

Three Decades of a Miracle

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A humane job, performed by Cuban doctors who returned sight to millions of people worldwide.

"In the field of Ophthalmology there hasn't been in Cuba a more important task than the Operation Miracle", quoted doctor Marcelino Rio Torres at the time of celebrating this July 10th the 15th anniversary of the creation of a program that made possible that millions of people worldwide recovered one of the most important senses: sight.

The date serves as excuse to speak about the topic with whom still runs the Cuban Institute of Ophthalmology Ramón Pando Ferrer, facility where this wonderful humane work was born – performed by the Cuban doctors – through which three millions 88 thousand 516 patients were assisted, according to figures offered by the Unit of Medical Cooperation of the Ministry of Public Health.

Doctor Marcelino told that in the evening of July 9th, 2004 Fidel arrived, without prior notice, to the hospital. "In that encounter we participate, among others, the doctor Eneida Pérez Candelaria (who currently directs Microsurgery service) and Doctor Reinaldo Ríos.

"Fidel pointed out that President Chávez had commented, soon after the implementation of educational missions that Venezuelans didn't learn, and the cause was that they couldn't see well, apparently, they suffered from cataracts. Then the Commander in Chief asked us if we were willing to operate 50 patients per day. Can you imagine!, how could we refuse before such

request?

"The Venezuelans were already in Cuba, therefore on the following day, which was July 10th, we were already assisting patients in doctor's offices and taking them to the operation theater, with the foreseen diagnosis. That was the beginning".

How did the name Miracle come up?

"We suppose it was the Commander in Chief's idea. The program was born in Cuba with the name of Operation, in Venezuela they call it Mission. But the truth is that when the dressing of patients were removed from their eyes, the first thing they exclaimed was: ` This is a Miracle ` . Most likely, Fidel knew what they would say.

"That's how we started until one day we operated on 500 cataracts. That led us to think of the need of creating two work groups, in order to do this we incorporated specialists from other hospitals and provinces, we even had to bring some quickly from abroad, where they were working on a mission. That made everything easier because when one group was working during the day, sometimes until the early morning the other one was resting. Thanks to that by late October and early November we had already carried out 13 thousand 600 surgical interventions of this kind."

When did the program reach world level?

"On the following year (2005) it was then that we decided to send our professionals to Venezuela, to Bolivia, where several eye care centers. That's why we say that Operation Miracle was born here; it's our work we ended up having presence in one more than a dozen countries, although some refused to receive Cuban doctors, like Brazil and Argentina. What did patients do then? Well they walked across the border with Bolivia, unbelievable!, and they were operated there.

"In the homeland of President Evo Morales we built more than 8 eye care centers and in Venezuela a few, others were opened in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. In Argentina we built one and named it after Ernesto Che Guevara, and another in Uruguay which we called José Martí, and in these places the very people who at first `detested` us, began to send their children to be trained as specialists.

"In the African continent we had a Miracle Mission in Benguela, Angola, and in Mali, without counting the eye doctors we have in Algeria, where Cuban physicians worked for the first time as internationalist."

What has Operation Miracle meant for Doctor Marcelino?

"Come to think about it! As a professional it has been the greatest thing in my life. A work began by Fidel and our doctors have known how to complete until today. Actually, a great satisfaction."
