

## Cuban Revolution: Where to Now?

Sisir K Majumdar

[The author visited Cuba as a member of British Medico-Dental Delegation in November 2010]

Cuba is the largest Caribbean island covering 110,861 sq km and is roughly the size of England. Cuba lies at the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico and is bound on the south by the Caribbean Sea and on the north and east by the Atlantic. It is only 145 km (90 miles) from Florida (USA). More than 400 keys and islets form part of the Cuban island, including the special municipality Isle of Youth (*Isla de la Juventud*). Cuba has more than 300 natural beaches of fine white sand and crystal clear waters. Tourism is the country's main industry, while sugar is the second. It is estimated that 3% of the economy is constituted by remittances sent to family members here by Cuban-Americans. Tourism is safe in Cuba. In addition, the island is blessed with three mountain ranges, two regions of Savanna and numerous valleys as well as scenic waterfalls and cascades. Cuba has a 95.7% literacy rate, the highest in all of Latin America. Life expectancy at birth—male (76%), female (80%)—also the highest in Latin America.

Ethnically, the population is predominantly of mixed African and European ancestry, as the indigenous Taino who inhabited Cuba before Christopher Columbus's (1451-1506) arrival in 1492 were almost entirely wiped out by Spanish invasion (1492-1493) and European diseases. The population (11 million) is currently 51% mixed race, 37% white, 11% black and 1% Asian, Cuba's population of 11 million is a hybrid of several races and cultures.

Religion in Cuba reflects the island's diverse cultural elements. The largest organized religion is the Roman Catholic Church 47% - Protestant 5%, but Afro-Cuban religions (a blend of native African religions and Roman Catholicism) are widely practiced in Cuba. Santeria developed out of the traditions of the Yoruba, one of the African peoples who were imported to Cuba during the 16th through 19th centuries to work on the sugar plantations. Santeria blend elements of Christianity and West African beliefs and as such made it possible for the slaves to retain their tradition beliefs while appearing to practice Catholicism. There are also a number of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in Cuba. However, officially Cuba is a secular State. Many Cubans claim no religious belief at all. It is this mix of races which has contributed to the unique Cuban character. The Cuban people have an infectious charm and warmth which is impossible to resist, they are friendly, happy, and loquacious and possess a great sense of humour. Rural and urban divide is still there but the administration is actively and sincerely trying to minimise it. However, overall it is an egalitarian Society.

### HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF CUBA

1492 : Cuba was 'discovered' by Christopher Columbus (and claimed for Spain), having been previously occupied by Native American Indians.

1511 : Spanish conquest begins under the leadership of Diego de Velazquez, who establishes Baracoa and other settlements.

1526 : Importing of slaves from Africa begins.

1762 : Havana captured by a British force led by Admiral George Pocock and Lord Albemarle.

1763 : Havana returned to Spain by the Treaty of Paris.

1868-78 : War of independence lasts for ten years between Cuban colonials wanting independence from what they see as unjust rule from Spain. The War ends in a treaty and promise of greater autonomy for Cuba.

1895-98 : Second war of independence led by Cuban nationalist Jose Marti. United States declares war on Spain.

1898 : Spain relinquishes all claims to Cuba after military defeat by the United States.

1902 : Cuba swears in its first independent president Tomal Estrada Palma. Cuba is still officially under US protection.

1906-09 : Cuban President Tomas Estrada resigns and the United States invades and occupies Cuba after a rebellion led by Jose Miguel Gomez.

1912 : US forces invade Cuba again to assist in suppressing protests against racial discrimination suffered by black Cubans.

1924 : Gerado Machado becomes dictator of Cuba. Cuba develops in agriculture and mining under his rule.

1933 : Machado overthrown in a coup led by Sergeant Fulgencio Batista.

1952 : General Batista seizes power of Cuba and oversees a corrupt government in which dissent is brutally suppressed.

1953 : Revolutionary Fidel Castro leads a thwarted revolt against the Batista government.

