

Katrina Veterans Learn About Cuba's Hurricane Management

By Elizabeth Newhouse

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Introduction

In early December, the Center for International Policy's Cuba Project took Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré (ret.), "the hero of Katrina," to Cuba to look at how the Cubans prepare for and respond to hurricanes and other natural disasters. In 2005, the commander of the U.S. First Army, General Honoré arrived in New Orleans as head of the Joint Task Force Katrina and turned around the disintegrating situation. Since then, he has written, lectured, and consulted on disaster management, with the goal of fostering a culture of preparedness in the United States, similar to what the Cubans have. Also on the trip were John Barry, New Orleans flood control expert and best-selling author of two books on natural disasters, *Rising Tide*, the story of the great Mississippi flood of 1927, and *The Great Influenza*, about the 1918 pandemic, and Alberto Vazquez de la Cerda, oceanographer and retired vice admiral of the Mexican navy.

10,000 Foreign Graduates

The group's first visit was to the Latin American Medical School (ELAM), which for 12 years has been offering a free medical education—including courses in disaster medicine—to disadvantaged youth from many countries, including the United States, who then return to their communities to practice. Some 10,000 students from 67 countries have now graduated from ELAM. In addition, according to Vice Rector Dr. Martiza Gonzalez Bravo, eleven foreign medical schools include Cuban faculties, with a total enrollment of more than 30,000 students. In all, she calculates, Cuba is responsible for training 50,000 medical students from 115 countries, a formidable number and one that will invariably help transform the health systems in many countries.

Cuba's Henry Reeve Brigade, a cadre of doctors specially trained in disaster medicine, includes graduates of ELAM, said Dr. Gonzalez. They have been airlifted into Chile, Pakistan and Haiti to help in the aftermath of earthquakes. The brigade was actually formed in 2005 with the intention of sending 1,600 medical professionals to assist during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but the offer was declined by the United States. Although this was taken as a political rebuff, it was not meant to be, said General Honoré. "There was a need in the first couple of days, but by the time the brigade could have arrived, we were in the process of evacuating people from the city." Noting the value of Cuba's medical diplomacy, however, he had urged the State Department to help transport the Henry Reeve Brigade to Haiti after the earthquake.

Today, 119 Americans are enrolled in Cuban medical schools (all foreign students spend their first two years at ELAM and then disperse to medical schools around the country). The CIP delegation met Graham Silva, a second-year student from Dallas, Texas, who noted the heavy focus on primary care. "When medical students in the U.S. are studying pathology, we're learning how to do a physical exam." According to Silva, medical costs in the United States run \$7,000-8,000 annually per person, whereas Cuba spends a total of \$253. Cuba's resources go into prevention, whereas the focus in the United States is on treating illnesses, he pointed out.

The Next Disaster: Climate Change

Dr. Guillermo Mesa Ridel, director of the Latin American Center for Disaster Medicine (CLAMED), the next meeting's host, has as his adage, "Disasters occur when hazards meet vulnerabilities." And his institute, part of the Ministry of Public Health and under Cuba's civil defense system, appears to leave few stones unturned in its efforts to root out all possible vulnerabilities—structural, functional, social, cultural—that could be susceptible to hazards of any kind. For each possible hazard (hurricanes, chemical spills, epidemics etc.), there's a plan for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, organized by stages.

In disaster medicine, Cuba offers short courses, diplomas, master's degrees, and doctorates. It has an international presence in the field through its publications, website, advisory roles and exchanges. In March 2013 it will hold a Second Congress on Health and Disasters that will address, among other topics, the potential health problems brought on by climate change.

General Honoré expressed his admiration for the Cuban system. In the emergency management field, he said, "we all share the concept of prevention, preparation, response, and recovery, but Cuba's deliberate plan for disaster reduction is something the U.S. needs to be more aware of." He was also impressed with the Henry Reeve Brigade, calling it "very innovative." John Barry applauded the Cuban efforts and noted that he advises the Center for Refugees and Disaster Response at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, which also puts physicians on the ground. He and Dr. Mesa discussed Cuba's centralized action plan for the H1 N1 virus. This year 89% of the vulnerable population has been vaccinated.

Wayne Smith announced that in March 2012 CIP will hold a major trilateral conference in New Orleans, with participants from the United States, Cuba and Mexico, to discuss and exchange ideas on all aspects of natural disaster preparedness.

In Defense of Playa

As on other trips, the civil defense briefing took place at the Havana Aquarium in the suburb of Playa, hosted by Francisco Sanchez Perdomo, the secretary of the provincial assembly governing the city of Havana. He first introduced the facility's deputy director who spoke about lessons learned from strong and devastating sea surges in 1992 and 1993. With a precise disaster reduction plan in place that included staff training, stronger construction, and animal evacuations, the aquarium in 2005 withstood Hurricane Wilma with minimal damage and no animal deaths. He pointed out that surprise sea surges unrelated to hurricanes have brought the most damage to the area. Like tsunamis and earthquakes, these are very hard to predict; only the animals seem to know when they are coming.

