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Cuba Thwarts U.S. Policy To Play In World Baseball Classic, But Is Barred From Donating Winnings To Katrina Victims

by Mike Leffert

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The just-played, first-ever World Baseball Classic (WBC) is an international championship originally planned to be the real World Series, after the world began to notice that nations other than the US were playing better baseball than were the teams of the US major leagues. But the games were almost scuttled after the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced in December 2005 that Cuba's application to play in the 16-team tournament had been rejected because of concerns that the Cuban government would gain financially if Cuba won.

Cuba attempted to eliminate the concern. The Cuban Baseball Federation announced that any money it won would be donated to victims of Hurricane Katrina, but to no avail. The US government did not accept the offer, nor was it moved by taunts from President Fidel Castro that the US was afraid to play against Cuba. Eventually, US policy did cave in to world opinion that roundly castigated the Bush regime for its conduct, and Cuba was allowed to play on US soil. Prior to the reversal of policy, the International Baseball Federation (IBAF) threatened to withdraw its sanction of the tournament, and Puerto Rico threatened to withdraw as a host country.

In reversing itself, Treasury spokesperson Molly Millerwise said an agreement had been reached that "ensures no funding will make its way into the hands of the Castro regime." Cuba did not win the tournament. A formidable team riding on the shoulders of past Cuban teams that had won the Olympic gold medal in 1992, 1996, and 2004 played well and reached the finals in San Diego, California, but was defeated by Japan. The last time Cuba failed to make it to the final of an international tournament was 1951, when it was third in the World Cup of Baseball. With a second-place win in the tournament, Cuba was entitled to 7% of the profits and still intended to donate its winnings as planned.

But a US Major League Baseball (MLB) official turned the issue into a political football. League spokesman Patrick Courtney told the media, "Cuba doesn't have a cut of the proceeds of the tournament, and there is nothing for Cuba to donate." Cuba thus beat the US in world opinion.

The team of amateurs who returned to the island having outlasted everyone but Japan received a hero's welcome at home. Many thousands of Cubans lined the streets to cheer them on. Castro personally greeted each player and told the team he had watched every game they played on TV "and enjoyed, along with millions of citizens, your feats over there." He said their participation was a "victory against the unfair exclusion" of the team. It remains unknown how much money Cuba would have donated to the hurricane victims.

The tournament was played in Puerto Rico, Asia, and the US, at a cost of about US\$50 million, so profits could turn out to be nonexistent. The major leagues are scheduled to publish their accounts

within 120 days. An editorial in Granma, the official Cuban newspaper, concluded, "Cowards and the organizers can turn a blind eye to Cuba's honorable gestures, but the people will not." The US team was never a contender. It was knocked out early in the tournament.

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