1956 : Fidel Castro begins a guerrilla war from his base in the Sierra Maestra in Eastern Cuba.

1958 : The US stops military aid to General Batista.

1959 : Castro leads guerrilla army of 9,000 into Havana, forcing Batista to leave Cuba. Castro becomes prime minister.

1960 : All US owned businesses in Cuba are nationalised. Cuba openly allies itself with the USSR.

1961 : US plan an unsuccessful invasion by Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs.

1962 : The Cuban Missile Crisis occurs when Castro allows the USSR to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba. The crisis was solved when the USSR agreed to take back the missiles in exchange for the US withdrawing their missiles from Turkey.

1976 : A new socialist constitution is approved by the communist party and Fidel Castro is elected president.

1976-81 : Cuba sends troops to help Angola's left-wing MPLA withstand attacks by South Africa, FNLA and Unita. Assistance is also given to Ethiopia against attacks from Somalia and Eritrea.

1980 : More than 100,000 Cubans flee to the US.

1988 : Cuba withdraws its troops from Angola following an agreement with South Africa.

1991 : Soviet military advisers leave Cuba following the collapse of the USSR.

1993 : The US continues its embargo on Cuba. The US dollar is legalised in Cuba, several state farms are changed into semi-autonomous cooperatives. Cubans are also allowed to own and run very limited small scale businesses for the first time since the revolution.

1998 : Pope John Paul II visits Cuba.

1999 : An international incident is sparked when Cuban child Elian Gonzalez is picked up off the Florida coast after the boat in which his mother had tried to escape to the US capsized. Cuban exiles in Miami begin a campaign to prevent Elian from returning to his father in Cuba. Huge protests occur in Havana calling for the return of Elian.

2000 : Elian returns to Cuba after prolonged court proceedings.

2002 : US Under-Secretary of State John Bolton accuses Cuba of trying to develop biological weapons.

## **HEALTH CARE**

Cuba's system of primary health care covers the entire country and is considered to be unique in Latin America and one of the best in the world. Health services are free for all Cubans. There is an extensive network of centres (442 health clinics and 281 hospitals), in addition to other specialized institutions. The infant mortality rate is 7 per thousand and live

births and life expectancy at birth is 77 years. Cuba is among the six nations of the world that produces *interferon* (INF).

According to World Health Organization, Cuba provides one doctor for every 170 residents and has the second highest doctor to patient ratio in the world after Italy. Its type B and C meningitis vaccination and Hepatitis B vaccination are unique in the world.

### **CUBAN NATIONAL HEALTH SYSTEM**

The Latin American Institute of Medical Sciences trains many doctors from Latin America, Africa and some East European countries. Medium of instruction is, of course, Spanish. Teachers are fairly up to date with advances in modern medicine.

Article 50 of the Cuban Constitution declares Health and Education as basic right—universal, accessible, free of charge. There are various specialities, polyclinics, specialized clinics (both provincial and municipal).

Health fraternity in Cuba is unique and is extended to 78 countries; 39,036 medical personnel are involved. During 1966-2009, 13,120 doctors and 4,535 health technicians have been trained in Cuba from 108 countries including Portugal (European Economic Community). About 100,000 people with cataract and other eye problems from Latin American and African countries have so far been treated in Cuba. Cuban doctors also set up clinics in many countries in Latin America, Africa, (Nigeria, Algeria, Angola), Qatar, and also in China.

There are two million Cubans exiled in USA; when they come to Cuba for medical treatment, they need to pay.

Preventive medicine and vaccination are compulsory for all Cubans. 75% Cubans born after the Revolution are all vaccinated for preventable diseases.

Mal and under-nourishment is non-existent in Cuba; basic foods (meat, fish, egg, wheat, rice etc.) are all subsidized for all people—rural and urban. There are basic primary health clinics in rural, semi-urban and urban areas with easy access to Specialist Clinics and hospitals.

