in my memory. But then came the earthquake in Pakistan and the floods in Mexico and Guatemala.

And the Brigade was split. I was sent to Pakistan, with a first group mostly military doctors and a few civilians with certain experience in this sort of events. Being there, Bruno Rodríguez requested my disposition to head straight to East Timor. And I was one of those who said “here we are”, I raised the hand thinking I wasn’t going to be chosen, because I was leaving for Cuba, and they chose me nonetheless. In East Timor I spent two years. Then the Haiti earthquake and volunteers were requested. When they speak of volunteers I raise my hand and ask the reasons later. Well the earthquake was on the 10th and by day 11th or 12th we were already in Haiti, and there I inaugurated the intensive therapy in campaign. Returning, as a reward, I was told that I should go on a “collaboration”, because my missions were all of war, of disasters, and I spent three years in Mozambique.

“A bit later this pandemic grew strong, I had heard speak of the Ebola, I know Africa, I had treated hemorrhagic fevers in Mozambique, and I raised the hand, and here I am. No big deal, actually? That’s life after all. While I have strength in me and they accept me, I’ll go wherever I must go.”