There are Men Called Cuba

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At least two dozen of the fifty volunteers who left for northern Italy - a country among the G-7, that is, one of the richest in the world, in its richest half, which is, paradoxically, the most affected by the coronavirus pandemic—, they were just five years ago in West Africa, in extremely poor countries, fighting against Ebola. That fact, which is not a mere coincidence, filled me with pride; They are human beings who never get tired of risking their lives to save the lives of others, in small and large neighborhoods, because we all share the same planet. Martí and Fidel taught us: Homeland is humanity.

Reuters spoke to two of them (and the New York Times reprinted the news dispatch): "We are all afraid. But there's a revolutionary task to be accomplished, fear is controlled and set aside," said Dr. Leonardo Fernández, of 68 years old, and I see how his eyes narrow when he adds: "Whoever says he is not afraid is a superhero and we are doctors." Dr. Graciliano Díaz Bartolo, 64, reiterated the collective disposition: "For me this collaboration constitutes a challenge and for Cuban medicine even more. We are going to fulfill an honorable task, based on the principle of solidarity." I reproduce the words of these two "common" men, as they appear in my book **Red Zone** (2016). They were 63 and 59 years old back then. I found one in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia; the other in Conakry, neighboring Guinea. I haven't met Dr. Leonardo again; Instead, I know that Dr. Graciliano had time to fulfill, after the Ebola outbreak, another mission in Haiti.

I Learned to Value the Revolution Outside Cuba

Doctor Leonardo Fernández

At age 63, he is one of the oldest specialists in the mission and someone to look up by young people. His circumspect appearance offers no indication of the boy he was, with long hair and rebellious rock taste. But something gives him away, perhaps his smile, or those rogue eyes that narrow when he speaks.

“It was in Nicaragua that I became a revolutionary. When I was 17, listening to a song of the Beatles was banned, neither going to a bar, or be out on the street until late at night. And despite the fact that my family had belonged to the **26 de Julio Movement**, that my father and sister fought in Sierra Maestra, I was a rebel, I did not understand. I liked rock and had long hair. But I had been educated in the principles of the Revolution and one day they told me: we have this situation; I raised my hand and started. And I learned to value Cuba. I learned to value the Revolution outside Cuba. "

It was his first mission, in 1979, only a month had passed after the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. Daniel Ortega commissioned him as personal physician to the leader of the counterrevolutionary organization **Steadman Fagoth Muller**, and he lived in Puerto Cabezas, until 1981. I remembered, when he was telling me, that in 1999 I interviewed Fagoth at his ranch in Coco River, and he spoke to me about the Cuban doctors: the one who treated him for free and well in Nicaragua, and the one who operated on him in the United States and charged him $ 18,000.

After that, in Cuba, Dr. Fernández specialized in Intensive Care and Internal Medicine. He did not travel abroad immediately. “I never signed up for those employee lists, it seemed absurd to me. Until Fidel made a call to doctors to go to the United States, after Hurricane Katrina - he does not forget the meeting with Fidel at Ciudad Deportiva Center-. We were selected among the first 150 doctors. Afterwards the brigade grew to 1,500”.

However, the US government refused the offer. But the earthquake in Pakistan and the floods in Mexico and Guatemala caused the contingent to split into three:

“I departed for Pakistan, with a first group, mostly military doctors and a few civilians with some experience in this kind of events. While I was there, Bruno Rodríguez asked for our willingness to continue directly to East Timor. I was one of those who said yes, I raised my hand thinking I would not go, because I was already returning to Cuba, and they chose me. I was in East Timor for two years. Then came the Haiti earthquake and they asked for volunteers. When they talk about volunteers, I raise my hand and then I wonder why. There I started intensive therapy in the field. ”.

