

PHILIPS' DOUBLE BETRAYAL

The United States is the biggest patent owner in the world. It has drained brains from all countries - whether developed or developing- doing research in a number of areas, including the production of mass destruction weapons or even medicines and medical equipment. That is why the economic and technological blockade is not something that serves only as a pretext to blame the empire for our own difficulties.

Public health has been one of the areas in which our country has advanced the most, despite the fact that the United States took away almost 50 per cent of the medical doctors graduated from the only university that existed in Cuba - who were more than 5 000-, many of them unemployed.

In that area, the Cuban Revolution wrote one of the most beautiful pages of international cooperation, which started with a group of doctors who were sent to Algeria, a country that had just conquered its independence, almost half a century ago. That policy has never stopped being implemented, and in that very humane area our country has deserved world recognition.

No one should think this was an easy task. The United States did everything within its power to prevent it. All along these years the US has done its best to sabotage that effort. It applied against Cuba every possible variant of its criminal economic blockade which further on, by virtue of the Helms-Burton Act, acquired an extraterritorial character under the Bill Clinton's administration.

At the time when the socialist block collapsed, and some months later its main bastion, the Soviet Union, disintegrated, Cuba decided to keep on struggling. By then our people had already acquired a high level of awareness and political education.

In 1992, Hugo Chavez headed the military uprising against the bourgeois oligarchic government that resulted from the Punto Fijo pact, which for more than three decades had been plundering Bolivar's homeland. He went to prison, as we did. He visited Cuba in 1994 and, some years later, with the full support of its people, was elected President and started the Bolivarian Revolution.

Soon after that, the people of Venezuela, like the Cuban people, had to face the hostility of the United States, which planned the fascist coup d'etat in 2002 that was defeated by the people and the revolutionary military. A few months later there was an oil coup, which turned out to be the most difficult moment; and the Venezuelan leader, the people and the military were able to shine again. Chavez and Venezuela offered to us their full solidarity in the midst of the Special Period, and we offered to them ours.

By then our country had no less than 60 000 specialized doctors, more than 150 000 experienced teachers and a people with a brilliant internationalist history. After the oil coup, rivers of Cuban collaborators started to flow into the education and health programs of that country; they cooperated with the Bolivarian Revolution in one of the deepest and fastest social programs ever implemented in a Third World country.

I refer to these antecedents because they are indispensable to judge the perfidious attitude of the imperialism and understand the topic I will discuss today: how a well known and relatively prestigious European multinational, the Dutch transnational Philips, specialized in the manufacturing of medical equipment, gave in and betrayed both Cuba and Venezuela.

I wrote a Reflection on this topic two years ago, on July 14, 2007, but I did not want to mention its

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name. I still entertained some hopes that it could amend its behavior.

We had been cooperating with the people of Venezuela to create one of the best health systems ever. Tens of thousands of specialized doctors and other Cuban health professionals have offered their services there. President Hugo Chavez, who was pleased with the work carried out by the first contingents that traveled to Venezuela to work in the 'Barrio Adentro' (Inside the Neighborhood) program, designed to take medical assistance to the poorest urban and agricultural regions in the country, asked us during one of his visits to our country to create a program that could benefit all sectors of the Venezuelan people, whether poor, middle class or rich. Thus, the High-Tech Diagnostic Centers were founded. They were intended to be a complement to the 600 Comprehensive Diagnostic Centers that, as polyclinics offering a broad range of services, with their laboratories and equipment, were supporting the work of the 'Barrio Adentro' doctors' offices. A high number of rehabilitation centers would be entrusted with the humane task of assisting any type of physical or motor disability.

Based on that request made by the Venezuelan President, we bought the necessary equipment for 27 High-Tech Diagnostic Centers distributed in all 24 Venezuelan States. Three of them required the installation of two such Centers given their high population density.

As a rule, we usually buy medical equipment from the most prestigious and advanced firms in the world. We even try to buy the most complex equipment from at least two of the most specialized firms.

Thus, the most sophisticated and expensive imaging equipment, such as the Multislice Computed Tomography (MSCT) scanner, the Nuclear Magnetic Resonance scanner, the ultra-sound equipment for diagnostic purposes and similar ones were bought from the German firm Siemens and from the Dutch firm Philips. Of course, none of the two manufacture all these equipment, but they do produce the most complex and sophisticated ones. Both of them should compete in quality and price. We bought diagnostic equipment from the two of them for Venezuela and for Cuba, where we were developing a similar medical services program that had received very few resources during the toughest years of the Special Period.

From both firms we bought equipment for more than 10 different specialties to support the services in the two countries. I will not refer to the equipment supplied by the German firm Siemens, which honored its commitments. I will just focus on Philips, which supplied equipment for 12 different specialties. Philips and the other firm supplied the most important and expensive equipment: Fifteen

40-slices tomography scanners, twenty eight 0.23 Tesla nuclear magnetic resonance scanners, eight urology telecommand tables, thirty seven 3D diagnostic ultrasound equipment, two neurological angiographers, two cardiology angiographers, two polygraphs, one double-headed Gamma Camera, three single-headed Gamma Cameras, 250 portable X-Ray equipment, 1 200 non-invasive monitors and 2000 defibrillator monitors.

