

This week in Cuba / March 29 to April 4, 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; and secondly, Cuban medical brigades confronting Covid-19 in the world.

(1) The Cuba battle against Covid-19

During this past week in Cuba, one could not avoid being moved by the well-organized and coherent plan formulated and explained by the ministers of the Council of State, led by President Miguel Díaz-Canel and Prime Minister Manuel Marrero, a plan that is being carried out with the determined and patriotic support of the people. There has emerged a routine to the daily struggle. A press conference on national television every morning at 11:00 by Dr. Francisco Durán, National Director of Epidemiology of the Cuban Ministry of Public Health, reporting on the international and national developments of the previous day, reportedly a program with high television ratings; a meeting of the Council of Ministers every afternoon to evaluate the situation in Cuba, with highlights on evening television news at 8:00; and beginning at 6:30

or 7:00, an hour or an hour and thirty minutes dedicated to one aspect or another of the Covid-19 struggle, on the evening television-radio program La Mesa Redonda, which is reconfirming its role as an important space for information, news, and commentary.

Throughout the day, vehicular and pedestrian traffic is lighter than what used to be the norm, as the people are encouraged to stay at home, especially vulnerable populations, those who are older or who have health issues, except for work and for necessary purchases. Almost everyone wears cloth face masks, in the streets, in buses and cars, in stores, and in places of work. A few items (chicken, soap, and detergent) have become scarce, and when they are found available in a particular store, the people patiently form lines, maintaining a certain distance among themselves, as the country's leaders have repeatedly asked. By nightfall, the streets of Havana are virtually deserted. At 9:00 p.m., the people in Havana take to their balconies to applaud the dedicated work of the medical professionals and technicians, who without doubt are the heroes of the historic moment, along with the dedicated and competent ministers and vice-ministers of the government, whose leadership has been an important factor in forging one of Cuba's finest hours.

On Saturday, April 4, Dr. Francisco Durán reported that as of midnight of the previous day, Cuba has 288 confirmed cases of Covid-19. Of the 288 confirmed cases, six have died, 255 are hospitalized in stable condition, 8 are in critical condition, 3 serious, 15 have been discharged, and one has been evacuated to his country.

On Monday, March 30 and Tuesday, March 31, Durán reported the deaths of three Cuban citizens, two of whom were men of 63 years of age and the third a man of 75, all of whom had previous health conditions, bringing the number of deaths from Covid-19 in Cuba to six.

Duran also reported on the second event of local transmission in Cuba on March 29 in the Camilo Cienfuegos community in the municipality of Consolación del Sur in the westernmost province of Pinar del Río. From a married couple traveling from Cancún, Mexico, five cases were confirmed, three of them secondary cases. On April 1, the community was placed under strict measures of isolation. The residents are confined to the community, but the workers in nearby stockbreeding centers will be able to leave for work; and medical assistance, food, and other vital services are ensured. The secondary cases involve local transmission, in which a Cuban who has not traveled abroad infects another Cuban. This is the second event of local transmission, following an event the previous week in involving four secondary cases in the provinces of Matanzas, in which a tour guide infected by Italian tourists transmitted the disease to three family members and a work companion. In these seven cases of local transmission, a tie to foreigners or Cubans who have traveled abroad has been traced, so there has not yet been an autochthonous transmission, in which a tie to international travelers proceeding from infected areas cannot be established. Therefore, Cuba remains in the first or pre-epidemic phase.

At 8:00 p.m. Friday, April 3, the zone of El Carmel Popular Council, a ten block by eleven block area of the Vedado section of Havana, was placed under isolation for two weeks, as a result of the high incidence of Covid-19 positive cases in the zone. Eight persons tested positive, all as a result of contact with foreigners or with Cubans who had travelled abroad. Only residents who have essential activities outside the zone will have a safe-conduct, and they will be given a rapid Covid-19 test.

On the Friday, April 3, La Mesa Redonda program, the Minister of Public Health, José Angel Portal Miranda, reported that the brigades formed by medical students as well as mass organizations have been playing a central role in conducting door-to-door inquiries in order to identify persons with respiratory symptoms, so that they can be incorporated into the process of testing and treatment. Thus far, more than 9 million persons have been screened, and 48,947 persons with respiratory symptoms were identified in time and were isolated.

