

CUBA AND HAITI - ISLANDS WORLDS APART

Just 80km of Caribbean Sea separate them but even before the earthquake the contrasts for people born on the islands of Cuba and Haiti could not be starker.

As Seamus Milne wrote in the Guardian in January: "While Haiti's infant mortality rate is around 80 per 1,000, Cuba's is 5.8; while nearly half Haitian adults are illiterate; the figure in Cuba is around 3%. And while 800 Haitians died in the hurricanes that devastated both islands last year, Cuba lost four people."

For many in Latin America Cuba is a beacon to what human beings can achieve when they have opportunities for healthcare and education and a say in their future. Haiti, Cuba's sister island in the Antilles is a harrowing picture of the human suffering caused by years of foreign intervention and economic policies moulded to benefit elites, multinationals and foreign economic interests imposed on a people from the outside.

Why? Because where a ruthless blockade and aggressive US policies have failed in Cuba for 50 years, they have successfully maintained a stranglehold on economic interests in Haiti.

That so many people died in Port au Prince on 12 January can not solely be attributed to the aching poverty which exists there. Blame also lies squarely at the feet of the international community and especially the US for their actions in the country in recent years. While many press reports focus on the humanitarian disaster and suffering caused by the quake, they do a disservice to the Haitian people by not exposing the policies that caused the poverty and exacerbated their suffering in the first place.



A Cuban flag flies alongside the Haitian flag outside a field hospital



Port-au-Prince following the earthquake

Just 30 years ago, the country was self-sufficient in rice. But the IMF bullied the government into accepting loan conditions which slashed import duties on the crop. Local agriculture and livelihoods were decimated as the island became a dumping ground for heavily subsidised US rice. Haiti's Arbonite Valley, once home to thriving communities of farmers, now has one of the highest child malnutrition rates in the country. Impoverished families have had little choice but to leave their homes and land and move en masse to the overcrowded capital. Here they live cheek by jowl in makeshift dwellings, trying to eke a living in a country where fifty per cent of the population earn less than US\$2 a day.

Haiti has never been forgiven for the slave rebellion that won it independence from French rule in 1804. Debt, US backed dictators, coups and military intervention have been a constant in the last 200 years. The country's first democratically elected President; Jean-Bertrand Aristide was twice removed by US backed coups and troops, the most recent just six years ago in 2004.

Today the role of US troops on the island is again under scrutiny. Aid agencies have complained that in the first few vital days following the quake precious hours were wasted when the airport was closed to them. US forces gave priority to landing more troops, evacuating US citizens, and allowing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to visit. There is no doubt more people died as a result.

There are now 13,000 US troops in Haiti, US ships blockade the island to prevent refugees seeking

sanctuary in the US. It is not paranoia to view this militarisation in the region cynically. Just last year Colombia handed over seven military bases to the US and President Zelaya of Honduras was removed in a US supported coup. It will come as no surprise to hear that oil reserves have been found in Haitian waters.

Haiti undoubtedly needs immediate aid and long term support to rebuild itself. But it is the Haitian people who should control this. Their aid should be without soldiers or strings attached. What good is the \$100 million loan that the IMF has offered to a country already crippled by debt repayments and is likely to come on condition of public service cuts, wage freezes and privatisation?

String free aid has been Cuba's priority since it began supporting public health initiatives in Haiti in 1998. Over the last 12 years, 6,094 Cuban doctors have volunteered in the country, treating 14 million people and saving 230,000 lives. Four hundred Cuban doctors working in Haiti lived through the terror of the quake and emerged from the ruins within hours to begin treating their Haitian brothers and sisters. They set up field hospitals in the rubble – treating more than 2,000 people a day and a total of more than 25,000 survivors by 26 January.

Cuba, a poor blockaded country itself, donated 10 tons of medical supplies. Its doctors are now administering 400,000 tetanus jab vaccines donated by the Cuban government. A further 60 specialists with experience in similar international catastrophes arrived within 24 hours carrying drugs, medical supplies, food, serum and plasma. Today they are working to save lives alongside 400 Haitian doctors – all graduates of Cuba's Latin America Medical School (ELAM).

This support will continue long after the TV crews have moved on. Cuba's focus is on helping Haitians to rebuild their country and provide essential services for their people. In Cuba today, 640 Haitian students are on scholarships, 570 training to be doctors at ELAM.

This support has been at best ignored and at worst distorted by the world's media. Fox News carried an early story chastising Cuba for doing nothing to help. Here in the UK, the Evening Standard ran a scurrilous story suggesting that Cuban medical brigades were needlessly amputating survivor's limbs!

Those with the facts, like for example, Dr Mirta Roses, Pan American Health Organisation Director, tell a different story: "...it was an enormous advantage that they were already here before the quake. They know the situation, the

Health Ministry, the Haitian people...theirs is an enormous contribution."

Just as Cuba is supporting Haiti, the Cuba Solidarity Campaign has been supporting Cuba's work in the country by publicising their work and the fund set up to support Cuban doctors working in the country.



Cuban medics are treating 2,000 patients a day

SUPPORT FOR CUBAN MEDICAL BRIGADES IN HAITI

Over £20,000 has already been raised by UK unions and CSC local groups and members for Cuban medical brigades working in Haiti. You can donate to this fund via CSC by calling 020 8800 0155 .

Alternatively send a cheque made payable to CSC, marked Haiti Earthquake to CSC, c/o Unite Woodberry, 218 Green lanes, London, N4 2HB

All moneys received go directly to support Cuban medical brigades working in Haiti.

PROMOTE CUBA'S WORK IN HAITI

'Fireflies in the Night' a 20 minute short film about the work for Cuban trained doctors in Haiti is available from CSC, who can organise a showing and speaker in for your local group/branch. Please contact CSC on on the number above or email communications@cuba-solidarity.org.uk