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Cuba Foreign Initiatives in High Gear While Window Remains Open

by Mike Leffert

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Cuba's Foreign Ministry has in the past week announced an extraordinary number of foreign-policy initiatives with other nations, and particularly with island nations, from neighboring Saint Kitts and Nevis to the far-off Solomon Islands. The initiatives appear to aim at Cuba's sharing its experience in transforming its agricultural sector to reduce its vulnerability as a sugar-export economy and creating an atmosphere of solidarity in dealing with global warming.

Island nations are very much endangered by the effects of climate change and rising tides, and many have already confronted severe damage as climate is altered by the effects of global use of energy, pollution, and the like. The latest outreach to the Solomons actually began more than a year ago when the Solomon Star newspaper reported Cuba had invited the islands to revive discussions on providing Cuban doctors and training local doctors. Cuba already has about 400 doctors working in relatively nearby East Timor.

The matter was first brought up in 2000 when Pattison Oti, then foreign minister, visited Cuba to discuss how Cuba could help the Solomons with its shortage of local doctors. In 2006, a memorandum of understanding on the issue was signed, with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare acknowledging Cuba's doctor-to-population ratio of 1:180, "a remarkable achievement," and Cuba's rating as first in the world in health services. In February 2007, Oti was again in Cuba to sign a number of agreements, among them one for Cuba to provide 50 scholarships to educate a class of 50 Solomon Island medical students.

Said Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque at the signings, "We are small islands that confront the challenges of this condition, and we confront the common dangers of the threats of global warming. We live and try to develop ourselves in an unjust, unequal world that makes the right to development and peace difficult." Perez Roque emphasized that the agreements were in the spirit of solidarity and goodwill and had nothing to do with market access or any other kind of political or economic gain.

Closer to home, Saint Kitts and Nevis further cemented its relationship with Cuba with a visit from Prime Minister Deizil Douglas. Saint Kitts and Nevis is seeking help with an agricultural economy based on 350 years of exporting sugar to Great Britain, its former owner. It sees, accurately, Cuba as having successfully dealt with this kind of transition. "We're having difficulties and are trying to transform a sugar-dependent economy to services, in particular tourism. We must share experiences and learn from each other," said Douglas. The country is also looking at Cuba's successes with urban agriculture for food production, particularly organic farming at which Cuba excels, and job creation. Saint Kitts and Nevis also benefits from Cuba's medical outreach.

Many from these islands have availed themselves of specialized medical services through Operacion Milagro. The islands established diplomatic relations in 1995 and have benefited ever since. The outcome of this visit will have Cuban technical people working closely with counterparts in Saint Kitts and Nevis on the specific proposals. Natural leader solidifying relationships Cuba has, by virtue of its own experience, emerged as a natural leader, or at least a rallying point, for small island states. Executive director of the Cuba Research and Analysis Group (CRAG) Louis Head told NotiCen this is "not a good time to be an island nation economically speaking. Cuba has tremendous resources compared to these tiny places. No one else reaches out to such countries in any positive way, and small island nations have fallen by the wayside gradually ever since decolonization. But the worsening of conditions in many places due to the implementation of free-trade agreements and the elimination of quotas makes those countries really fertile ground for strengthened ties, especially in the Caribbean." Head notes that Cuba is "certainly well-equipped" to assume this role.

Cuba is also solidifying its relationships beyond islands in the Caribbean neighborhood. In March, First Vice President and Foreign Minister of Panama Samuel Lewis Navarro and Perez Roque concluded the first meeting of the Comision Binacional Panama-Cuba, which resulted in signing several accords. They include agreements on: * Asistencia Juridica Mutua en Materia Penal. This strengthens ties in juridical and justice-system matters. * Traslado de Personas Sancionadas. This is an extradition treaty. * Exchange of Information and Technical Consultation on Issues of Documentation and Historical Diplomatic Archives. * Mutual Recognition of Studies, Degrees, and Diplomas of Higher Education.

The importance of the meeting goes beyond the agreements. The two countries have been at odds in recent years on a number of matters, including Panama's freeing international terrorist Luis Posada Carriles, whom they had in custody on charges related to the intended assassination of Fidel Castro (see NotiCen, 2004-09-16 and 2004-09-23). Perez Roque indicated the countries have put that behind them. "I consider that today is a sign of the excellent state of the relationship between the two countries and that a stage has ended with the beginning of the formal re-establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries," said Perez Roque. "Today the complete normalization and relaunching of the political relationship, and respectful dialogue, are sealed."

As a further demonstration of strengthened ties, on March 3, Panama's President Martin Torrijos officially opened the Centro Oftalmologico Omar Torrijos Herrera at the Luis Fabrega Hospital in Veraguas province, 250 km west of Panama City. Twenty Cuban specialists will staff the facility. The clinic is named for Torrijos' father, the renowned Maximum Leader of the Panamanian Revolution. At the other end of the isthmus, Elpidia Moreno of the International Relations Department of the Federacion de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) visited Belize to expand relations with women's organizations there and to coordinate mutual projects. She met with Joan Musa, president of the Center for Visual Impairments of Belize. Musa is also first lady. Moreno met with Vice Minister for Human Development Anita Zetina and with the heads of the feminist wings of the major political parties, as well as with Carol Fonseca, head of the government's Department of Women. With these and other officials, agreements were made for exchanges, including training courses within the framework of the Federacion Democratica Internacional de Mujeres (FEDIM).

On other diplomatic fronts, Cuba announced in March the pending arrival of a high-level military delegation from the People's Republic of China. There was not much detail about this visit, but it is clearly military related. Also, Vietnam hosted Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, chief of international relations of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC). He was received by Nguyen Van Son, his homologue in the Vietnamese Communist Party. Ramirez de Estenoz said the purpose was to identify common objectives for developing relations between the two countries. A key topic they covered was oil exploration. Vietnam is interested in the way that Cuba has become 50% oil self-sufficient and in Cuba's recent successful campaign to reduce energy consumption through innovative technology and strategies. Also discussed was Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the implications for improving productivity and product quality.

The pace of these foreign-policy initiatives has drawn the attention of Professor Nelson Valdes, a Cuba specialist, himself a Cuban, who teaches Cuban politics at the University of New Mexico. Valdes finds the key to the timing of these events in the text of a recent conversation between Cuban President Fidel Castro and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. The occasion for the conversation was a surprise phone call Castro made to Chavez in the midst of Chavez's live *Aló Presidente* broadcast in late February. Castro speaks to Chavez about "taking advantage of the short time we have left." He tells his friend, "Time cannot be overlooked. In my opinion we have limited time." Valdes analyzes this to mean that the US is finally becoming aware of its loss of influence in Latin America, and the impending trip of US President George W. Bush to the region signals that the window of opportunity for change might be closing as the US seeks to reassert itself in the hemisphere.

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