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Departing Cuban embassy official found curiosity, not confrontation, in U.S.

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As he spoke at college campuses and to state legislators and city councils over the past four years, Miguel Fraga found curiosity, not confrontation, about his homeland, Cuba.

"The reception has been better than I expected," he told *People's World* in an exclusive interview on the eve of his departure back to a senior Foreign Ministry post in the Cuban capital of Havana.

Instead, Fraga's audiences "wanted to know more" about actual conditions in Cuba. And he strove to counter their preconceptions gained from old movies, U.S. TV sitcoms and hostile U.S. government statements and media coverage of the socialist republic and the 1959 Cuban revolution.

Attendees also wanted to know how Cuba and the U.S. could improve relations, a question Fraga easily answered. And that's where a little-known, but important, joint Cuban-U.S. medical research project on testing a Cuban-invented vaccine to combat lung cancer, undertaken at the nationally known Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, comes in – along with other examples.

Fraga has spent much of his time in the U.S. on that task of touring the country, explaining Cuba, its culture, its politics and its prospects. He wound up his three-year assignment as the First Secretary – the embassy's #2 job – of the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C., in December. His tenure in that post, in the century-old embassy building itself high on D.C.'s

Meridian Hill, began after the two nations re-established full diplomatic relations in 2016.

For the year before that, Fraga was First Secretary of the “Cuban Interests Section” in Washington, the name for diplomatic outposts two nations maintain when they don’t have formal diplomatic relations. His prior career also includes a stint in the Cuban Embassy in Canada.

Ordinarily, in any nation’s diplomatic corps, such presentations and talks would be left to consular staffers and visiting experts, not an embassy’s #2. But a combination of U.S. restrictions and expulsions of Cuban lower-level diplomats – which left the embassy short-staffed — and Trump administration-ordered closure of Cuban consulates in the U.S. put Fraga on the road for much of his tenure.

As a result, Fraga addressed groups at 46 college campuses, including three Penn State campuses, and convinced state and local lawmakers to pass resolutions urging the U.S. government to end its 58-year blockade of Cuba. He also urges listeners to come to Cuba themselves to see revolution’s results.

“We’ve got resolutions from Alabama, Helena, Montana, Sacramento, Richmond and Oakland, California, Hartford, Connecticut, Detroit, Seattle, Minneapolis-St. Paul and both houses of the California legislature, along with the Michigan Senate. We’re working on Chicago and Washington, D.C.,” he added. Helena, Hartford and St. Paul, Minnesota., are state capitals.

Possibilities for U.S.-Cuban trade are a big selling point in those resolutions, Fraga said. But so are instances of cooperation between the two countries. That includes fighting terrorism, cooperating against human trafficking in the Americas and fighting the Ebola virus in Africa. There, the U.S. built and funded clinics and Cuba sent the doctors.

That’s also where collaboration between Cuba and Roswell Park shines forth.

Cuba’s medical system is known for the breadth of its care, its state-paid medical training, its high doctor-to-patient ratios, its excellent health outcomes – in many areas, equal to or better than in the U.S. – and its advanced medical research.

Ironically, that advanced research is a result of the blockade, which the U.S. calls an embargo. The blockade forced Cuba to develop its own biotechnology and medical research facilities, which the Cuban government has generously funded ever since, Fraga notes. The research has produced a range of pioneering results, according to a peer-reviewed April 2018 article in *Medicc Review*.

So with the encouragement of New York Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo, the famed institute teamed up in April 2015 with Cuba’s Center for Molecular Immunology (CIM) to test a Cuban-developed anti-lung cancer vaccine in the U.S. Trade in scientific and medical goods and processes is an exception to the long-standing blockade, which the U.S. calls an embargo, of Cuban goods and services.

The Cuban center had field-tested the vaccine, Cimavax, there. It’s reduced antibody responses in lung cancer patients and thus reduced future tumor growth. But a clinical trial in the U.S., with authorization and follow-up judgement by the federal Food and Drug Administration of whether it could be produced and marketed here, is the world “gold standard” for vaccines.

The point of the Roswell Park project was to get testing underway and, from its results, craft the required new drug investigation application for FDA to review, Roswell Park's director, Dr. Candace Johnson, told medical journals then.

The joint Cuban-Roswell Park clinical trial, involving hundreds of patients, from Oct. 2016-Nov. 2017, showed Cimavax succeeded in quelling lung cancer tumors. There are still hurdles to overcome, the *Medicc* article reported: U.S. "foreign assets control" rules, restricting whether Cuban-made medicines and vaccines can be widely used in the U.S. beyond clinical trials.

"Joint efforts by CIM and RPCI bring new hope to lung cancer patients by offering them the results of efforts to obtain new and more effective therapies. The... joint work paves the way for other academic institutions and companies to engage in bilateral collaboration to develop new therapies, also needed to limit or eliminate toxicity seen with other cancer treatments." Such therapies "may also lead to more cost-effective care for cancer patients and for those suffering other life-threatening diseases," *Medicc's* authors, all clinical medicine physicians, reported.

Which is why Fraga touts the CIM-Roswell Park cooperation as an example of what could happen, to both nations' benefit, if the blockade ends. U.S. patients would benefit from advanced Cuban-developed vaccines. Cuba would get more U.S. investment in biomedical research and, after approval, marketing.

Cuba could also benefit, Fraga admits, by gaining a new, big and closer market for all of its goods, not just vaccines, and by cutting the cost of its imports. It lost 80% of its trade when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and must expensively import food from non-U.S. sources, for example.

There are two cautions, however. One is the political climate in the U.S. GOP President Donald Trump and the few U.S. lawmakers who pay attention to U.S.-Cuban relations – a low priority on Capitol Hill – side with the aging anti-Castro anti-Revolution Cuban refugees, most of whom reside and vote as a bloc in South Florida.

Even the doctors in *Medicc* recognized Trump's anti-Cuba stand could cause problems.

"Uncertainties plague the future of U.S.–Cuba collaboration in cancer research under the change in U.S. administration," they laconically wrote. "While under the Obama administration, the two countries were able to advance in establishing scientific links, it is uncertain whether the Trump administration will go along the same lines or will erect barriers to those ties," their journal article said.

The other caution is Cubans' rightful refusal to return to the state of relations that existed before Fidel Castro threw out corrupt President Fulgencio Batista and his corporate cronies 60 years ago, ending decades of U.S. domination.

"The majority of the Cuban people want respectful relations, not to be a colony like we were before 1959," Fraga says.

As for himself, Fraga, the lawyer son of a farm worker and a housewife who never went to college – he went for free under Cuba's education system – calls serving in the U.S. "a great personal and professional experience."

“I really believe the majority” in the U.S. “want better relations. We can do more and more and more together – and it’s good for both sides and provides opportunities for both sides,” he concludes.

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