

This week in Cuba March 15 to March 21, 2020



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By Charles McKelvey

In today's "This week in Cuba," we review, first, the battle in Cuba against Covid-19; secondly, an article in Granma providing a historical review of the development of the Cuban pharmaceutical product Interferon Alfa 2B; and thirdly, an interview with the Cuban President of the Popular Supreme Court.

(1) The Cuba battle against Covid-19

The government of Cuba announced at 6:00 p.m. on March 20 that, beginning in 72 hours, Cuba will deny entrance into the country of persons who are not Cuban citizens or residents, for a period of thirty days. The measure makes good sense. Confirmed cases of Covid-19 have accelerated in the world in recent days, and the death rate of infected persons have increased. Moreover, the infirmity has the characteristic that infected persons can show no symptoms for up to fifteen days, yet during the time they can be transmitting the disease. The majority of new positive cases in the world have been transmitted by asymptomatic infected persons. Cuba has had for some time a system of epidemiological vigilance at

airports and other points of entry, but asymptomatic infected persons cannot be detected by the system of surveillance.

With more than four and one-half million tourists per year, the denial of entrance to foreign tourists will have an impact on the economy, but the measure is being taken to protect the health of the Cuban population. Foreigners visitors presently in Cuba are not required to leave within 72 hours; they are able to leave any time during the thirty-day period. But they are being warned that they may find flights limited, because of airline flight reductions due to worldwide travel restrictions. In fact, many foreigners are leaving the island during the 72 hours prior to the beginning of the thirty-day restrictions on entry into Cuba, which can be extended, depending on conditions.

In addition, Cuban citizens will not be able to leave the country during the thirty-day period, a measure also designed to protect the health of the population. Cuban citizens and residents currently outside of Cuba can enter the country at any time during the thirty-day period; however, citizens and residents who arrive from the exterior during the period will be placed in health centers for fifteen days for observation. Many Cubans presently in the exterior are returning to the island.

The new measures were announced at a special two-hour edition of the evening new program Mesa Redonda. President Miguel Díaz-Canel, Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz, and Deputy Prime Minister Roberto Morales Ojeda led a team of various ministers of the Council of Ministers, which explained the measures, their rationale, and their ramifications. They noted that just a few days ago the number of international cases was much lower, which did not make necessary such restrictive measures, taking into account Cuba's capacity to detect persons with symptoms at points of entry as well as its capability to control transmission inside Cuba. But the recent acceleration of cases internationally has led the Council to establish the restrictions.

As of Saturday, March 21, Cuban has 21 confirmed cases of Covid-19, including one, an Italian tourist, who has died. All of the persons who tested positive are "imported cases," that is, they are persons who recently traveled to Cuba from abroad, or who had direct contact with someone who had. So far, there is not been local transmission. As of March 21, 716 patients are hospitalized with relevant symptoms for observation, 159 foreigners and 364 Cubans.

Because there is not yet internal transmission, the schools and universities remain open, but students and faculty are being educated to take appropriate hygiene measures, including frequent hand washing and the cleaning of frequently touched surfaces. Students or workers with flu-like symptoms are prohibited from entering any educational center; they are instructed to present themselves to their family doctor.

In addition to restrictions on entering and leaving the country, other measures are being taken. Cultural, social, and political events that involve concentrations of people are being canceled, postponed, or modified. And those in vulnerable populations, such as older persons or persons with respiratory conditions, are being advised to stay at home. A campaign of door-to-door surveillance of high-risk populations is being carried out. Working at home via Internet is encouraged. All persons are to avoid unnecessary travel within the national borders. Stores will be kept open, but store managers are to ensure that a large number of people are not inside the store at the same time. Restaurants and cafeterias will remain open, but managers should reduce their capacity by fifty percent and arrange seating with distance among the tables. In general, concentrations of people are to be avoided.

In the United States at the present time, there is valid concern for the lack of testing kits and other medical supplies; there is lack of confidence in the authorities of the nation; and there is uncertainty as to what to do. In contrast, in Cuba there is concern and the taking of reasoned measures by the authorities, who act with the confidence and the support of the people.

When nations with socialist governments are able to respond effectively to national emergencies, it often is mistakenly interpreted as a positive consequence of totalitarian tendencies. But in reality, it is a

consequence of the fact that the political process is under the control of the delegates and deputies of the people; and therefore, public discourse and public policies are not distorted by the interest of the great corporations and financial institutions in maximizing profit. A high level of understanding and consensus is possible.

