

This week in Cuba / May 31 to June 6, 2020



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By Charles McKelvey

In today's "This week in Cuba," we review, first, a tweet by the Cuban president calling the U.S. government immoral and arrogant; secondly, a Declaration by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations, condemning terrorism and political manipulation; thirdly, the increase in Cuban Covid-19 cases during the past week; and fourth, the initiation of clinical trials in India for a Cuban drug for the treatment of Covid-19.

(1) Cuban president calls U.S. government immoral, arrogant, and perverse

On June 3, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a press statement announcing the addition of seven new entities to its Cuba Restricted List. They include one financial institution (FINCIMEX), three hotels, two scuba diving centers, and one marine park for tourists. The statement claims that these entities are controlled or owned by the military. Some 200 entities were previously on the list. U.S. persons are prohibited from engaging in direct financial transactions with entities on the Cuba Restricted List. The action continues the Trump administration's hostile policy of intensifying the economic,

commercial, and financial blockade of Cuba.

The press statement makes reference to a “Castro dictatorship” and to the “repressive and abusive Castro regime.” It declares, without offering evidence, that the Cuban government denies freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and human rights. Such declarations display a profound ignorance of the Cuban political process of people’s democracy, which was first developed as an alternative to representative democracy in the early 1960s, institutionalized in the Constitution of 1976, and reaffirmed in the Constitution of 2019, all of which were conducted with exceptionally high levels of popular participation. Such a level of ignorance of another country by a U.S. government official who is responsible for formulating foreign policy is stunning. One wonders if the ignorance is genuine, or if it is feigned for political purposes.

The following day, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel wrote in his personal twitter account: “The imperial government applies new sanctions that adversely affect the Cuban people, while the people of the United States are severely hit by the pandemic and by an increase in racism. What an immoral, arrogant, and perverse government!”

(2) Ministry of Foreign Relations condemns terrorism and political manipulation

On June 1, the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations emitted a declaration rejecting the libelous inclusion of Cuba in the U.S. Department of State’s list of countries that supposedly do not fully cooperate with the U.S. efforts against terrorism.

The Declaration maintains that the list is arbitrary, lacking in foundation or authority, and without any international backing. As is known, its only purpose is to defame and coerce governments that refuse to subordinate their sovereign decisions to the will of the government of the United States.

The Declaration asserts that the principal argument used by the government of the United States is the presence in Cuban national territory of members of the peace delegation of the Army of National Liberation (ELN) of Colombia. It notes that Iván Duque assumed the presidency of Colombia on August 7, 2018, and representatives of that government sustained dialogued with Cuba and with the ELN peace delegation, with the intention of continuing the negotiations that had begun during the previous administration of President Santos. However, following an attack on the School of Police Cadets in Bogotá on January 17, 2019, which Cuba unequivocally condemned along with all other terrorist acts, the government of Colombia took legal action against the ELN peace delegation, and it broke with the peace negotiations. In addition, the Colombian government decided to not recognize the Protocol of Rupture, which had been signed during the peace negotiations. The Protocol of Rupture was signed on April 5 by the government of Colombia, the ELN, and the six guaranteeing nations, including Cuba. The Protocol established the safe return of the guerrilla delegation to Colombia, in the event of the breaking of the dialogue.

The Declaration states that the Cuban government sustained and it sustains today that the Protocol ought to be applied, a position that is amply backed by the international community. Because the Protocol has not been applied, the members of the ELN peace delegation remain in Cuba.

The Declaration further states that beyond the impasse concerning the Protocol of Rupture of the Colombian peace negotiations, the accusation by the government of the United States that Cuba does not fully cooperate in U.S. efforts against terrorism is totally unfounded. Concrete evidence exists, some of it very recent, of Cuban bilateral cooperation with the United States in the struggle against terrorism, such that the designation by the Department of State is a deliberate act of distortion of the truth.

(3) Cuban Covid-19 cases increase during the week

During the past week, Cuba has experienced an increase in the number of active Covid-19 cases and in the daily-average of newly confirmed cases. However, the scientific advisors to the government believed that a new upsurge is not beginning, that the situation is under control, and that a gradual decline in the number of active cases will occur. Since the beginning, Cuba has undertaken an epidemiological investigation of all confirmed cases, in order to seek to identify the source of each infection. As a result of these investigations, the sources of the infections have been identified in 97% of the cases. Therefore, the reason for the recent upsurge is known. What occurred was that a worker in a store in Central Havana continued to go to work in spite of having symptoms, hiding the symptoms from superiors. This person infected other workers at the store for a period of six days. One of the infected store workers was asymptomatic, without awareness of being infected. He infected his wife, who also was asymptomatic. She infected several co-workers at the pharmaceutical laboratory where she works. In addition, one of the store workers infected others in the transportation provided for the workers. The overwhelming majority of new cases in the past ten days have been related to the case at the Central Havana store.

The scientific advisors and the nation's leaders emphasize that the Central Havana store event illustrates the importance of compliance with the health measures. Symptoms should be reported immediately. And in addition, since one can be infected without knowing, it is important for everyone to constantly comply with the measures concerning social distancing, hand washing, and the wearing of masks.

During the last fifteen days, all of the new cases have been concentrated in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas, with rates of infection of nine per 100,000 population in the case of Havana, and three per 100,000 in Matanzas. In contrast, the provinces of Artemisa and Ciego de Ávila have had infection rates of less than one per 100,000 population in the last fifteen days. The remaining eleven provinces and the island municipality Isla de Juventud have not had a single newly confirmed case in the past fifteen days. This control of the virus in most of the national territory gives the scientists and the leaders confidence that the measures are working, and that the nation will be able to contain, if not eliminate, the virus. They are hopeful that the Covid-19 disease will not become an endemic in Cuba in the future, with periodic outbreaks. Meanwhile, the advisory team continues to observe daily, and it has begun to reflect on a partial relaxation of the measures as the number of active cases reaches an anticipated gradual decline.

As of midnight June 6, Cuba has 244 active cases, up from 151 the previous week. The number of active cases on a given day is the number of accumulated cases presently hospitalized, excluding those who have been discharged or have died. In spite of the increase, the number of active cases remains less than the most favorable projections made in early March.

The total number of confirmed cases in Cuba as of midnight June 6 is 2,191. Of these confirmed cases, 1,862 have been discharged from the hospital, 83 have died, and two have been evacuated to their countries. The Cuban fatality rate of 3.9% is less than the world rate of 6%, as a result of Cuban early detection of cases as well as effective treatment procedures, using medicines fabricated in the Cuban pharmaceutical industry.

(4) A Cuban drug is tested in India

The Cuban daily newspaper Granma reported on June 2 that a clinical trial for the Cuban drug Itolizumab will be initiated in six hospitals in India. The drug, a monoclonal anti-body, is a possible treatment for serious cases of Covid-19. It is being produced by an Indian drug company, Biocon, in collaboration with the Center for Molecular Immunology of Havana. The two entities have maintained bilateral relations since 2006, developing antibodies for autoimmune diseases.

South-South cooperation has been a fundamental principle of the Third World project and the Non-Aligned Movement since the 1950s and 1960s. The idea is that the nations of the South ought to develop complementary and mutually beneficial trade among themselves, bypassing the unequal exchange inherent in North-South trade. It is especially good to develop South-South commerce in high-technology and high-value added industries, such as the pharmaceutical industry.

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