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With Fidel's eyes: 43 years after his visit to Sierra Leone (+ Photos)

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Freetown International Airport is more comfortable than Monrovia's, but travelling from there to the capital of Sierra Leone it is necessary to go around a wide bag-type bay. The journey by road may last, depending on the traffic, between three and four hours. There's another option: crossing by sea. The ferry is not available yet. Ebola epidemic prompted the interruption of the service. I do not know whether it is still the same vessel Fidel boarded along with the then President Siaka Stevens on May 7, 1972, in a quick visit to that country shortly after the establishment of diplomatic relations. But there's a boat, relatively comfortable that takes us in twenty-five minutes.





It's my first stay in the country, and I try to watch the landscape through Fidel's eyes. The reason for the trip cannot be more favorable: a press team has come to report the return, in some cases, and the work, in others, of the Cuban doctors and nurses fighting Ebola. In his words of greeting, Fidel noticed then: "I say it with all sincerity and frankness: "In this task of making homeland and to carry it out, you can decisively count on your Cuban brothers and sisters". Sierra Leoneans know that we haven't broken that promise.

The city features a mixture of comfortable homes and clay or zinc ones, as well as paved streets and dust or mud slopes, according to the epoch, the many cars and the even more numerous street vendors, with their baskets, bags, buckets or trays on their heads full of the most varied goods. Public transportation vans travel overloaded with passengers, indifferent to the danger of personal contact with some Ebola virus carrier. The city is not afraid, does not stay indoors, notwithstanding the epidemic infects, on average, seven people per day. Other diseases claim more lives and are older. The people do not seem to be afraid of this dice game. The government issues sporadic curfews and checks the temperature of drivers and passengers at key points of the city and its surroundings. People must wash their hands in a tank of water with chlorine, upon entering every establishment.







Monrovia is possibly bigger, but Freetown reserves two cards of particular charm: the beach coast –which is not integrated into the city in Monrovia–, and the mountains with buildings up and down. The two capitals lack a minimal system for water supply and sufficient power generation capacity. In recent years, the economic growth rate in Sierra Leone was high, one of the highest in Africa, should we understand that it started from very low levels (it was regarded as one of the poorest countries in the world), but Ebola stopped it and reversed everything. Investors went away.

“Ebola is the second crisis that we confront. After 11 years of war, when the country was progressing with normality, Ebola arrived”, Sierra Leone’s FM Samura M.W. Kamara told us in an exclusive interview with our press team. “We’re very grateful to the people and government of Cuba for this contingent of doctors it sent us”, he added.

The first group of our health workers has already returned to the Homeland, after being generous and courageous in the care to infected patients and at the same time, strict observers of protection rules. Yesterday, we talked to their national and British peers, who miss them now. Sierra Leonean Dr Rashida Kamara, from Waterloo, says they are wonderful, and know how to work in teams. Andy Mason, coordinator of British NGO “Save the Children”, wants them back: “The first thing I would tell Cubans is thank you for the time they were with us and secondly: “I hope we have the chance to work together again”.



Cuba was the locomotive of solidarity in the fight against Ebola. It arrived before other countries of bigger economic power (although there were NGOs and individuals in their personal capacity), and before those crusaders arrived, Cuban collaborators of the Comprehensive Health Plan were already working in Sierra Leone, by virtue of a bilateral agreement. Its members (family doctors and nurses) were the first to confront the disease, when security controls were not followed yet and there was very little knowledge of its characteristics. "We were scared at the beginning –explains Dr Jacinto del Llano Rodriguez, who has also served missions in Gambia and Venezuela, and works in a district of Freetown since 2011–, because it was a new disease that had no treatment. Women behaved bravely, remained in the front line and transmitted strength to men. They protested, when they were ordered to return".

On the outskirts of Freetown there's a unique hotel, named "Compañero", like that, in Spanish. Its owner studied in Cuba. On the side wall of the entrance ramp, a mural shows a color drawing of Fidel and the flags of Cuba and Sierra Leone. That facility accommodated Cuban doctors of the brigade fighting Ebola. Sulaiman Banya Tejan Sie, Secretary General of the Sierra Leone People's Party, says convinced: "When it is about Cuba, the Government and the opposition speak with one voice in Sierra Leone".





In his brief speech in 1972, Fidel had referred to the common roots shared by our nations:

Our two nations have much in common. We should not forget that, in past centuries, men from this region, from this country, were forcibly uprooted from their soil, enslaved and sent to the island of Cuba. There, they suffered colonialism and slavery, there; they identified themselves with those lands, formed their families and also helped form a nation. That new nation fought for its Independence very hard. Later many of the descendants of the men and women from those lands shed their blood for Cuba's independence, for the new Homeland.

Cuban culture transcultured elements from the African one. There were a babalowa (Santeria's high priest) and a palero (Palo Religion priest) among the doctors and nurses fighting Ebola outbreak. "Every day and every night I asked for us –told me the latter–, for our families and for all the brothers and sisters who were here". They did their thing when Dr Felix got sick. The departure time is near. In a few days we will be in Guinea-Conakry, where the battle is still bloody, but in Sierra Leone and Liberia we learned a little more about ourselves, about a part of our ancestors, about the need of solidarity.



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