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## **Cuba Graduates First Class Of Doctors For World's Poor**

*by LADB Staff*

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Cuba's Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM) graduated its first class of new physicians Aug. 20 in a ceremony headed by Presidents Fidel Castro of Cuba, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and Martin Torrijos of Panama. About 1,600 graduates from 28 countries got their diplomas, culminating six years of innovative medical education. The school makes doctors of some of the poorest of the world's people, sending them off in their final year of school to serve in the most remote and underserved regions of their countries.

Castro told the graduates, "You, evidently, are some superdestabilizers of the hemisphere; you're destabilizing pain and suffering." Castro was playing off US accusations that he and Chavez were destabilizing the region with this and other initiatives aimed at improving the lot of the poor.

Chavez continued that theme with his remarks to the class, telling them that training doctors is a way of "advancing by the ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas) road," a reference to Venezuela's alternative to the US-promoted Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

The school, utilizing the facilities of all of Cuba's medical schools, currently has 12,000 foreign students in all stages of medical education. Among them are 489 from Mexico and the US, about 5,500 from South America, 3,244 from Central America, 1,039 from the Caribbean, 42 from North Africa and the Middle East, 61 from Asia, and two from Europe. Among them are children of the disappeared from the Pinochet period in Chile and students from indigenous communities. The education is free, but students are accepted with the understanding that they will return to work in their own communities once credentialed.

While not daring to criticize the quality of the medical training the Cuban reputation is outstanding in this regard medical societies in many countries from which the students come have fought the school and its objectives as a threat to their powers and prerogatives. Cuba is well-known throughout the world for sending highly competent doctors to serve populations that the local associations neglect (see NotiCen, 2005-04-21).

The graduation, political in the sense that any official event in Cuba is political, provided the background for an important get-together for leaders from the Caribbean and South and Central America. The presence of Panama's President Martin Torrijos signaled the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations between Panama and Cuba. A rupture occurred in 2004 when then President Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004) precipitously released the would-be Castro assassin and convicted terrorist Luiz Posada Carriles, along with three others, Guillermo Novo, Pedro Remon, and Gaspar Jimenez. Cuba broke relations with Panama on Aug.26, 2004 (see NotiCen, 2004-09-16, 2004-09-23).

### *Healing a diplomatic rift, deepening political alliances*

Upon taking office in September 2004, Torrijos went to work to repair the diplomatic damage. Consular relations were restored in December of that year. Torrijos' place of honor at the graduation celebrated the signing of normalization documents by Cuban Foreign Relations Minister Felipe Perez Roque and his Panamanian counterpart Ricardo J. Duran. An important feature of the rapprochement is that the documents subscribed by the two governments specify "the respect for the political system of each state and for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination, and noninterference in the affairs of the states, and other principles of international proclamations by the charter of the United Nations." The statement signals Panama's position as the US seeks to reassert its flagging influence in the region. It goes on to affirm that "cooperation between both countries will contribute to foment effective Latin American integration."

The occasion also marked Torrijos' first foreign trip since assuming office. Panama had about forty new doctors in the graduation class, all from poor backgrounds, and most from indigenous districts, who invited him to attend the ceremony. It was an important political moment for Hugo Chavez as well. His first remarks upon being greeted by Castro on his arrival were to announce, "We have been hard at work visiting almost all of the Caribbean countries and taking note of their oil needs, and we have already drawn up an agenda to work on this morning."

The Venezuelan president also announced an upcoming meeting in Jamaica to work on integration efforts under ALBA. The meeting with Prime Minister Percival Patterson concerns Jamaica's participation in Petrocaribe, the plan to supply nations in need with Venezuela's oil. In the meantime, Chavez and Castro had about twenty heads of state, government officials, and other public figures from around the region, in Cuba for the medical-school graduation, with whom to discuss these and other matters.

Among the invitees were Ecuadoran Vice President Alejandro Serrano, Prime Ministers Roosevelt Skerrit of Dominica, Ralph Gonzalves of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Baldwin Spencer of Barbuda, Denzil Douglas of Saint Kitts and Nevis, Keith Michel of Granada, and ministers from Barbados, the Bahamas, Guyana, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Santa Lucia, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guatemala, and Surinam. The occasion also served as a showcase for Cuba-Venezuela cooperation and as a firm reminder of the breadth and depth of the ties between them.

From the town named for the Nicaraguan hero Augusto Cesar Sandino in Pinar del Rio Province, the two presidents, surrounded by their top officials, broadcast a marathon edition of *Alo, Presidente*, Chavez's Sunday TV show. The town was chosen not for its name but because Venezuelan soldiers built 150 houses there to replace homes destroyed by hurricane Ivan. The new development is known as Villa Bolivar. More than 800 houses were lost to Ivan in 2004 and to Isadore and Lilly in 2002.

Amid jokes about how long the two notoriously long-winded leaders might stay on the air, they responded to US accusations concerning their destabilizing influence. Chavez said that Cuba and Venezuela are opening up a new road and that, "if the world is going down the bad road that imperialism is trying to impose, we will have no exit." Of the US and its recent attempts at isolating the countries, he said, "Threats will do them no good, not even invading us; it would serve only to make them regret it." Castro warned as the program began that it could last 14 hours; Chavez said

the good news was that there was a full moon. Both wore their traditional military uniforms. The two strayed from the program format (reportedly, there was a format) and conversed in detail about joint projects, including Operacion Milagro, which will bring ten million patients from Latin America to Cuba for cataract surgery during the next ten years. They spoke also of continuing and increasing the training of doctors, thousands every year, to be deployed among the disadvantaged of their countries.

Concurrent with the graduation events, US televangelist and Republican politician Pat Robertson called for the assassination of Chavez in his Christian Broadcast Network program The 700 Club. In his graduation remarks, Chavez said his country would soon emulate the Cuban school in Venezuela, and together "we will form, forge, and graduate, to begin with, around 100,000 doctors for Latin America and the Caribbean." He said he had looked at the economics of the project and concluded that, with the participation of other countries, 200,000 Latin American doctors could be trained in the next ten years.

Chavez made it clear in his rousing speech that this graduation was as much the commencement of a new stage in the Bolivarian revolution as of 1,600 medical careers. He said with true unity, with political, social, economic, productive, and energy integration, the "dreams of our liberators," Simon Bolivar and Jose Marti, would be realized. The graduates responded, "Venceremos!"

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