



Disaster Management in Cuba: Reducing the Risks

- ▶ Editorial
- ▶ Top Story
- ▶ Headlines in Cuban Health
- ▶ Cuban Medical Literature
- ▶ Intl. Cooperation Report
- ▶ Spotlight
- ▶ MR Interviews
- ▶ International Voices
- ▶ Announcements

International Cooperation Report: Cuban Medical Teams in Global Disaster Relief

By Gail A. Reed

It may have come as a surprise to some that Cuba would be among the first to offer help in the wake of the terrorist attack on 9/11—its airports were immediately opened to U.S. planes stranded in the skies, medical teams and blood donations were readied. But the reaction was in fact common practice from the Cubans over the years, their response coming quickly in the face of disasters around the world since the early 1960s.

Cuba's first international health brigade was dispatched in 1960 to Chile, where cities lay buried beneath the rubble of a catastrophic earthquake. Martyred Chilean President Salvador Allende—then a member of the legislature—was in Havana at the time. He later recounted the experience to Cuban health workers. "I was here when Prensa Latina (news agency) reported that vast cities in my country had been devastated by the quake. And I watched as Cuba mobilized...and beyond the (fraternal) attitude of the government, the obligation of its leaders, I witnessed your attitude—the attitude of the people of Cuba. I saw the trucks rolling by (carrying) the anonymous generosity of people who gave what they needed for themselves." (1)



Cuban volunteers at a Havana blood bank alter the earthquake in Peru, 1970.

This theme—the poor helping the poor—is at the heart of Cuba's South-South cooperation with other developing countries today, and permeates much of its disaster relief efforts. In 1970, in nine days, 106,000 Cubans voluntarily gave their blood for the victims of the earthquake that hit Peru.

Most often over the years, Cuba has sent disaster relief in the form of medical brigades, as shown in the chart below. Sometimes the aid has gone to countries with which Cuba's government had no diplomatic relations. And frequently, the teams have found themselves among the first to arrive, before the disaster itself has subsided. Cuban doctors still talk about their hands trembling from the after-shocks as they treated the wounded in Nicaragua's 1972 earthquake. And they have also found their rush to assistance has made for strange allies: two Cuban physicians told **MEDICC Review** they were ferried over flood waters in US Army helicopters after Hurricane Mitch hit Central America.

Examples of Cuban International Disaster Relief 1960-2000

1960	Chile	Earthquake, 5,000 dead	Medical team
1970	Peru	Earthquake, 60,000 dead	Medical team, 6 rural hospitals, 106,000 blood donations
1972	Nicaragua	Earthquake, 5,000 dead	Medical team, food, medicines
1974	Honduras	Hurricane Fifi, 2,000 dead	Medical team
1990	Soviet Union	Chernobyl disaster program	17,733 children treated in Cuba through October, 2004
Date	Brazil	Radiation poisoning	52 patients treated in Cuba
1998	Central America	Hurricane Mitch, 30,000 dead and disappeared	Medical teams
1998	Haiti	Hurricane Georges	Medical team

1999	Venezuela	Torrential rains, mudslides, 9,000 dead	Medical team
2000	El Salvador	Dengue epidemic, 10,000 cases over 16 wks.	Medical team, advisors and equipment

Treating victims of catastrophes in Cuba itself has played an important part in the disaster relief program. Since 1990, over 17,000 children and several thousand adults suffering from the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident have been cared for at Havana's Tarara seaside rehabilitation center and other facilities (See MR Interview with Dr. Julio Medina this issue). The experience accumulated in such a massive effort was also applied to 52 Brazilian children, flown to Cuba after they were exposed to radiation at a dump site in Rio de Janeiro.

Cuba's experience in confronting its own health emergencies has also been put to work in other countries. The formidable lessons of the national campaigns against dengue fever were the basis for collaboration with health authorities in El Salvador (2000) and Honduras (2002), stemming the epidemics in those countries. (2)

In the case of Honduras, not only were Cuban physicians already on the ground to bolster the effort, but 485 young Hondurans home for the summer from Havana's Latin American Medical School spent 45 days of their vacation going door to door in Tegucigalpa. With the support of the Honduran Health Ministry and later joined by medical students from the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), they hauled fumigating equipment on their backs up and down the sprawling hillsides surrounding the city center, also educating families on ridding their homes of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, carrier of the disease. (3)

The most recent example of Cuban assistance in the face of disaster is, of course, Haiti. This is an experience worth further study, considering that over 500 Cuban health personnel were already stationed across the country when the disturbances of February, 2004 and Tropical Storm Jeanne this fall rocked the small nation. Many of the Cuban physicians were deployed in the most remote areas, or in the epicenter of the emergencies: the city of Gonaives, where Haiti's independence was first declared. Despite their own precarious situation, and despite offers to return home, all of the physicians decided to stay through rebellion and even occupation.



Cuban doctors evacuate the wounded during disturbances in early 2004.

Over 11 million tons of food and medicine were shipped in just prior to the collapse of the government of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in February, but no one could foresee the devastation of Jeanne. Once again, the Cubans kept on working.

The fact that they were already in place before the storm has put them in a unique position to make more profound contributions to the city's process of healing. In one case, family doctors have brought together hundreds of children orphaned or simply traumatized by the disaster, working with psychologists to bring some sense of stability and optimism back into their lives

(see Mental Health of Children and Teenagers in Emergencies and Disasters, this issue). In Haiti, as elsewhere, the poorest of the poor is where disasters strike the hardest—and where the majority of Cuban doctors are also to be found, constituting a safety net rarely available to these populations.

References

1. Allende, S. "Charla ofrecida a los empleados del Ministerio de Salud Pública." *Tribuna Médica de Cuba*. Año XXII. Nos. 459-462, marzo-junio, 1961: 13-19.
2. For a full report on the El Salvador experience, see Lemus E R, Estévez G, and Velázquez, J C, *Campaña por la Esperanza: La Lucha Contra el Dengue*, Havana, Editora Política, 2002.
3. Author's interview with Eladio Valcarcel, Special Advisor to the Rector, Latin American Medical School, Havana, November 18, 2004. 

