

Relevant news

Significant events have taken place in our country lately.

On October 28, at 7:30 am, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the physical disappearance of Camilo Cienfuegos; the sad event occurred one stormy evening as he was traveling in a light aircraft from Camaguey to the capital, along the north of Cuba.

He had fought his last victorious battle against the tyranny in Yaguajay, at the end of December 1958. The mausoleum was dedicated in that area where the remains of those who fell during the war in the Las Villas North Front or after January 1st, 1959 have been laid to rest; they will later be joined by those who fought with his Invading Column or connected with it in the center of the island, and who are still alive. Somebody then called him the Hero of Yaguajay and the title stuck to him. But he was more than that: he was the Hero of the Antonio Maceo Invading Column. The brave commander was advancing with his light column towards Pinar del Rio, and he would have reached its mountains if he had not received an order from the Sierra Maestra to stay in the center of the island and fight there with Che under his command. It was not necessary to put him at risk in that mission which was an incorrect interpretation of the historic circumstances. On January 2, he started with Che the historic march to the capital. There is so much to research and to reflect on that event!

Following a decision of the Party and the Government, as of this 50th Anniversary his steel silhouette shines together with that of the Heroic Guerrilla from the Revolution Square, guarding the statue of Our National Hero Jose Marti.

Also on October 28, at 9:00 in the morning, as fate would have it, the debate started on the resolution introduced by Cuba against the economic, financial and commercial blockade imposed by the US to our homeland. Numerous leaders from Third World countries spoke moving words that gave testimony of their appreciation for the indomitable and supportive country that for half a century has faced the ruthless and genocidal empire which emerged in the proximity of our island. A great number of countries felt that Cuba's resistance was a struggle for their own right to sovereignty.

The discreet and supportive work of our people from the first years of the Revolution, and its heroic resistance despite the United States' cruel blockade, was not forgotten by the overwhelming majority of the 192 sovereign states of the world.

The irrefutable arguments of our Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez sounded like a terrible pounding in that room sitting at the very heart of New York, and very close to Wall Street.

For the first time in many years of debate, every UN member state took part in the discussion of the thorny and compromising issue.

Even the European allies --members of NATO-- and the developed, consumer-oriented and rich countries that make up the European Community felt obliged to express their disagreement with the economic blockade of Cuba. Our foreign minister gave a vigorous reply to the justifying and plaintive remarks of the US representative.

When the President of the Assembly took a vote on the resolution, of the 192 states present only three delegations voted against Cuba: the United States and its ally in the Palestinian holocaust, Israel, and the island of Palau. An American lawyer with Israeli citizenship, the representative of Palau, --a 281.2 sq. miles territory in the Pacific Ocean which spent nearly fifty years under the Yankee administration--

sided with the United States at the UN. Two other states abstained and 187 condemned the blockade.

However, as fate would have it, these were not the only remarkable events for Cubans that day. That evening marked the end of the visit to our Homeland of Dr. Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO), accompanied by Mirta Roses, Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Both represent the two most important international agencies taking responsibility for that crucial task. Last Tuesday I had the honor of meeting with them.

Since the issue of the A H1N1 influenza epidemic is of such great interest to every nation, especially those of the Third World, which have been the most affected by the consequences of plundering and exploitation, I asked them to make space in their tight schedule to have this meeting.

Despite the concern and efforts of our ministry of Public Health and its information programs intended for our people, I felt it could be advisable to delve into the epidemic subject.

Public health was one of the causes that made a Revolution necessary in Cuba. It is not my intention to relate the progress obtained which has turned us into the country with the largest number of medical doctors per capita in the world –an example of what can be done for other peoples— even when this nation has been blockaded and attacked for half a century by the mighty empire. Our Homeland was not only the victim of a ruthless brain drain but also a target of biological aggressions by the US administration that not only used viruses and bacteria against plants and animals but also against the population. The dengue fever afflicted more than 300 thousand people. Actually, serotype 2 was introduced in Cuba and the hemisphere when it was not present as an epidemic in any other country.

Leaving out many data to make the story short, suffice it to remember in this Reflection that the dengue is transmitted by the mosquito but the A H1N1 influenza spreads more easily and directly through the respiratory tract.

Our people should know that at the end of World War I, an influenza epidemic took the lives of tens of millions of people at a time when the population of the planet hardly exceeded 1.5 billion. On the other hand, humanity had much less scientific and technical resources available than today.

