
The blood of Nigerians flow through veins of Cuban people – Ambassador Clara Escandell

By: Ayodamola Owoseye
05/04/2020



Her Excellency, Clara Margarita Escandell, Cuban Ambassador to Nigeria, in this interview with Premium Times, spoke on the ravaging [coronavirus](#) disease, her country's bold strides in biomedical sciences, the wonder drug – Interferon Alpha 2B that was used to acclaim in China, currently in Italy and has been on hot orders globally.

She also spoke on the preparedness of Cuba to help Nigeria where the footprints of the disease are showing a disturbing spike, and signals an openness to collaboration with willing Nigerian biomedical laboratories.

Ambassador Escandell was born in January 1960, had a degree in International Relations at the Raúl Roa Higher Institute of International Relations, Havana and a double master, one in African Studies from the University of Ghana, Legon (1992), and another in History from Historical Sciences, University of Havana.

She has participated in several academic events in Cuba and

elsewhere and has published books and articles on political sociology in Africa.

In a diplomatic career that started in 1982, Ms Escandell has held positions in Ghana, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Algeria prior to her Nigerian posting.

PT: What specific role did Cuban doctors play in China and to what extent did the Interferon Alpha 2B play in the treatment process?

Ambassador: In China, a small team of Cuban doctors worked passionately since the beginning of the coronavirus disease helping in treatment and care processes. Cuba has experience in these two areas, particularly to control and cut disease transmission.

Due to the known mechanism of the disease's action, it is common to deploy the use of interferon against viral infections without available specific therapies. Interferon Alfa-2b is one of the drugs (in total more than 20) used as experimental biotherapy for patients affected by COVID-19. Its use is based and justified by the antiviral properties of the interferon molecule, a member of the first line of antiviral defense with activation of the innate immune response against the virus and the mechanism of inhibition of viral replication, mediated by the inducer genes of Interferon.

Different types of Coronavirus (as SARS-CoV, associated with the 2002 epidemic, and MERS-CoV, associated with the 2012 epidemic) have been reported to reduce Interferon expression and prevent interferon-inducing STAT1 and MyD88 genes from activating, as well as antiviral defense mechanisms detect the presence of the virus.

Due to the urgency of COVID-19 pandemic, not only interferon, but various drugs are being used as therapeutic tools, even though their efficacy has not been demonstrated for the treatment, previous evidence and studies suggest the possible usefulness of interferon as a preventive measure in vulnerable populations and in early stages of infection, in addition to the fact that its use continues to be published in the current pandemic and appears recommended in patient treatment

protocols by different countries and organizations.

Interferon has also proved effective in other illness (as VIH-AIDS) and is very useful to help the immunity capacity of individuals.

PT: Now that 50 Cuban doctors are in Italy, what roles are they expected to play?

Ambassador: Cuban medical doctors working in Italy are members of the Cuban Medical Brigade “Henry Reeve”. This Brigade has vast experience in disaster, natural and epidemiological crises. They fought against Ebola in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea; also went to countries like Haiti and Pakistan when they were shaken by earthquakes. Brigade members are prepared to work in difficult conditions and contribute to solving complex health situations.

Cuban health personnel traveled to Italy at the request of the Lombardy province government. They work in a field hospital and help to cut transmission in these difficult conditions.

This cooperation always starts through a request from the affected country which could benefit from such aid, and is implemented and carried out by mutual agreement according to agreed conditions.

PT: In how many countries are Cuban doctors currently deployed and what roles are they playing in all these countries?

Ambassador: About 30 thousand Cuban medical personnel now work in 61 countries, 31 in Africa. They work primarily in national health systems through government or private agreements.

They can work in general and specialized hospitals, frequently in national programmes such as mother and child care. Most of them work in rural areas as long as their living conditions and protection are guaranteed. They are also involved in teaching.

PT: How did Cuba come to its current leadership position in the management of the coronavirus disease?

Ambassador: Cuba relies on its well-structured health system to deal with the coronavirus. This system has two essential pillars: prevention and work at the community level.

Through the press, government structures, political and social organizations, the country has set out to prevent contagion. For this, family doctors and nurses, accompanied by volunteer social workers, visit the population in their homes to detect any suspicious case and contribute to health education.

All possible means of dissemination of information are used: the press, social networks; relevant artists have recorded spots and songs, also sportsmen and other popular figures came to help. The President of the Republic and other leaders carry out radio and television interventions to give personally instructions to the population. The maximum effort is put into education on how the disease is transmitted.

So far, almost all cases are imported; a very tiny minority has been by local contagion and always from a person arriving from abroad. All confirmed 67 cases are on medical admission, as well as 1603 persons that have symptoms even if they have not tested positive. This is an extra measure to protect their health and to avoid contagious.

PT: If countries like Nigeria were to seek the help of Cuba in this stage of its management of the crisis, what protocols need be activated?

Ambassador: Cuba and Nigeria have a historical relationship. Through the veins of many Cubans flows blood from the peoples that make up this great country.

There is an enormous cultural and idiosyncratic influence from Nigeria in many aspects of our social life, like music.

Cuba has very special ties to the African continent, the land of our ancestors.

When a government is interested in receiving aid from Cuba, it must

make an official request. Next, we analyze the overall issue and agree on what conduct can be followed.

PT: Do you envisage that Cuba could soon be overwhelmed by foreign requests and scale back in its internationalist considerations?

Ambassador: So far, regarding COVID-19, Cuba is supporting with medical personnel, mainly in advisory and prevention work, 7 countries, 6 of them in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as in Italy. Like any country, Cuba has limited resources, but also an important aid capacity and vast experience in managing human resources.

Years ago, then President Fidel Castro designed a policy of training doctors for Cuba and for the world. It has been fully fulfilled. Part of this training of medical professionals, are thousands of young people from more than hundred countries, including Nigeria, that have been educated in Cuba.

PT: Is the Cuban biomedical industry adequately commercialized to help countries like Nigeria take advantage of its malaria and cancer drugs?

Ambassador: The Cuban biomedical industry has commercial experience. In the past there have been various efforts to introduce Cuban products to the Nigerian market. Some are imported in limited numbers. Cuba is always open to expand its commercial relations with friendly countries and we have the necessary know-how for this.

In the case of malaria, the Cuban experience is not only related to drugs production. There is the criterion that more important than curing the disease is to prevent it, eradicating its causes. Cuba managed to eradicate malaria transmission since the 60s.

In the case of cancer, Cuban biotechnology has developed a wide range of products that are marketed in various countries of the world, even in some we carry out joint productions using Cuban technology.

PT: Has the Nigerian government so far approached Cuba for help in any aspect of its health needs?

Ambassador: Not at the moment, but Cuba is always attentive to the requests of friendly countries.

PT: Is it possible for Cuba to collaborate with Nigerian pharmaceutical companies in research and development of its malaria, cancer and now COVID-19 drugs?

Ambassador: Cuban scientific institutions are fully prepared to work alongside Nigerian ones. These issues have been discussed in the past and it is a permanently open door and opportunity. The most important thing is to go deeper among the interested and concerned institutions on what we can do together.

Cuban institutions such as LABIOFAM, the Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, the Immunoassay Center and others, in the past and today, have been in conversation with Nigerian institutions and authorities. The Cuban disposition is total to deepen those ties for the benefit of both countries in a win-win relationship.
