

Bush administration snubs Cuban hurricane relief offer

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Among the many offers of aid for New Orleans and Gulf Coast disaster victims that the Bush administration has either blocked, squandered or delayed is that of a substantial emergency medical brigade from Cuba.

The Cuban government of President Fidel Castro offered in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastation to send over 1,000 doctors and 36 tons of medicine and equipment to the disaster zone. After 10 days, the Bush administration has yet to even dignify the Cuban proposal—which has since swelled to more than 1,500 doctors, due to a flood of volunteers—with a reply.

The offer involves real and badly needed aid that is quickly deployable. Cuba is nearer to the affected areas than Miami, barely an hour's plane trip away, twice as close as New York. Moreover, the country's doctors are internationally recognized as among the most experienced and qualified in emergency relief, having participated not only in responding to hurricanes in their own country, but in providing aid to disaster-stricken populations throughout the Americas, Africa and elsewhere.

Cuban doctors are also among the best trained and most experienced in dealing with infectious diseases, including cholera, the first cases of which have been reported in the disaster area.

A group of prominent US physicians that has worked on a project that provides medical training for US students in Cuba sharply criticized Washington's failure to accept Cuba's offer of aid.

"Up to this point there is a clear need for more medical help for Katrina victims," said Peter Bourne, the former special adviser on health in the Carter White House and former assistant secretary general at the United Nations. "The Cuban physicians are accustomed to working in difficult third-world conditions without the resources and supplies that most of us are accustomed to. Since they are just an hour away, it is a shame that they have not been allowed to join our committed medical corps already."

Bourne, the chairman of Medical Education Cooperation With Cuba (MEDICC), was joined by other

doctors—including a former US surgeon general—medical educators and international health experts who expressed "deep concern" that the failure to accept the Cuban brigade would only hinder the struggle to prevent "a second wave of sickness and death."

Among the volunteers in Cuba is Cedric Edwards, a young American from New Orleans. He is newly graduated as a doctor from Cuba's Latin American Medical School, which trains thousands of medical students from around the world, including 65 from poor and minority communities in the US.

"I am almost sure that the government of my country will not accept the aid, because of politics," Edwards told the Cuban newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*. He said he had learned that his own family had been evacuated from their home in New Orleans, which was now under water.

"Unfortunately the lives of many people have less importance than politics," he said. "But that doesn't matter to me. I want to be there to help my people. I am sure that they don't think about the people, about the majority of the population. Those who need aid the most are the poor and this offer would help them the most."

Edwards added, "It doesn't make sense that my country goes off making wars over there to protect the world from terrorism if it doesn't know how to protect its own citizens."

In a lame attempt at irony, White House press spokesman Scott McClellan dodged a question about the administration's response to the Cuban offer by declaring, "We would certainly hope that Castro would offer freedom to his people."

It is hardly likely that many Cubans would like to experience the "freedom" offered to disaster victims of New Orleans, who were left free to die in the streets and who are now being forcibly evicted from their homes and relocated to shelters that have all the characteristics of detention camps. They, like the rest of the world, have watched in horror the images of babies and old people dying from official neglect in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Cuba, an impoverished island nation that has been

subjected to a 45-year economic blockade by successive US governments, stands in stark contrast to the US when it comes to disaster prevention and relief. While officials in Washington are continuing the refrain that no one could have foreseen the hurricane and suggesting that those left in New Orleans and other disaster areas are responsible for their own deaths, the Cuban authorities have proven in practice that such tragedies are avoidable.

Last July, Cuba weathered Hurricane Dennis and in September of last year Hurricane Ivan—two of the most powerful storms to strike the Caribbean in the last century. In the case of Dennis, just 16 people died amid massive damage to island, while Ivan claimed not a single victim. In both cases, Cuba succeeded in evacuating more than 1.5 million people, emptying out entire flood-prone coastal areas. People were provided buses to pre-arranged shelters staffed with medical personnel and stocked with food and water, as well as to private homes that took in the evacuees.

Cuba boasts of an extensive and well-organized civil defense system, free public health care and an extensive education program in relation to hurricanes, all of which—as Katrina made so painfully clear on the Gulf Coast—are lacking in the US.

Even as Cuba was extending its offer of aid, Washington escalated its hostilities against the country. Just this week, Havana filed a formal protest over the US administration's violation of international treaties by denying visas to Cuban officials invited to attend the World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments, which began Wednesday at the United Nations in New York.

And just days after the hurricane struck, immigration Judge William Abbot, in El Paso, Texas, signaled that the US government will not deport the notorious anti-Castro Cuban terrorist Luis Posada Carriles to Venezuela, where he is charged with organizing the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 people. Posada, a longtime CIA agent who has admitted to directing a terrorist bombing campaign against Cuba in the 1990s and has been implicated in numerous assassination attempts against the Cuban president, was picked up on immigration charges in Florida last May.

The judge indicated that Posada's lawyer had established a "prima facie case" that his client could face torture if he were sent to Venezuela. This is doubly ironic, given Washington's routine "rendition" of detainees to foreign countries for the express purpose of having them tortured, and because Posada himself directed the torture of political dissidents in Venezuela when he served as a secret policeman under a right-wing regime there in the 1970s.

"If Adolph Hitler himself applied" for a deferral from deportation on the grounds of an alleged torture threat, Judge

Abbot claimed, he would be forced to grant it.

The government of Venezuela, which has been demonized as part of a new "axis of evil" in Latin America, has also offered disaster relief. Washington has been forced to accept it, as it involves the shipment of an extra million barrels of gasoline from the Venezuelan national oil company Citgo, the US refining and distribution firm that Venezuela bought in 1990. The US administration has no say in the matter. Venezuela has also talked of granting another \$5 million in monetary aid. It is unclear whether the US will allow in Venezuelan medical teams.

Commenting on the US disaster during his weekly radio program last Sunday, President Hugo Chavez charged that the US government "attempts to dominate the world and does not attend to the needs of its people."

Denouncing the Bush administration's failure to provide emergency relief to the people of New Orleans, much less evacuate the city before the hurricane struck, the Venezuelan president said, "How many children died there that could have been evacuated by land, by air, by water? Not one helicopter was moved before the hurricane came. Not one public use vehicle was moved. No bus nor military truck. Nothing. And Mr. Bush is on vacation in Crawford, on his horse."

As Venezuela began shipping fuel and money to the US, Washington's Federal Emergency Management Agency carried a notice on its web site urging that donations be sent to a number of charities, most of them religious. Featured prominently among them is "Operation Blessing," a front for the extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalist politician and broadcaster Pat Robertson. Just a week before the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast, Robertson called publicly for the assassination of Venezuela's president, Chavez, an incitement to terrorism that Washington has refused to condemn.



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