

Gamma

U.S. organization supports Cuba's struggles

When altruism is more than just a word

Nuria Barbosa León
Photo: Orlando Perera (Courtesy of ICAP)

• IN defiance of the U.S. government's attempts to spread fear and discredit Cuba's reputation as a safe country, members of the U.S. Non-governmental organization CODEPINK, visited the Caribbean island to show their opposition to the White House's hostile policy.

Speaking before national press outlets at the Havana headquarters of the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), the activists condemned the criminal economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the U.S. on Cuba, called for the closure of the illegal Naval Base in Guantánamo, and for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

CODEPINK, founded on November 17, 2002, is a women-led grassroots organization working to end U.S. wars and militarism, support peace, environmental protection, and human rights initiatives; as well as redirect taxpayer's money destined for the military sector into areas linked to social development.

Co-founder of the organization, Medea Benjamin, highlighted the irony of the U.S. State Department's attempt to create fear by issuing travel warnings on Cuba, when it is one of the safest countries in the region, and given the level of violence and death in the U.S. as a result of the right to bear arms.

When we get back we will talk about our experience here in Cuba and recommend that people visit the island, not only to meet with solidary people but also to get to know a country with a very interesting culture and way of life, she noted, going on to emphasize the high level of safety on the island.

The CODEPINK co-founder went on to note that much work remains to be done to raise awareness around the issue of war; especially at such a complicated time for the country, with many domestic matters to resolve. In this sense she noted that the organization is working to build alliances with other progressive groups, above all those struggling to end police violence against African-Americans and people of color, immigrant rights movements, and environmentalists.

Medea stated that 50 years after the unjust blockade was imposed on Cuba, she never imagined she would still be struggling to bring an end to the immoral and irrational policy, which has been condemned by international organizations such as the UN and the Vatican.

Only the U.S. oligarchy and Cuban-American mafia groups are interested in maintaining the policy; and President Trump announced a reversal in bilateral diplomatic relations to appease these individuals, but firm opposition from the U.S. public, who condemn this hostility, has prevented him from implementing new laws, she explained.

The activist also noted that the results of surveys conducted by renowned U.S. institutions show that the vast majority of citizens support normal relations with Cuba and want to be able to freely visit the Caribbean island.

It's our job to continue educating people by showing them that the blockade remains in effect, and negatively impacts both Cuban and U.S. citizens, she noted.

Meanwhile, young journalist Eleonor Goldfield, visiting Cuba for the first time, stated that she wanted to gather and share information about the island, noting that the mass media in the U.S. hide and distort information about the Caribbean island to create a negative image of the country among the general public.



Members of the CODEPINK delegation during an encounter with the Cuban press.

Meanwhile, 16-year-old high school student Charlotte Guyot had a similar experience whilst walking around Old Havana one evening. She explained that on being approached by a restaurant promoter, she was frightened at first as ever since she was a young girl, she had been taught not to trust strangers. Today, I think that this idea is wrong and believe that you should trust in people until they give you a reason not to, she explained.

The young student also noted that most of her friends know little about Cuba and tried to dissuade her from visiting the island. However, she decided to travel to the island to get to know the country and intends to tell her classmates about her experience when she returns.

Meanwhile her mother, Jadie Sarda, noted that she was happy her daughter wanted to join the trip as a member of CODEPINK, stating that the last time she visited the island Cubans were excited and pleased about the opening up of diplomatic relations with the U.S. I'm for the normalization of relations between the two countries and it's down to me to motivate other U.S. citizens to demand ongoing adequate exchanges, she noted. •

Nuria Barbosa León
Photos: Courtesy of the interviewee

• CUBAN neurosurgeon Norbery Jorge Rodríguez de La Paz is currently providing medical care to the population of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, severely affected by an earthquake in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region September 7, leaving more than 300 dead.

The Cuban doctor is working in the field hospital located in the Che-Nita sports center, as part of a brigade of the Henry Reeve International Contingent of Doctors Specializing in Disasters and Serious Epidemics, with experience working in twenty countries.