He still had time to complete a “normal” mission in Mozambique, for two years. But the most difficult test would come with the Ebola outbreak. However, he downplays it:

“Look, the media impact of this mission, the propaganda that has spread on Facebook, on Internet, has made some of us think that we have done something extraordinary, that we think of ourselves as heroes. I think that we have fulfilled a duty, with a revolutionary and medical ethic. What difference is there with those working in the Brazilian jungle? What difference is there from those in villages in Africa? I am lucky to have known part of Africa. I lived, for example, in the capital of Mozambique, I worked at an Intensive Care Ward in a province, but there were colleagues who lived on the border, in the jungle, with temperatures of 48 degrees ... What’s the difference? The difference is that this was a well-known international mission, with a lot of media, which was given the importance it had, because you really need to be brave to say I’ll go and face it, it’s undeniable, but it was just one more task. I had heard about Ebola, I know Africa, I had dealt with hemorrhagic fevers in Mozambique, and I raised my hand, and here I am. Nothing special. That's life. As long as I have the strength and they accept me, I’ll go wherever I have to go. "

Men Like Him Don't Give Up

Doctor Graciliano Díaz Bartolo

He is a quiet, helpful man from Santiago de Cuba. His life was not exactly a walk in the park, but bumpy: he knew what his goals were. He is 59 years old, a wife who is a nursery school educator, four daughters, all university students - one has a diploma in Hygiene and Epidemiology, another is a lawyer, the other is a sociologist and the youngest is on her third year of Medical School - and three grandchildren. He first became an electromedical technician in 1972; he repaired the OR equipment, the oxygen, and therapy equipment. He was skilled, but he dreamed of more. From 1978 to 1984 he studied Medicine, and was founder - after Lawton's eight - of the Family Doctor Plan, in the province of Granma. He became a specialist in 1988. His first mission, in 2002, was to Bolivia:

"That was before Evo won the elections, during the so-called black October, triggered by a domestic conflict that took place in that country where many people died. We were working in La Higuera area, in Vallegrande. It was a very beautiful mission, because we were the first doctors to arrive in that country, in that area, after Che's remains

were exhumed. We had to do several things, including filming a movie and a documentary with the Cuban actress Isabel Santos. We were three doctors and we travelled the entire Vallegrande area, many places where Che had been, a very poor area, without electricity. We spent 25 months there. I met Chato Peredo, brother of Inti, all the meetings were very emotional.

However, in Guinea he lived his longest and most intense internationalist experience as a doctor. Since July 25th, 2011, he was one of the 15 general practitioners developing the so-called ***Comprehensive Health Program*** in six regions of the country, before the Ebola outbreak: Labe, Kankan, Faranah, Mamou, Boké and Conakry. Dr. Graciliano would follow in the footsteps of the internationalists in the 60's and 70's, first in Vallegrande and then in Boké, very close to the border with Guinea Bissau, where the Cuban guerrilla doctors who fought under Amílcar Cabral lived. In mid-2012 he was transferred to Conakry, as head of the brigade. In 2014, when his return to Cuba was just looming, the Ebola outbreak set in. He remembers a dramatic moment:

"One Monday morning I arrived at the Donka hospital, to the Internal Medicine ward where I worked, and I found that there was only one nurse, and when I asked about the doctors and interns, that is, the Medicine students, they told me that none had come, that the services chief had had a meeting on the first floor with a few specialists, because the head of the ER had died of Ebola. People refused to work, so the services chief and I had to assist all the patients in the ward on our own, and protect ourselves well - in Cuba we had received some training and here too – we called the people who specialized in those cases back then, Doctors Without Borders, to assist patients suspected of Ebola in the ward. Fear was always lingering in the air, we've had to be brave to confront a disease we didn't know, in such a hostile environment from the hygienic-sanitary point of view, where there wasn't risk perception".

His experience in the country and his self-taught learning of Guineans' Creole French were very useful for the newly arrived doctors and nurses of the Henry Reeve brigade, who since October 2014 would fight the Ebola epidemic. Although it was already his time to return home, he agreed to join the new brigade as second chief. I met Dr. Graciliano in March 2015, in the Ebola Treatment Unit of Coyah, and on several occasions he served as a translator. In those days he decided to postpone, once again, his return to Cuba, because the President of Guinea asked if Cubans were willing to stay one more month, after completing the six months agreed with WHO. And it was precisely in that last month that he suffered a heart attack. But he recovered, and made his post-hospital convalescence in the care of his friends and colleagues, as well as of Maité and Daffne, at the ambassador's residence. Men like him don't quit their jobs.