Cuba commercializes the provision of medical and teaching services overseas and to patients in Cuba as part of the establishment of mutually beneficial economic relations with other countries in the field of health. Health professionals are part of human capital, with a solid vocational training and humanitarian principles with experience in various settings in over 100 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Cuban Medical establishment provides services worldwide of professionals and technicians in 55 medical, 5 dental and 5 Nursing specialities, and 21 profiles in Health Technology.

Medical attention for patients in Cuba is affordable and of quality in a safe and pleasant environment. It offers attention to all conditions in the field of ophthalmology, dermatology, orthopaedics, traumatology, rehabilitation, diagnostic and therapeutic endoscopy, cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, neurological and neuro-surgical diseases, minimally invasive surgery, cardio vascular surgery, hyperbaric oxygenation treatment and retinitis pigmentosa.

Cuba has contributed to the founding of medical schools in a dozen countries. Postgraduate teaching in offer comprises training activities in all medical and dental specialities through courses, diploma courses, Master of Science and doctoral programmes in Cuba and in countries that request it.

## **HAVANA—A CITY OF STATUES**

Statues of Jose Julian Y Perez Marti (1853-1895), who initiated the first revolution against the Spanish rule in 1895-1898, Che (Ernesto) Guevara (1928-1967) decorate the Cuban skyline. There are also statues of the Indian Poet-Philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Nobel Literature Laureate, 1913 on the seaside and of the 16th President (1861-1865) of USA—Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) in a central park.

Havana is a beautiful city, decorated by both Spanish and French architecture. All those spectacular mansions are now used as museums, schools, health centres and are open to all. Unlike many cities in other parts of the world, Havana is totally safe and secure for tourists. But Havana International Airport is a bit chaotic and not suitable enough to handle vast numbers of tourists from Canada, UK, Western Europe etc. For foreigners, Cuba is fairly expensive.

## **HEMINGWAY IN HAVANA**

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961), Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1954, had a sprawling mansion on seaside in Havana. He spent many years in Cuba. The house is now a tourists' attraction. As people know, war, bull fighting and fishing are used symbolically in his work to represent honour, dignity, and primitivism—prominent themes in his short stories and novels, which include “A Farewell to Arms” (1929), “For Whom the Bell Tolls” (1941) and “The Oldman and the Sea” (1952, written in Havana—Pulitzer prize winner).

After the Revolution in 1959, Hemingway commented that it would be good for Cubans. He was right. He was regarded highly by Fidel (Ruz) Castro (1927–) as a great literary genius. They had very good and cordial relations. Both were interested in deep-sea fishing.

## **THE ECONOMY**

It is undergoing structural changes relevant to the pressure of multinational globalized economy but the socialist philosophy is being maintained without any noticeable dilution in any form.

## **EPILOGUE**

Cuba withstood extraordinary attacks by USA like that on the Bay of Pigs in 1961 as well as several attempts on the life of its leader Fidel Castro. Undeterred, it pursued a very active foreign policy, especially in Africa where Cuban troops were deployed against some of the nasty regimes. It provided skilled personnel, especially doctors in large numbers to aid and support local developmental activities. At home, Cuba is something of a showcase for an alternative vision of progress, concentrating on the social sectors where the universal high quality health care that it provided its citizens became a byword. Its sports persons achieved great success and drew worldwide admiration as did its musicians and dancers. The state explores talents in the field of sports, music, dancing etc. in the whole country and provides necessary training and support free of cost. The whole country is a family. Its leader—Fidel Castro became a symbol of revolutionary endeavour and radicals of all hues were drawn to him.

First a socialist person—then a socialist family—then on to a socialist society based on the Marxian principle of “form -each-according-to his-ability to each—according-to-his needs”—then on finally to the socialist state and not in the reverse orders. Cuba seems to have set the ball rolling.

Mutual solidarity between multi-racial Cuban people is unique. Their sense of solidarity with other people of the world (USA included) is also spectacular. It is difficult to make a final comment right now whether this solidarity is skin-deep or deep-rooted or whether it will stand the onslaught of the virus of the globalized economy. If it is sustained, it should be a model for other countries of the world. □□□