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Nicaragua: Cuban Medical Professionals Continue Working In Bluefields

by Deborah Tyroler

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At present, 16 Cuban specialists work at the Sandino Regional Hospital which serves the 42,000 residents of Bluefields and thousands more in surrounding villages. The hospital director, three doctors and all the nurses are Nicaraguan. The Cubans in Bluefields are part of a mission comprised of 120 physicians, nurses and medical technicians sent to Nicaragua by Havana in 1980. According to Health Minister Ernesto Salmeron, the Cuban presence in Bluefields is vital. Albert Brooks, Interior Ministry delegate in Bluefields, said, "Doctors from Managua don't want to come to this little town..., but the Cuban doctors come here to suffer and to rejoice with us." The majority of Bluefields residents are black, conservative English-speaking Protestants. Many are descendants of runaway slaves. While local residents expressed extreme animosity toward the hundreds of Cuban construction workers based in Bluefields prior to the defeat of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the February 1990 elections, the physicians have been well received. Indeed, when Cuban President Fidel Castro appeared to be ready to send the physicians home, contra rebels in the area provided guarantees for their safety. Dr. Tomas Linton Barrera, head of the Cuban medical team, said ideological differences proved unimportant because "our work benefits the whole population. Whoever gets sick, gets sick regardless of whether they think like us or not." President Violeta Chamorro de Barrio's government, with a shoestring budget and too few experienced public health workers, also asked the Cubans to stay. The government provides the Cubans with housing, food, gasoline and the equivalent of US\$10 each a month. A Soviet medical mission left the Chinandega hospital in northwestern Nicaragua this year when the Chamorro government could not meet their demands for salaries, paid vacations and round-trip tickets to Moscow. East German doctors left after Germany was reunited. The Cuban mission sends about 50 critical cases to Havana for treatment every month. Nicaraguan hospitals are chronically short of equipment, medicines and other supplies. Dr. Linton and his team must make do with available equipment and supplies. He said, "We've been without X-ray film for 20 days at a time. When we had a trauma situation, we had to send the patient to Managua." (Basic data from Associated Press, 11/25/91)

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