

[Remarks by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, meeting with the medical doctors assembled to offer assistance to the American people in areas affected by hurricane Katrina. Havana Convention Center, September 4, 2005. \[1\]](#)

Date:

04/09/2005

Dear members of the medical force assembled to offer assistance to those affected by hurricane Katrina in the South of the United States;

Distinguished guests;

Fellow Cubans:

Hardly 48 hours ago I concluded my remarks on the Round Table broadcast where I once again explicitly offered the United States to send a medical force with the necessary means to offer emergency assistance to the tens of thousands of Americans trapped in the flooded areas and the ruins Katrina left behind after lashing Louisiana and other southern states.

It was clear to us that those who faced the greatest danger were these huge numbers of poor, desperate people, many elderly citizens with health situations, pregnant women, mothers and children among them, all in urgent need of medical care.

In such a situation, regardless of how rich a country may be, the number of scientists it has or how great its technical breakthroughs have been, what it needs are young, well-trained and experienced professionals, who have done medical work in anomalous circumstances, and that, with a minimum of resources, can be immediately transported by air or any other available means to specific facilities or sites where the lives of human beings are in danger.

Cuba, a short distance away from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, was in a position to offer assistance to the American people. At that moment, the billions of dollars the United States could receive from countries all over the world would not have saved a single life in New Orleans and other critical areas where people were in mortal danger. Cuba would be completely powerless to help the crew of a spaceship or a nuclear submarine in distress, but it could offer the victims of hurricane Katrina, facing imminent death, substantial and crucial assistance. And this is what it's been doing since Tuesday, August 30, at 12:45 pm, when the winds and downpours had barely ceased. We don't regret it in the least, even if Cuba was not mentioned in the long list of countries that offered their solidarity to the US people.

Knowing that I could rely on men and women like you, I took the liberty of reiterating our offer three days later, promising that in less than 12 hours the first 100 doctors, carrying the necessary medical resources in their backpacks, could be in Houston; that an additional 500 could be there 10 hours later and that, within the next 36 hours, 500 more, for a total of 1100, could join them to save at least one of the many lives at risk from such dramatic events.

Perhaps those unaware of our people's sense of honor and spirit of solidarity thought this was some kind of bluff or a ridiculous exaggeration. But our country never toys with matters as serious as this, and it has never dishonored itself with demagoguery or deceit. That is why we proudly gather in this hall, at Havana's Convention Center where only three days ago we observed a minute of silence for the victims of the hurricane which battered the United States, and from where our heartfelt condolences were extended to that brotherly people.

Here we are, and not 1100 but 1586 doctors, including 300 additional doctors, in response to the increasingly alarming news that keep coming in. In fact, another 300 doctors, approximately, have joined this group at the last minute. They were called in and we've already announced that we are willing to send thousands more if it were necessary. But these 300 doctors are in other halls of the Convention Center, taking part in this function. In just 24 hours, all of the doctors summoned to carry out this mission, coming from all parts of the country, met in the capital. We have shown the utmost punctuality and precision.

You bring honor to the noble medical profession. With your quick, unwavering response to the call of duty and your willingness to work in unchartered and difficult conditions, you are writing a new page in the history of solidarity among the peoples and are showing a course of peace to the suffering and imperiled human species to which we all belong.

This medical force, I mean the 1586 initially mentioned, includes:

1097 specialists in Comprehensive General Medicine, 600 of whom are pursuing Masters degrees in Medical Sciences;
351 general practitioners and intensive care specialists;
72 healthcare professionals with two medical specialties, and
66 specialists in cardiology, pediatrics, gastroenterology, surgery, psychiatry, epidemiology and other specialties.

Of this medical force:

699 doctors have served in one or more international missions in 43 different countries, and some have even served in three missions, and
727 were ready and about to leave Cuba to serve in missions in Latin America, Africa and Asia; they joined this force in view of the dramatic situation unfolding in the southern United States, while other similar professionals will meet our internationalist commitment in other countries.

The average age of these health professionals is 32 years. Most of them had not yet been born when the revolution triumphed and some had not even been born 15 years after the triumph of the revolution, they are the product of these hard years. The average work experience is of no less than 10 years. Some have more experience, some less, most have more experience.