All in all there were 3 553 equipment for a total value of 72 762 694 dollars.

I personally participated in the negotiations of these purchases with the two firms.

We discussed the price of each piece of equipment, which led to a significant reduction in the cost, since they would be paid for in cash and would be bought in high quantities because they were destined to both Cuba and Venezuela. Otherwise they could not be bought as urgently as we needed them, especially in Venezuela, given the accumulated needs among the poorest sectors of that population which already surpassed the figure of 27 million inhabitants.

The most complex equipment were to be installed at the High-Tech Centers; the least complex and abundant were to be sent to the 'Barrio Adentro' Diagnostic Centers, although they would not be the only ones to operate in those centers. Almost all of them were bought early in the year 2006.

I got seriously ill by the end of July of that same year. Philips supplied spare parts until the end of

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2006. In 2007 supplies came to a complete stop: not a single spare part was delivered.

On March that year some Cuban representatives were sent to Brazil, the venue of Philips' Latin America office -the one that had made business with Cuba. The firm officials started to explain the difficulties they were facing. The Bush administration had requested them to supply detailed information about the equipment that the firm had supplied to Cuba, claiming that some of them contained computer programs and, in some cases, certain components which had been patented by the Yankees. Philips had handed over the information requested about the equipment bought from this firm for Cuba and Venezuela. There had never been the slightest problem with that firm before.

The head of the Philips office in Brazil literally said to the Cuban representatives: "There is a brutal intransigence on the part of the US Government in terms of equipment regulations and license applications regarding Cuba."

"I know that this affects the Commander's program. Our organization is being affected and threatened. All our organizations are very scared." And right after that he repeated: "they are very scared."

Finally, they added that they wanted to cooperate and that they would find the way to do so.

By mid July, 2007, during a so-called White House Conference on the Americas, Bush, the secretary of State and other US Government officials "talked nineteen to the dozen", as described by the AP, about education and health. It seemed something unreal. They promised to deliver health care all over Latin America.

They made emphasis on the Comfort, and old aircraft carrier that, according to Bush, was turned into the biggest hospital vessel of the world", which for ten days would be visiting every in this hemisphere, South to the United States. That was his health program. What he did not say was that in Venezuela he was sabotaging the most serious health program ever implemented in a Third World country.

Despite the coincidence in the dates, at that moment I did not want to directly address Philip's problem. On March that firm had promised to solve the problem. I still entertained some hope that it would amend its behavior.

I limited myself to write in that same Reflection the following: "The problem is that the United States cannot do what Cuba is doing. On the contrary, it brutally pressures the manufacturing companies of the excellent medical equipment that is supplied to our country to prevent them from replacing certain computer programs or some spare parts that are under United States patents. I could cite concrete cases and the names of the companies. It is disgusting..."

Despite the solemn promise made by Philips to Cuba, the rest of the year 2007, the twelve months of 2008 and almost half of 2009 have elapsed and not a single spare part for those equipment has been delivered by that firm.

In June, 2009, after paying a fine of 100 000 Euros to Barack Obama's government, something not far removed from the rules established by his illustrious predecessor, Philips deigned to communicate that very soon they would supply the spare parts for the equipment they had sold to Cuba.

However, no one has compensated Cubans or the Venezuelan patients assisted by our doctors in the 'Barrio Adentro' program, or the patients at the High Tech Diagnostic Centers for the human damage this situation has caused.

Obviously, we have not bought a single piece of equipment from Philips ever since we made our last purchase early in 2006.

Besides, we have cooperated with Venezuela in the purchase of hundreds of millions of dollars in medical equipment for its national health network, and a wide range of high-tech sophisticated

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equipment from other prestigious European and Japanese firms. I wanted to believe that firm would make an effort and try to honor its commitment.

Thus, Venezuela incorporated to its state-run hospitals state-of-the-art equipment. The most expensive private clinics could only buy some of them. The rest will depend on the efficiency the country could achieve in these services. The Venezuelan president is really interested in attaining that goal. I think he would be doing the right thing if he mitigates the Venezuelan habit of buying American medical equipment, not because of their quality, which is good, although with less strict norms as compared to those established by Europe, but because of the essence of that country's policy, which is even capable of blockading the supply of spare parts, as they did with Cuba.

An of course, we have sent to the Venezuelan Diagnostic Centers, the High-Tech- Centers, and others operated by our doctors, equipment from firms recognized in the world as the best in their specialty, such as Siemens, Carl Zeiss, Drager, SMS, Schwind, Topcon, Nihon Kohden, Olympus, and others from Europe and Japan, some of which were founded more than 100 years ago.

Now, when Bolivar's homeland -the one Marti asked to serve- is threatened by imperialism more than ever before, we should enhance, more than ever before, our organization, work, and the efficiency of our efforts, not only in the health sector but also in all other spheres of our cooperation.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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