

2021 Nobel Peace Prize Nomination for the Cuban Henry Reeve Brigade's remarkable international health work, particularly during the global COVID-19 pandemic

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Dear Members of the Nobel Committee,

My name is Dr. John Kirk, and I am a full professor of Latin American Studies at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. I have studied the role of Cuban medical collaboration (mainly in the Global South) for the past 15 years, and am the co-author of Cuban Medical Internationalism: Origins, Evolutions and Goals (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and author of Healthcare Without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism (University Press of Florida, 2015). For my research I interviewed some 270 Cuban medical personnel (both in Cuban and in the field), and in 2010 accompanied a contingent of the Henry Reeve Brigade in El Salvador after Hurricane Ida.

I write at the request of the Council of Canadians organization to nominate the Cuban medical internationalism programme of the Henry Reeve Brigade for the Nobel Peace Prize of 2021.

Rationale:

Many will have first heard of the Henry Reeve Brigade (named after an American citizen who fought for Cuban independence in the 19th century) during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014. Cuba was the first country to respond to a WHO appeal for support, and some 256 medical personnel, specialized in emergency medical services, participated (In all, some 5,000 Cubans volunteered their services). The goal of the Henry Reeve Brigade (with over 4,000 highly specialized medical personnel) is to send humanitarian missions anywhere in the world where there is a natural disaster or epidemic.

This medical brigade was initiated in October 2005, when more than 2,000 Cuban medical professionals tended to over 1.7 million people in the Kashmir region of Pakistan following a devastating earthquake that killed over 70,000 people. Unlike international NGOs that stayed just a short time, the Cubans remained in Pakistan for eight months. Moreover, after leaving they donated 32 field hospitals and provided medical scholarships for 1,000 Pakistanis to study medicine in Cuba at the Latin American Medical School (ELAM). The last of these doctors graduated seven years ago.

Since 2005 medical contingents of the Henry Reeve Brigade have participated in dozens of missions. In all, a total of 46 countries (as well as five territories in the Caribbean) have received medical care from some 9,000 Cuban medical professionals. In the past they have supported people affected by floods, earthquakes and hurricanes (dozens of missions dealing with natural disasters in Latin America, Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean). In addition, they have sent medical staff to deal with the Ebola outbreak (mentioned above), and that of cholera in Haiti (2010, when they treated 400,000 patients). Their response to those in need has indeed been exceptional.

More recently Cuba has responded to requests from dozens of countries requesting Cuban medical support in the fight against COVID-19—and their response has indeed been exceptional. However, these most recent initiatives by no means represent an isolated

response. Indeed, at the time of the outbreak of COVID-19 there were already 28,500 medical staff from Cuba working in 58 countries.

The most recent initiatives; the Cuban response to COVID-19

At the time of writing the entire planet is dealing with the massive challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most countries are facing significant social costs in terms of the number of people affected and dead. Cuba is no exception, and yet has managed to respond to dozens of requests for support—in part because it has the best rate of patients to medical staff in the world. In all some 3,700 Cuban medical professionals (of whom 61% are women) have provided service in 37 countries, tending to over 300,000 patients. The Cuban medical staff dealing with the COVID-19 crisis belong to 47 Henry Reeve contingents and have been sent to Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

The Cuban response to COVID-19 has been exceptional since the first brigade left four months ago. While several brigades have returned to Cuba after completing their medical commitments there, as of late August 2020 some 37 remain in 26 countries and five Caribbean territories. It is expected, as has been past practice, that they will remain as long as their services are required.

Medical international collaboration: a longstanding tradition of Cuba

While the Brigade has only been formally in existence since 2005, the longstanding commitment to medical cooperation by Cuba can in fact be traced back to 1960, when the first medical mission went to Chile following an earthquake there. Since that time more than 400,000 Cuban medical professionals have provided emergency assistance in over 160 countries.

In fact, Cuba has been involved in several other key areas of medical support. The Latin American Medical School in Havana, for instance, was established 15 years ago to provide (free) medical training for students, again mainly from the Global South. In all, some 29,700 medical doctors have graduated. Also worth noting are the (free) medical support provided in Cuba to some 25,000 children affected by the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown (1987-2011), and the Operation Miracle ophthalmology programme providing free eye surgery to date to over 4 million patients in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa.

While this nomination proposal is focused specifically on the actions of the Henry Reeve Brigade for the past fifteen years, this background information is provided to add some context to emphasize the longstanding tradition of medical internationalism.

In sum:

As can be seen, in the past 15 years the Henry Reeve Brigade has provided medical service around the globe, responding to requests for humanitarian assistance, regardless of political ideology. (Indeed, in September 2005 Cuba had offered to send 1,200 medical specialists to New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, an offer rejected by the Bush administration). Their work fighting in dozens of countries against COVID-19 is part of a decades-long process of solidarity, largely with impoverished countries in the Global South. While the most recent example of this outstanding contribution (3,700 medical personnel in 37 countries) to international health and development needs remains the response to COVID-19, the Henry Reeve Brigade has proven its commitment to supporting the

medical needs of those in need, wherever they are. Who else has made such a contribution to international health?

For these reasons I officially request that you consider awarding the Henry Reeve Brigades of Cuba with the Nobel Peace Prize.

I wish you well in your deliberations.

Sincerely,

John M. Kirk (kirk@dal.ca), Professor of Latin American Studies