The brigade is composed of 40 doctors, nurses, technicians and service personnel, including cooks and maintenance workers for the hospital's power plant, all living in tents. The medical personnel provide consultations from eight in the morning until there are no more patients waiting to be seen. They also receive emergency cases 24 hours a day.

Dr. Rodríguez previously traveled to help earthquake victims in Nepal, in May 2015. Working there for three months, he noted that the task was particularly difficult given the language barrier. "There we operated both on those wounded due to the disaster, and others who had not been treated due to a lack of professionals dedicated to this specialty in the country. Dr. Orestes López and I operated on more than 30 patients with spinal and cranial disorders," he explained in an exclusive interview with **Granma International**.

Rodríguez, who works at the Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery in Havana,



Dr. Norbery Jorge Rodríguez de La Paz (left) performing complex surgery on a Mexican patient.

noted: "In the case of Mexico, we have already diagnosed five pituitary tumors, malignant lesions of the head, and other traumatic lesions of the spine. We have coordinated with nearby hospitals to operate on these patients and treat their conditions."

The doctor described the local people as being of very scarce means, and noted that they constantly express their gratitude for the Cuban medical aid.

He recalled the surgery conducted on a soldier who had been rescuing earthquake victims, who arrived with a depressed skull fracture. The presence of the medical brigade prevented the patient from having to travel for 13 hours to the Mexican capital, which would have presented a high risk to his life due to infection of the central nervous system. The operation was performed with the few tools they had available and limited technical resources.

Likewise, they operated on a woman with a deforming cystic tumor. Doctors believe that

it grew gradually inside the patient's head for some 30 years, without receiving any specialized professional follow-up care. The patient is currently very well and her relatives have expressed their gratitude for such a feat.

Despite the fact that aftershocks continue to occur in the area, the most difficult part of these internationalist missions for Dr. Rodríguez is being separated from his family, especially his sons Diego and David, aged 14 and three, respectively.

In a visit to his home in Havana, his wife Diana Fernández Calderón noted that her husband has a difficult profession; he leaves the house very early and returns late at night. Meanwhile, Diana is assistant director of the Lizt Alfonso Dance Cuba company, meaning she too has frequent international commitments. As such, the children's maternal grandparents have become surrogate parents: "I have to really thank my parents who help me all the time," she stressed.

She added, "The departure of a member of the family is very difficult, because those who remain in Cuba worry about the absent person. We are a close-knit family, the two children have different mothers but they love each other with devotion. The youngest loves playing with his older brother and misses his dad very much. Father and baby make a game of daily tasks such as bathing, eating, sleeping and walking."

For Diana, living with a neurosurgeon is a great sacrifice but at the same time a source of pride, as he cures illnesses and saves lives. "It is very comforting to see people's affection toward him. Patients and their relatives always think of him on Doctor's Day or on Father's Day. They call him and congratulate him on important

dates," she noted.

Diego explained that he intends to study medicine and wants to become a neurosurgeon just like his father. He is aware of the rigor of the career and aims to obtain high academic results to fulfill his dream. He noted: "My dad is my idol and my source of inspiration to study; I want to imitate him in his profession. I have seen how people profess a lot of affection for the work he does. I would also like to be in a place where I could help others and feel that I have done important work."

"My dad's departure to Mexico," Diego explained, "occurred at the end of September, he didn't have time for a farewell and we only speak by phone. He tells me that he feels a great sadness to see the devastation caused by the earthquake and to learn of the number of deaths that have occurred. They live in tents put up in the grounds of a sports center, and feel the earth shake as a result of the aftershocks. They have also suffered strong winds that almost destroyed their tents. Very early in the morning there are patients to attend to and he has had to perform several complex surgeries without optimal conditions."

Such testimonies remind one of the words of the historic leader of the Revolution Fidel Castro when the Henry Reeve Contingent was founded on September 19, 2005: "Our concepts about the human condition of other peoples and the duty of brotherhood and solidarity have never been nor will be betrayed. Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors and health professionals scattered around the world are irrefutable proof of what I say. For them there will never be language barriers, sacrifice, dangers or obstacles." •