This reality, however, should not lead us to be overconfident. When such epidemics break out, resources are needed to prevent and fight them, as it was the case with yellow fever, polio, tetanus and others, and the vaccines that for years have protected children and the population at large from many extremely harmful diseases.

Today, there are also other types of vaccines, especially those protecting the people from various flu viruses, which are given to those cases at greater risk due to permanent or temporary causes.

Our people should be mindful that it is more difficult to have vaccines against certain viruses because of their genetic mutations, as it is the case of those related to the A H1N1 flu and others.

The highly developed and rich countries have quite sophisticated and costly laboratories. Even Cuba, despite underdevelopment and the Yankee blockade, has been able to establish several labs for the production of vaccines and medications.

Internationally, there is a logical fear of the abovementioned flu, given its dissemination capacity and its effects on certain more vulnerable persons. Aside from the aspects related to the international cooperation offered by our doctors, who have given Cuba great moral authority and prestige, I was interested in examining with the Director General of the WHO the issue of the A H1N1 epidemic. She confirmed to me that the difficulty with the vaccine is that laboratories with the capacity to produce them in Europe, the United States and Canada are turning out a much lower volume of vaccines than are required; there was a great demand in the developed nations and the first vaccines will not be available to the rest of the countries until the end of the year; at the same time, their prices show a marked growing trend. She has included Cuba among the countries which have been given a priority

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due to its international cooperation and its capacity to immediately vaccinate the most vulnerable through its network of hospitals.

Dr. Chan knows that wherever the Cuban doctors are, they will cooperate in the speedy vaccination of the people.

These are obviously positive news for our compatriots. However, we must bear in mind certain circumstances.

It will be several weeks or maybe two or three months before the first vaccines get here.

The main concern of the WHO is that the mutation capacity of the virus may quickly overtake the effect of the vaccines and then it would be necessary to start again the search for another effective vaccine. In my view, this determines the importance of an adequate network of medical services as we have in our country and of the systematic orientation to a population with high educational levels to obtain its cooperation in the relevant actions.

The lack of adequate medical services in many countries, including the United States where nearly 50 million people do not have access to medical care, raises considerably the number of potential victims. That country has declared a state of Health Emergency. Two days ago, I listened to a report that between November and March the A H1N1 flu could be the cause of 90 thousand deaths in the United States since winter favors the development of the epidemic. I wish such estimates are wrong and there is no such damage. With a population that is at least 27 times that of Cuba, it would be tantamount to over 3 thousand deaths in our country, and many million people in the world, in spite of the scientific breakthroughs.

The initial symptoms of the A H1N1 appeared in Mexico in the first quarter of the current year, and almost simultaneously in the United States and Canada. From there it extended to Spain, one of the first European countries where the epidemic spread.

When the current US President lifted the restrictions to Cuban Americans for traveling to Cuba, the epidemic had already extended to many states of the union. Thus, the four countries where the largest number of tourists and other travelers originate were precisely those where the epidemic had mostly spread in the world.

The first carriers of the virus here were travelers from overseas. Relatively few people were infected in our country and for months we had no virus-related deaths but as the virus extended to every province, mainly those with a higher number of relatives resident in the United States, it became necessary to purchase new laboratory equipment for the Pedro Kouri Tropical Medicine Institute and to multiply our efforts, while still fighting dengue.

So, we were faced with the intriguing situation that, on the one hand, the United States authorized the traveling of the largest number of virus carriers while, on the other, it banned the acquisition of equipment and medication to fight the epidemic. Of course, I don't think it was the intention of the US administration, but it is the reality resulting from the absurd and shameful blockade imposed to our people.

With the equipment purchased elsewhere we are in a position to know, with absolute precision, the total number of people affected by the epidemic and those whose death may be related to the presence of the virus.

Fortunately, in addition to the services and the well-trained medical personnel in our country, there is in the international market an antiviral medication particularly effective when given to the people with clear symptoms of carrying the virus and to those providing direct care to them.

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We have that antiviral and also the necessary raw material to continue producing a similar amount to that available; additionally, we shall spare no effort to have the indispensable doses.

Even if many countries fail to provide the international agencies with the relevant information about the epidemic, for lack of networks of services and medical personnel, we know that our government is determined to communicate with absolute accuracy to such agencies the number of cases and deaths related to the epidemic, as we have always done with the public health data of Cuba.

Fortunately, our country has an extensive network of healthcare services. The possibility to provide immediate care to those afflicted by the disease is real; we also have a sufficient number of medical doctors with quality training, many of whom have fulfilled honorable and unforgettable internationalist missions.

Fidel Castro Ruz
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