
Cuba and Algeria, Moments of Friendship

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Relations between Cuba and Algeria go as far back to the beginnings of the Revolution. Geographically distant, both countries achieved their national liberation at the same time, within a short time of each other.

On the early date of September 26th, 1960, the Prime Minister, Fidel Castro, asserted in the General Assembly of the United Nations that "in the Algerian problem (...) we are one hundred percent on the side of the Algerian people's right to their independence". The North African country was waging a bloody war against French colonialism, whose atrocities were systematically denounced in the newspaper Revolution.

Shortly after, in June 1961, Cuba recognized the Algerian revolutionary government. No State in the Western Hemisphere had done so up to that moment, according to what the political analyst Leonel Nodal has written.

In turn, Algeria was the first African country where Cuban medical collaboration arrived. As a result of the visit to the Island of the then Prime Minister Ahmed Ben Bella, Fidel Castro affirmed during the inauguration of "Victoria de Girón" Institute of Basic and Preclinical Sciences, on October 17th, 1962, in the Cuban capital:

"(...) There are four million more Algerians than Cubans and colonialism has left them many diseases, but they only have a third ?and even less? of the doctors we have. When it comes to health, the situation is truly tragic.

That's why I told the students that we needed fifty doctors as volunteers to go to Algeria.

I'm sure that there will be no shortage of volunteers... Today we can send only fifty, but in eight or ten years, who knows how many, and we will be helping our brothers..."

The words of the leader of the Revolution were heard in a context in which they seemed preposterous: after the victory of January 1959 there was a huge exodus of doctors; about half of the almost more than 6,000 who left the country. However, solidarity and popular enthusiasm made it possible for a team integrated by 29 doctors, three dentists, 15 nurses and eight health technicians to be organized in a short time to travel to the newly independent Algeria.

It corresponded to the commander of the Rebel Army José Ramón Machado Ventura, who served as Minister of Public Health, the mission to lead the group. On May 23rd, 1963, that first contingent marched towards Algeria. The Cuban personnel, financed by the Cuban government, not by the Algerian, were located in six cities, attending the needs raised by the Algerian authorities.

Piero Gleijeses, an Italian-American researcher on Cuba-Africa relations, pointed out in his book *Missions in Conflict* that it was "45 men and 10 women who left voluntarily before the collaboration agreement was signed." For his part, Machado Ventura himself would reflect years later: "it was like a beggar offering help, but we knew that the Algerian people needed it even more than we did and that they deserved it."

That mission laid the foundations for a close relationship between Cuba and the Algerian nation, which would extend to other peoples in Africa.

Translated by Amilkal Labañino / CubaSi Translation Staff
