Duty and the epidemic in Haiti

Last Friday, on December 3rd, the UN decided to devote one General Assembly session to analyzing the cholera epidemic in that sister country. News of that decision was heartening. Surely it would serve to alert international opinion about the seriousness of the fact and to mobilize its support of the Haitian people. After all, its raison d'être is to confront problems and promote peace.

At the present, Haiti's situation is very serious, and the emergency aid required is far too little. Our hectic world invests one million 500 thousand million dollars every year on weapons and wars; Haiti, a country that less than a year ago suffered a brutal earthquake that caused 250,000 dead, 300,000 injured and enormous destruction, needs an ever growing amount for its reconstruction and development; according to experts' calculations the figure totals around 20 billion, just 1.3% of what is being spent in one year for such purposes.

But now that is not what we are dealing with; that would be a mere dream. The UN is not only calling for a modest economic request that could be resolved in a few minutes but also for 350 doctors and 2,000 nurses, something that poor countries do not have and the rich countries are used to ripping away from the poor countries. Cuba responded immediately by providing 300 doctors and nurses. Our Cuban Medical Mission in Haiti looks after almost 40% of those suffering from cholera. Quickly, after the call from the international organization, the task was set to look for the concrete causes of the high death rate. The low rate for the patients they look after is less than 1%; it grows smaller and smaller day by day. Compare this to the 3% death rate of persons looked after in the other health centres at work in the country.

It is clear that the number of deaths is not limited just to the more than 1,800 persons who are being reported. That figure does not include the persons who die without having gone to any doctor or any of the existing health centres.

Investigating the reasons for those most serious cases that come to the centres dealing with the fight against cholera that are run by our doctors, they observed that these persons were coming from the sub-communes which were further away and had less communication. Haiti has a mountainous geography, and one can only reach many of the isolated areas by walking over rough terrain.

The country is divided into 140 communes, both urban and rural, and 570 sub-communes. In one of the isolated sub-communes, where approximately 5,000 persons are living – according to the Protestant pastor's calculations – 20 people had died from the epidemic without having gone to any health centre.

According to emergency research done by the Cuban Medical Mission, in coordination with the health authorities, it has been shown that 207 Haitian sub-communes in the most isolated areas have no access to the centres fighting against cholera or providing medical care.

At the abovementioned UN meeting, the need was confirmed by Valerie Amos, UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, who made a two-day emergency visit to the country and calculated the figure of 350 doctors and 2,000 nurses. What was needed was to calculate how many human resources were already in the country in order to figure out the number of personnel required. That factor will also depend on the hours and days devoted by the personnel fighting against the epidemic. An important fact to bear in mind is not only the time being dedicated to work, but also the daily hours. In analyzing the high death rate one can observe that 40% of the deaths occur during the night; this proves that during those hours affected patients do not receive the same treatment for the disease.

Our Mission thinks that better use of personnel would reduce the abovementioned totals. Mobilizing the human resources available from the Henry Reeve Brigade and the ELAM graduates who are there, the Cuban Medical Mission is certain that, even in the midst of the enormous adversity caused by the destruction from the earthquake, the hurricane, the unpredictable rain and the poverty, the epidemic can be conquered and the lives of thousands of people who under the present conditions are inexorably dying could be saved.

On Sunday the 28th, they held elections for the presidency, all of the House of Representatives and for a part of the Senate; this was a tense, complicated event that greatly concerned us because of its relationship with the epidemic and the traumatic situation of the country.

In his statement of December 3rd, the UN Secretary General indicated, and I quote: “Whatever the complaints or reservations about the process, I urge all political actors to refrain from violence and to start discussions immediately to find a Haitian solution to these problems — before a serious crisis develops”, an important European news agency reported.

The Secretary General, agreeing with that agency, urged the international community to carry out the delivery of 164 million dollars, of which only 20% has been supplied.

It is not right to approach a country as it one were scolding a small child. Haiti is a country that, two hundred years ago, was the first one in this hemisphere to put an end to slavery. It has been the victim of all kinds of colonial and imperialist aggressions. It was occupied by the government of the United States just six years ago after promoting a civil war. The existence of the foreign occupying army, on behalf of the UN, does not take away this country’s right for respect for its dignity and its history.

We believe that the position of the UN Secretary General to urge Haitian citizens to avoid confrontations among each other is correct. On the 28th, relatively early in the day, the opposition parties signed a call for street protests, causing demonstrations and creating notable confusion within the country, especially in Port-au-Prince; and especially abroad. However, both the government and the opposition were able to avoid violence. The next day, the nation was calm.

The European agency informed that Ban Ki-moon had declared in regards to the elections last Sunday in Haiti [...] that ‘the irregularities’ recorded ‘now appear more serious than what was thought at first’.”

Whoever reads the information from Haiti and the later statements by the main opposition candidates, cannot understand how the person who is appealing for avoiding civil strife after the confusion created among the voters, just before the results of the vote count that will determine the two rival candidates in the January election, now states that the problems were more serious than what he had thought at the beginning; it’s like adding coals to the fire of political antagonisms.

Yesterday, December 4th, it was 12 years from the arrival of the Cuban Medical Mission in the Republic of Haiti. Since then, thousands of doctors and public health technicians have provided their services in Haiti. With their people, we have lived through times of peace and war, earthquakes and hurricanes. We are by their side in these days of intervention, occupation and epidemics.

The President of Haiti, the central and local authorities, whatever their religious or political ideas, all know that they can count on Cuba.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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