One of the ideological distortions in the public discourse since 1980 in nations with capitalist economies has been the false claim that the state is inefficient and that production and social services, including health services, should be removed from state control and should be privatized. The Cuban journalist Cristina Escobar, in a television editorial commentary this past week, observed that recent global events with respect to the new coronavirus demonstrate that improvement of society through privatization is a myth.

(2) Interferon Alfa2B ratifies the international prestige that Cuban biotechnology enjoys

In a March 20 article in Granma, Yaditza del Sol González tells the story of the Cuban drug Interferon Alfa 2B, which is one of the most used medicines in the treatment of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her article is based on interviews with Santiago Dueñas Carrera, Vice General Manager of the Cuban-Chinese joint venture company Changchun Heber Biological Technology; Gustavo Furrázola Gómez, a biologist by profession and one of the founders of the Cuban Center of Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (CIGB); and Yai Cruz Ruiseco, Director of Importations of CIGB.

The story began in 1981, when Fidel met with the U.S. medic Randolph Lee Clark and asked him about the newest cancer treatments used internationally. Clark informed him of the Interferon that was being developed in the hospital that he directed in Houston, and following that encounter, two Cuban scientists traveled to Houston to receive some training. Later, the two were joined by four other Cuban specialists, and they traveled to the laboratory of Professor Kari Cantell, in Helsinki, Finland, who produced for the first time the Interferon molecule in 1972. Upon returning to Cuba, and with the support of other professionals, they worked in a small house converted into a laboratory, and after much work, they produced, on May 28, 1981, the first interferon in Cuba, using a technology very similar to that applied in the Schering-Plough pharmaceutical company in the United States. However, they began to develop their own particular aspects in the technology employed, which permitted them to arrive to a guaranteed practice scaled to production, through which they were able to attain 99% purity in obtaining the molecule of Interferon, a very high level. CIGB worked with the Cuban National Center of BioPreparation in putting the product in its finished form, and it attained a level of use in various countries.

In 2003, the Changchun Heber Biological Technology company, the above-mentioned Chinese-Cuban mixed company or joint venture, was created on the basis of the Cuban and Chinese common interest in the production and commercialization of biotechnological products. As a result, the Cuban Interferon Alfa 2B technology was transferred to the new mixed company for the fabrication of this antiviral, therapeutic medicine. The commercialization of the pharmaceutical product was initiated in 2007. Since that time, four million doses have been administered to more than 100,000 patients in China.

This is the background to the arrival of the Cuban Interferon to its important role in the present epidemiological situation in the world.

(3) President of Cuban People's Supreme Court

On Monday, March 9, in the evening radio-television new program La Mesa Redonda, program host Randy Alonso interviewed the President of the People's Supreme Court, Rubén Remegio Ferro. Remegio began with the observation that "The fundamental and permanent challenge that we have in the courts, our complex, difficult, but beautiful mission, is to resolve conflicts of diverse nature that emerge from the breast of our society, some more serious than others. It is a great responsibility."

Remegio pointed out what the Cuban Constitution says concerning the mission of the People's Supreme Court and the judicial system. Article 147 states that the function of imparting justice arises from the people and is exercised in the name of the people by the People's Supreme Court. Article 148 states that the courts constitute a system of state organs, structured with a functional independence from any other institutions of the state; and that the People's Supreme Court exercises the maximum judicial authority and its decisions are definitive. Article 150 states that the magistrates and judges, in their function of imparting justice, are independent, and they do not obey anything other than the law.

Remegio observed that this characterization of imparting justice in the name of the people of Cuba has an enormous transcendence, and it is linked to a series of values such as equality and justice in a general sense. It is an integral part of the quest for social justice that has defined our society since the triumph of the Revolution. Resolving the conflicts in the name of the people obligates the judges and the courts to do so with intelligence, with sensitivity. "We interpret justice in the context of the values that are characteristic of our people. Our people in general have a very clear idea of the things that constitute justice. So we put the people's sense of the just in the first place, When we speak of this characteristic, this value so important, it reminds me of a paragraph that is part of the legacy of Fidel, in History Will Absolve Me, in which he speaks specifically of the sense of justice that our people have. 'The people have a profound sense of justice. The peoples have a logic simple, but implacable. If any people would erase privilege and inequality, it is the Cuba people. My logic is the simple logic of the people.'" This is our task, Remegio says, being faithful to the logic of the people, the simple and implacable logic that demands justice.

Rubén Remegio Ferro, President of Popular Supreme Court of Cuba, speaking on the evening television-radio news program Mesa Redonda on March 9.

We will be back next Sunday with "This week in Cuba," reviewing the news emerging during the week from revolutionary Cuba.

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