Of the total force, 729 are men and 857 are women.

The precarious sanitary conditions and dangers left in the United States by hurricane Katrina are powerfully described by international press agencies and the US press:

The EFE agency reports that in the Houston's stadium, in Texas, presently sheltering more than 15 thousand people evacuated from New Orleans, hardly three thousand have received medical care. Highly infectious diseases have been reported there while outbreaks of diarrhea and vomiting threaten to quickly spread due to overcrowding.

Yesterday's edition of the Washington Post reports that, at the moment, Mississippi's chief needs are fuel and medical assistance.

An AP press dispatch reports that two of the most severely affected hospitals in New Orleans were evacuated after its desperate doctors spent two days making the difficult decision of which patients should receive the scarce supplies of food, water and medicine. Three terminally-ill patients died during the evacuation and the number of patients who perished before assistance finally arrived could not be determined. Several hospital employees administered themselves intravenous saline solutions while waiting to be rescued.

Fox News network emphasized yesterday that New Orleans health professionals are working around the clock, without rest, to treat patients in critical condition and to prevent a catastrophe in the already overcrowded medical facilities. These health professionals have been working without rest and their strength is running out; something must be done urgently.

Yesterday, a Louisiana Health and Hospitals Department spokesperson, Kyle Viator, declared that “we have patients in dialysis, others with diabetes, people who require regular treatment and prescription drugs. Our resources are running out. At the moment, one third of the population is displaced, and this group of people includes our medical personnel”.

An article published in the Spanish newspaper El Mundo gathers the dramatic accounts of Nina Ferguson, a 46-year-old African American resident of New Orleans, who claims she could not suppress a feeling of nausea on getting off a military truck which took her to Houston, adding: “Seeing this, I’d rather stayed at the Convention Center where I saw dehydrated babies and several old people die without anyone looking after them”.

Another New Orleans resident, Rosanne Asuen, who suffers from diabetes and obesity, had to be reanimated by a volunteer nurse who was as desperate to get out of there as she was.

Evelyn Sander, a 23 years old mother, told the press how she wiped the sweat off Issaiah, her one-month-old baby’s forehead, with symptoms of dehydration and flies all over him.

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in a communiqué made public yesterday, Saturday, expressed its concern over the situation of children in the affected areas. According to UNICEF, one third to one fourth of the one million two hundred thousand people left helpless in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama are children.

A spokesperson for the Center for Disease Control (CDC) headquartered in Atlanta told EFE that the stagnant waters create the ideal conditions for the spread of the Nile virus and for outbreaks of hepatitis A and E. Coli bacteria, a potentially deadly pathogen which can cause diarrhea and kidney failure, among other complications.

An AFP cable dated in Houston yesterday reports that Texas offered to take in the thousands of people who had been displaced, but that hotels in Houston begin to experience water shortages and that the ill must wait long to receive medical care. Steven Glonsky, a doctor with the Methodist Hospital in the city, who spent thirteen hours attending to dehydrated and traumatized survivors who suffer from chronic illness such as diabetes and hypertension, stated that this is an unprecedented crisis in US history.

US Senate republican leader Bill Frist, presently in New Orleans, admitted that “doctors and nurses are doing a great job, but the distribution of medical assistance continues to be a serious problem” and “scores of people die every day”.

According to the Boston Globe, Louisiana and Mississippi are facing the worst public health care disaster the nation has known in decades.

The newspaper published declarations from Dr. Marshall Bouldin, Director for Diabetes and Metabolism at the University’s Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi, who assistance: “We’re seeing things that we haven’t seen in many years: cholera, typhoid fever, tetanus, malaria. We hadn’t seen such conditions in

50 years. People are crammed together and wander around surrounded by excrement”.

There is an endless list of health problems reported by virtually all the press and the specialized health care institutions.

Our doctors’ backpacks contain precisely those resources needed to address in the field problems relating to dehydration, high blood pressure, diabetes Mellitus and infections in all parts of the body —lungs, bones, skin, ears, urinary tract, reproductive system— as they arise. They also carry medicine to suppress vomiting; painkillers and drugs to lower fever; medication for the immediate treatment of heart conditions, for allergies of any kind; for treating bronchial asthma and other similar complications, about forty products of proven efficiency in emergencies such as this one.

