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Havana Healing: Castro's Minority Scholarship Plan

Cuban President Fidel Castro hugs an unidentified child during his visit to Riverside Church in Harlem on Saturday, Sept. 9, 2000, in New York, where he first announced a plan to provide scholarships to minority students in the U.S. AP Photo/Jose Goitia.

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When Cuban leader Fidel Castro visited Harlem last fall and delivered a six-hour speech at Riverside Church, he spoke out against globalization and denounced "the existing economic and social order of the world" and the "consumption patterns" of rich nations. The *jefe maximo* reprimanded the US for failing to take care of its poor and disadvantaged, and offered to provide six years of free medical education and training in Cuba for hundreds of low-income minority students in the US. The Congressional Black Caucus recently decided to take Castro up on his offer, and is putting together a board of admissions and developing a selection process.

"This appears to be an excellent opportunity to improve health care in our Congressional districts, as well as a chance to fulfill a life's dream for students who couldn't otherwise afford it," said Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY). Rep. Jose Serrano (D-NY), who has been campaigning to end the 41-year-old US blockade against Cuba, said that his district office in the Bronx has begun to contact high school counselors to identify potential student applicants.

The program, which is still gestating, is to be administered by the Congressional Black Caucus. Recruits must be high school graduates under the age of 26 and can be of any minority background (not only African American); they will receive free medical education and training, plus free textbooks and room and board. Beneficiaries would have to return to their communities to practice medicine after being trained in Cuba. Some

students could be registered in the program as early as this spring.

While proponents say the program will be an excellent means of addressing the dearth of minority students in America's medical schools, critics see Castro's offer as another political ploy or propaganda measure at a time when US-Cuba relations are rather strained. The Castro regime recently accused the US of encouraging terrorism after Washington moved to compensate the families of three Cuban American anti-Castro activists whose plane was shot down by Cuba in 1996, using \$96 million from Cuban assets frozen in the US since 1959.

Cuban National Assembly speaker Ricardo Alarcon told the official Prensa Latina news agency that the move was an act of "aggression," and that Washington has no right to disburse the assets. "The US government is stimulating with authorization, further terrorist acts and provocations," which eradicated any chance of a bilateral dialogue, Alarcon charged. In response, Cuba has cut off direct telephone links with the US, and, in a rather absurd turn of events, the Cuban National Association of Afghan Hounds expelled Vicky Huddleston, an American dog-owner who resided in Havana. The dog club stated in a letter that Huddleston, who allegedly insulted the communist nation, was asked to leave "out of a sense of patriotism and support for our people," but her dog was allowed to stay: "In no way was this decision aimed at her dog, Hassan Havana Huddleston, who is still welcome in our association, as is her co-owner, Ana Maria Gonzalez Macuran."

Despite all this, Castro has made overtures to the West, and recently hosted US financier David Rockefeller and a delegation of investment bankers. Some are skeptical of these overtures, including Castro's offer to train minority medical students. A spokesperson for US Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Baralt (R-FL) called the offer a "propaganda ploy" from a nation that is hoping to have the embargo lifted.

Fernando Garcia Bielsa, a spokesman for the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, said the offer was "a goodwill gesture" from a country that has too many doctors and regularly sends medical assistance to impoverished areas of the world. "Ours is a poor country without a lot of resources, but this is one way we can help other people," he said.

"Offering free education to poor black students in Mississippi and other poor areas is a brilliant idea by the leader of the revolution, Dr. Fidel Castro," said Eugene Godfried, a journalist and Radio Havana host who has lived in Cuba for nearly 30 years and is now a visiting Fellow in the Africana Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts. "Dr. Castro is a visionary. He has always been close to the struggles for the liberation of people of African descent and other poor, exploited nationalities in the US. Fidel has learned about the struggle of brothers and sisters here through the Black Caucus -- and is now giving them a helping hand. Cuba has been giving aid to Africa -- in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau -- and has exchange programs for African students. The US is not an exception. The position of the revolution is that international solidarity must include the US. The capitalist system here has created an internal colonialism, a marginalization of the youth, and sheer exploitation of the masses. Fidel has taken a visionary position. He is an internationalist. Had he not helped Africa, the face of South Africa would be different. Mandela could still be in the dungeons. The medical students will come to defend life in the US. It's to be applauded."

Representatives of the American Medical Association have voiced concern

about the quality of education and training American students would receive in Cuba, noting that they might have a difficult time getting licensed upon returning to the US. According to a report by the National Board of Examiners, only 48 percent of the graduates of foreign medical schools passed the final stage of their US licensing examinations in 1999, compared to 92 percent of those who graduated from schools in the United States or Canada.

Supporters of Castro's scholarship plan say that Cuba's medical instruction programs are world-class. "Cuba produces very good doctors. They historically have a great reputation," said Tinoa Rodgers, Media Director for Riverside Church, where Castro first made his offer last fall. "Cuban doctors may not have the best technology, but they have very good bedside manner, good relationship with patients. They're trained as physicians whose mission is to heal, [they're] trained to do the most with the least, given their lack of resources."

"13,500 of Cuba's 64,000 doctors are black," notes Lisa Brock, co-editor of *Race and Empire: African Americans and Cubans Before the Cuban Revolution* (1997). "We in the US only have 17,000 black doctors. Thus Cuba, with a population of 11 million, has nearly 13,500 black doctors, while we here with a population of 290 million have only [a few] thousand more."

According to the *New York Times*, after four decades of Castro's revolution and despite the loss of a \$5-8 billion subsidy from the former Soviet Union, Cuba still has free education and health care, the highest literacy rate and lowest infant mortality rate in Latin America. The average life expectancy is now 75, up from 60 in 1959. The number of university graduates has quadrupled under Castro, and Cuban doctors are pioneers in new research in biotechnology and vaccines.

African American interest and cultural exchange with Cuba goes back to at least the late 19th century when Frederick Douglass and fellow abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet actively supported Cuba's struggle to overthrow Spanish colonial rule. In 1881, a full-page picture and story on Frederick Douglass appeared on the front page of *La Fraternidad*, Cuba's leading black revolutionary newspaper. Many African Americans have also felt a special bond with Cuba's post-revolutionary government, which many feel improved the lot of black Cubans.

"African Americans have a promise of home in Cuba that they never dreamed of -- a country that recognizes the blood and sweat of the black folks that built it," said novelist Walter Mosley in a report on Cuba released by TransAfrica in 1999. "Cuba at least accepts that there is history beyond Europe; that Africa has also been a partner in raising the New World."

"A black man in Harlem has a shorter life span than a man in Bangladesh. Cubans have a much higher life span," said Elombe Brath, a political activist who met Castro during his visit to Harlem last year. "What Cuba has achieved in the field of medicine is unbelievable. In forty-two years, the Cubans have shown that even with [pressure from] the colossus -- with what Jose Marti called the 'monster from the north' -- they were able to create excellent healthcare services. Cuba has sent more medical workers to Africa than world health organizations. They will train people from around the world in Cuba and then send them back home -- they don't take part in the 'brain drain.'...Fidel shows us how a representative of humankind is supposed to be. Cuba's the only country out there standing for our liberation. When Castro came to power, he told his people that the blood of

Africa flows through the veins of every Cuban and every Cuban is at least a mulatto. 'If we study history,' he said, 'we'll find that Spain was conquered by the Moors. So we have an interest in Africa and African liberation.'"

For more information about Cuban medical scholarships, contact the Congressional Black Caucus.

First published: March 1, 2001

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