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Opponents Criticize Chavez's Cuban Advisers

by Guest

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[The following article by Mike Ceaser is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the September 24, 2003, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

Something new is blooming amid the skyscrapers and traffic of downtown Caracas. But whether it is fresh vegetables or communist infiltration depends on whom you ask. During recent months, President Hugo Chavez's administration has launched several new programs to improve literacy levels, cultivate organic gardens in the capital, and assign doctors to low-income neighborhoods.

But, however admirable the initiatives may appear, they are drawing fierce criticism in Venezuela's heated political climate because the people leading the projects are Cuban advisers and doctors, workers sent as part of Cuba's solidarity program. The doctors are among 2,500 other Cuban doctors working in countries across South America and Africa.

Chavez's opponents, who have long accused him of wanting to impose "Castro-style communism" on this oil-rich nation, charge that the Cubans' real goal is to teach communism, to spy, or even to provide paramilitary training. Chavez has given critics reason to believe that he would like to copy Cuba's communist system. He once described the island nation as "the sea of happiness," and he has also met frequently with his close ally, Cuban President Fidel Castro.

When dozens of Cuban dissidents were jailed in a crackdown in April (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24), provoking international outcry, Chavez remained silent. The Cubans "are prepared to indoctrinate," said retired Vice Adm. Rafael Huici, founder of an organization of retired military officers. But that is not evident at the half-hectare organic garden in downtown Caracas, where beets, lettuce, mint, and other crops are flourishing.

Rafael Lira, 46, a former bus driver who was unemployed until he joined the nine-person farming cooperative, said he is earning a steady income from his share of the produce sales and has even lost weight thanks to exercise and a healthier diet. He said the program's Cuban advisers are not spreading propaganda and that he wouldn't be receptive anyway. "Nobody imposes their ideology on me," Lira said. "We Venezuelans have had our principles and liberties established for 200 years."

After four years of Chavez's "Bolivarian revolution," Venezuela is still definitely capitalist. Even the Cuban-inspired urban gardens finance themselves through produce sales. Chavez denies having any intention of turning Venezuela into a communist nation, but says he wants to learn from Cuba's internationally recognized achievements in such fields as literacy and health. Urban gardens are also common in some Cuban cities.

Although it is a large and fertile nation, traditionally Venezuela has imported most of its food a practice Chavez says he wants to change. Cuban agronomist Anastasio Garcia Capote, who manages

the farm plot where Lira works, as well as another being prepared nearby, says there is potential for implementing intensive farming on 1,000 ha of land, in and near Caracas, and that this could boost Venezuela's fresh vegetable consumption. "By producing here, they can sell (vegetables) more cheaply," Garcia said.

Doctors live and work in poor barrios

The agronomists are perhaps the least controversial of the more than 1,000 Cuban experts working in official government aid programs. Cuban advisers assist with a national literacy program, and Cuban doctors are living and working in poor neighborhoods. Chavez's critics have attacked the programs furiously, saying that the urban gardens' produce is contaminated by exhaust from nearby traffic and that the doctors are unqualified and prescribe medicines not approved in Venezuela.

They also say that, instead of bringing more foreign doctors, the government should be investing in the nation's hospitals, which often lack medicine and other basic supplies. The fiercely anti-Chavez media have highlighted alleged cases of malpractice by the Cuban doctors. So far, however, little evidence has been produced to support the most radical accusations, and the scheme also has many supporters.

"In my 40 years, there's never been work like the work the Cubans are doing," said Paula Bastidas, a member of the health committee in the San Agustin neighborhood where several Cuban physicians live and work. Before the Cubans arrived, she said, residents had to travel long distances to public hospitals and poor patients often had to wait many hours before being seen.

Across town, one of the Cuban doctors, Dr. Suisberto Fernandez, works in the Macayapa neighborhood, high on a hill above downtown Caracas. He and other doctors in the neighborhood said that many low-income residents suffer from respiratory diseases, hypertension, and skin infections. There is also a high rate of adolescent pregnancy. Fernandez said the Cubans are well aware that, if Chavez falls, they will almost surely have to leave. "We came here to help these neighborhoods," he said. "If we get kicked out, then [the neighborhood] will be like it was before marginalized because no Venezuelan doctor ever comes here."

On Aug. 21, a court ordered the Cuban doctors replaced by Venezuelans or qualified foreigners. But the government, which says it has been unable to find Venezuelans willing to work in poor neighborhoods, has ignored the order. Back at the urban gardens, Xiomara Hernandez, a business administrator, was buying lettuce, which she said cost less and lasted longer because it was organic. She pointed out that Venezuela has also received advisers from many different nations; the gardens have also received help from experts from Chile and Senegal. "Venezuela will never become like Cuba," she said. "All the good things that come from any part of the world are welcome."

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