

COOPERATION SPIRIT IS PUT TO THE TEST IN HAITI

The news reported from Haiti describe a great chaos that was to be expected, given the exceptional situation created in the aftermath of the catastrophe.

At first, a feeling of surprise, astonishment and commotion set in. A desire to offer immediate assistance came up in the farthest places of the Earth. What assistance should be sent -and how- to a Caribbean nation from China, India, Vietnam and other countries that are tens of thousands of kilometers away? The magnitude of the earthquake and the poverty that exists in that country generated at first some ideas about probable needs, which gave rise to all types of promises that are possible in terms of resources that later on are tried to be conveyed through every possible way.

We Cubans understood that the most important thing at that moment was to save lives, and we are trained not only to cope with catastrophes like that, but also to cope with other natural catastrophes related to human health.

Hundreds of Cuban doctors were working there, along with quite a number of young Haitians of humble origin, who had become well trained health professionals, an area in which, for many years now, we have been cooperating with that neighboring and sister nation. Some of our compatriots were on vacations, while other Haitians were being trained or studying in Cuba.

The destruction caused by the earthquake exceeded all calculations: the humble clay and adobe houses -in a city with almost two million inhabitants- could not stand. The solid government facilities collapsed; entire blocks of houses crumbled over their tenants who, at that time of the day -almost at dusk- were inside their homes; and they were all buried, dead or alive, under the rubble. The streets were filled with people claiming for help. The MINUSTAH -the UN contingent- the government and the police were left without leaders or headquarters. Soon after the earthquake, the main task of those institutions made up by thousands of persons was to know who were still alive and where they were.

The immediate decision adopted by the dedicated Cuban doctors who worked in Haiti, as well as by the young health professionals from Haiti who had graduated in Cuba, was to establish contact among them, know about each other's fate and wonder what were the resources available to assist the Haitian people in the midst of that tragedy.

The Cuban doctors who were on vacation in Cuba as well as the Haitian doctors who were taking their specialization courses in our homeland immediately readied themselves to leave for Haiti. Other Cuban surgery experts, who had accomplished difficult missions, volunteered to accompany them. Suffice it to say that in less than 24 hours our doctors had already assisted hundreds of patients. Today, January 16, only three and a half days after the tragedy, there were already thousands of people injured who had been assisted by them.

Today, Saturday, at noon time, the head of our medical brigade reported to us, among other data, the following:

"...the work that is being done by our comrades is really commendable. The general opinion is that the Pakistani earthquake has been put in the shade - that was another huge earthquake, and some of these doctors worked there. In that country, many a time our doctors assisted patients with fractures whose bones were not well knitted together, or who had been crushed. But here reality has exceeded the imaginable: amputations abound, surgeries are being performed virtually out in the public. This is the image they envisaged of a war."

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"...The 'Delmas 33 Hospital' is already operational. It has three operating rooms, its own power generation plants, doctors' visits areas, etcetera, but is absolutely full."

"Twelve Chilean doctors have joined in. One of them is an anesthesiologist. There are also eight Venezuelan doctors and nine Spanish nuns. It was expected that, at any moment, 18 Spanish, to whom the UN and the Haitian Public Health authorities had handed over the control of the hospital, would come, but they lacked some emergency supplies that had not arrived, so they have decided to join us and start working immediately."

"Thirty two Haitian resident doctors were sent in; six of them were going straight to Carrefour, a place that was totally devastated. Traveling with them were also the three Cuban surgical teams that arrived here yesterday."

"...we are operating the following medical facilities at Port au Prince:

'La Renaissance' Hospital.

The Social Insurance Hospital.

The Peace Hospital."

"...Four Comprehensive Diagnostics Centers are already working".

This information gives only an idea of the work that is being carried out by the medical staff from Cuba and those from other countries working with them, who were among the first to arrive in that nation. Our medical personnel is ready to cooperate and join forces with all other health specialists who have been sent to save lives in that sister nation. Haiti could become an example of what humankind can do for itself. The possibility and the means exist; but willingness is missing.

The longer it takes to bury or incinerate the corpses and to distribute food and other vital supplies, the higher the risks of epidemics and social violence will be.

Haiti will put to the test the endurance of the cooperation spirit before egoism, chauvinism, ignoble interests and contempt for other nations prevail.

A climate change jeopardizes the whole humankind. The earthquake at Port au Prince, hardly three weeks after the Copenhagen conference, is reminding all of us how selfishly and arrogantly we behaved then.

Countries are taking a close look at all that is happening in Haiti. The world's public opinion and peoples' criticisms will be ever harsher and unforgiving.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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