Portal Miranda reported on the so-called "rapid kits," which were imported during the past week. Cuba has begun using them, as a supplement to the more reliable tests being conducted in three Cuban

laboratories. The results of the rapid test are available in minutes, whereas it takes 24 hours for the hospitals where samples are taken to receive the results of the laboratory tests. However, the laboratory tests are completely reliable, while the testing with rapid kits is not definitive in a diagnostic sense. The rapid tests are used to determine localities where there may be a situation with the virus.

(2) Cuban medical brigades confront Covid-19 in the world

The April 3 Mesa Redonda aired a video interview with Midely Sánchez Rodríguez, Vice-Director of the Cuban Integral Medical Mission in Venezuela. She reported that more than twelve thousand Cuban health collaborators, who constitute two-thirds of the Cuban medical collaborators physically present in Venezuela at the present time, are working in the Integral Medical Mission, which works with local community leaders in serving more than 2 million Venezuelans. Sick patients are isolated and cared for in more than 300 integral diagnostic centers in the 24 states of the country. Sánchez declared, "We ratify to the Cuban government and to the Cuban Ministry of Public Health that it can depend on the more than 18,000 Cuban medical collaborators that today are physically present in the sister Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to prevent, confront, and contain this infirmity."

During the April 3 Mesa Redonda, Dr. Marcia Cobas Ruíz, Vice-Minister for Medical Collaboration, stated that Cuba is present in 59 countries with more than 28,700 medical collaborators, including 31 countries in Africa, 5 countries of the Middle East, six countries of the Caribbean, and also in other countries of Europe [and in Latin America]. She described how from the first moments that this epidemic began to accelerate, the Cuban Ministry of Public Health gave indications to the medical brigades, in the first place, to organize the measures of protection, and to decide the places where Cuban collaborators could be treated in case of some respiratory infirmity or infection. She reported that the ministry prepared facilitators, in order to train all of the collaborators, not only Cuban collaborators in the medical science, but also other medical staff whom Cubans work in different countries, as well as Cuban diplomatic personnel, and Cuban residents in the different countries. In addition, Cuban facilitators met with the governments, with the ministries of health and the health authorities, so that together with the local authorities, Cuban facilitators trained the professional staff of the institutions in which Cuban collaborators are working. Cuba, she declared, has trained all of its collaborators and has trained more than 97,000 professionals in the countries where Cuban collaborators are working. Materials and procedures of treatment, explaining the symptoms and the characteristics of the illness, have been sent. Dr. Cobas declared that the immense majority of Cuban collaborators have the necessary knowledge and are prepared to confront Covid-19, together with the health authorities in the countries where they work. In the great majority of the 59 countries, Cuban collaborators already working to confront the transmission of the disease; in others countries, they are working on prevention and control to try to ensure that there is not dissemination.

Cobas affirmed that this international presence is no more than the story of all these years of the Revolution. In 1960, an emergency brigade arrived in Chile after the earthquake. In May, 1973, Cuba sent the first brigade to Algeria, which was just the embryo. Cuba has sent brigades to more than 174 countries, with more than 400,000 workers that have completed more than 600,000 missions. Many collaborators have participated in three or four missions, and this has to do with a spiriting of assisting, strictly voluntary, with a sense of duty to confront an epidemic, an earthquake, or a floods She considers the greatest example were the brigades that went to Africa to confront Ebola, an invisible enemy; during that time, 17,000 Cuban workers expressed their willingness to go to Africa.

And Cobas notes, there was the example of the creation of the Henry Reeve Brigade on October 19, 2005, created by the Commander in Chief, organized in the Havana sports complex, where one thousand doctors were ready to depart for the United States to confront the effects of Hurricane Katrina. And since that time, Cuba has organized 28 Henry Reeve medical brigades, in which 7000 workers that have participated in 22 countries. She declared that Cuban collaborators that today confront the pandemic are like those collaborators of the Henry Reeve Brigades.

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