These professionals carry two backpacks containing these products; each backpack weighs 12 kilograms. Actually, this was determined when all of the backpacks were procured, since although they are quite large, only half of the supplies would fit in; it was then necessary to give each doctor two backpacks, and the small briefcase which carries diagnostic kits. These doctors have much clinical experience, this is one of their most outstanding characteristic, as they are used to offering their services in places where there isn’t even one X-ray machine, ultrasound equipment or instruments for analyzing fecal samples, blood, etc. With the increase in the number of doctors, the medications weigh a total of 36 tons. The initial figure was smaller.

Cuba has the moral authority to express its opinion on this matter and to make this offer. Today, it is the country with the highest number of doctors per capita in the world, and no other country cooperates with other nations in the field of healthcare as extensively as it does.

Of over 130 thousand healthcare professionals with a university education, 25,845 today serve in international missions in 66 different countries. They offer medical services to 85,154,748 people; 34,700,000 in Latin America and the Caribbean and 50,400,000 in Africa and Asia. Of these, 17,651 are doctors, 3,069 are dentists and 3,117 are healthcare technicians who work in optic services and other areas.

Today, more than 12 thousand young people from around the world, chiefly from Latin America and the Caribbean, are studying medicine in Cuba completely free of charge, and their numbers will continue to grow rapidly. Scores of young people from the United States study in the Latin American School of Medicine, whose doors have been opened, since the institution’s inception, to students from that country.

Today, I received a moving letter from graduates from that Center, which reads:

“Your Excellency Commander Fidel Castro Ruz;

“Dear Commander in Chief:

“We have followed the horrific events that have unfolded in New Orleans resulting from the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina and listened to your statement on the afternoon Round Table program and we, Hondurans and other graduates from the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), are moved by the situation our brothers in the United States are enduring. Thus, as victims of a natural disaster (hurricane Mitch) ourselves, we want to express our solidarity with the American people at this tragic hour and join the doctors you have offered to send to this sister nation in response to this critical situation. You can be confident that we are ‘doctors willing to go where we are most needed’.

“We walk down the path you dream of.

“With infinite love and eternal gratitude,

“The first graduates from ELAM”.

This letter is signed by 85 young, recent graduates from the Latin American School of Medicine, who tell us the signatures and names are those of comrades currently in Havana, and that there are more comrades willing to join the mission but who are overseas on vacation.

When our first war of independence broke out in 1868, a group of Americans joined the ranks of Cuba’s independence forces. One of them, a very young man, stood out for his exceptional courage and wrote pages of admirable heroism in Cuba’s history. It was Henry Reeve. His unforgettable name is forever etched in the heart of our people, and next to that of Lincoln and other illustrious Americans it is carved on the pillars of the Plaza built in the days of the struggle for the return of little Elián González, when the noble people of the United States played a decisive role so that justice would finally be done.

Henry Reeve, almost crippled by the wounds sustained in the course of 7 years of war, fell in combat on August 4, 1876, near Yaguaramas, today the province of Cienfuegos.

I propose that this force of Cuban doctors who have volunteered to help save the lives of Americans bear the glorious name of “Henry Reeve”.

These doctors, I mean you, could already be there, offering their services. 48 hours have passed and we have not received any response to our reiterated offer. We shall patiently await a reply, for as many days as necessary. In the meantime, our doctors shall use the time to take intensive epidemiology courses and improving their English. If, ultimately, we do not receive any reply or our cooperation —your cooperation— is not needed, we shall not be demoralized, not you, not us, not any Cuban. On the contrary, we shall feel satisfied for having complied with our duty and extremely happy knowing that no other American, of the many that suffered the painful and perfidious scourge of hurricane Katrina, shall perish from lack of medical care, if that were the reason our doctors were not there.

The “Henry Reeve” Brigade has been created, and whatever tasks you undertake in any part of the world or our own homeland, you shall always bear the glorious distinction of having responded to the call to assistance our brothers and sisters in the United States, and that nation’s humblest children especially, with courage and dignity.

Let’s go forward, generous defenders of health and of life, winners over pain and death itself!

Thank you.

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