Sanchez said that the province of Havana has 15 municipalities of which Playa is one; each has a civil defense system like that of the province with eleven economic groups (food, water, electricity, transportation, health, construction, etc.) that work to guarantee the basic needs of all citizens in the event of a disaster. Both at the provincial and the municipal levels, officials have a wealth of detailed information about the population and structures therein. For example, Havana civil defense knows that in the case of a category 1 or 2 hurricane, they will have to move 195,600 people and in category 3-4-5 hurricanes, they will have to move 677,510 people, of whom 141,397 will go to shelters and the rest will relocate to the homes of family and friends. They know that five of the municipalities are vulnerable to flooding from heavy storms and cold fronts, in addition to hurricanes. If moderate or strong floods occur, 33,400 people would have to move. They are also preparing for earthquakes, even though they have not had any. "Climate change could affect that," Sanchez noted.

Playa's young mayor, Edelio Rodriguez Ordunez, gave a similarly detailed assessment of the needs of Playa's population of 177,773 and 53,862 residences. He pointed out that Cuba has a civil defense law and that all citizens must comply with it. Cubans do not hesitate to evacuate when told to do so because they know the dangers and, importantly, that Rodriguez guarantees the safety of their possessions.

Cooperation is Key

Meteorologist Armando Caymanes Ortiz spoke to the group at the Institute of Meteorology, overlooking Havana Bay and the Old City. Weather events the Institute watches include severe local storms, intense thunderstorms,

tornados, sudden floods, cold fronts, and hurricanes. Many more Cubans, an average of 63 annually, are killed by lightning than by hurricanes. Flash flooding, most of it coastal, can happen quickly and is very hard to forecast. Tornados are infrequent and take place mostly in the interior.

For hurricanes and, when possible, other severe weather events, the Institute's forecast center issues an early warning that spurs civil defense to action. Strong coordination with civil defense and the media enable alerts and forecasts to be issued with a single voice. All Cuba's TV stations give out exactly the same information as a hurricane approaches.

The science of tracking has improved, and models are now much better. A "cone of probability" narrows and becomes more precise the closer a hurricane gets. In 2011, there were 18 named tropical hurricanes, but fortunately none hit Cuba, noted Caymanes.

John Barry pointed out that while Cuba can mandate an evacuation before a hurricane strikes, in the United States there is a credibility factor that makes evacuating in good time very difficult, especially for a city the size of New Orleans.

Admiral Vazquez ended the discussion with a plea for cooperation among Mexico, Cuba, and the United States on the science of hurricanes, similar to that which exists for tracking and forecasting them.

No Optimism About the Relationship

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Rene J. Mujica, an analyst in the North American division, said that although Obama came into office with a different approach toward Cuba, creating a more favorable climate, not nearly as much substantive progress has been made as they'd hoped. Three rounds of talks have been held but nothing much has been accomplished. At the margins of these talks, Cuba has presented proposals on matters of interest to both countries, such as drug trafficking, migration, and disaster prevention, that could be dealt with immediately, pending resolution of the larger, thornier issues. However, the United States has either rejected or ignored the proposals, according to Mujica.

That the United States indefinitely postponed the last round of talks scheduled for June 2011 shows Obama's lack of will to move forward. And the outlook is not optimistic. "We are unsure what will happen with the presidential elections a year away," Mujica said, "and with a Republican administration we could go back to a rougher relationship."

In response to a question about imprisoned USAID contractor Alan Gross and whether an exchange with the Cuban Five might be possible, Mujica rejected the idea of an "exchange" but left the door open for some type of deal. However, "With the elections coming up, I don't see much chance that Obama will move."

General Honoré noted that the group's meetings on hurricane preparedness presented excellent opportunities to build relationships that will advance improvements in forecasting. Admiral Vazquez reiterated his belief that we must work together on the science, citing how well Cuba and Mexico cooperate on oil disaster prevention, and urged the sharing of real time data.

Between Cubans and Cuban-Americans

The group then proceeded to the United States Interests Section, where Deputy Chief of Mission Charles "Chip" Barclay noted too that on the rhetorical level the relationship had changed significantly since President Obama came into office. But the real action, he feels, is not between the two governments but between the Cubans and the Cuban-Americans. Annual remittance funds of nearly \$1 billion are helping set up small businesses and will be instrumental in the newly opened housing market; mechanics are busy refurbishing cars for the use of Cuban-Americans visiting the island.

In response to a question about what will happen after Raul, Barclay speculated that there will be an acceleration of economic reform, but he does not expect political changes before or after. There are too many stakeholders, and the current cadre of leadership is not interested in change, he said. Cuban-Americans are not a factor, as they do not now have a political foothold on the island.

Barclay assured the group that the United States will be talking to the Cubans about the potential for an oil spill

from drilling off Cuba's north coast. Discussions will take place in various multilateral settings, beginning with a conference in the Bahamas the following week. Progress on this issue will become evident over the next year, he said.

With regard to the proposal for environmental cooperation that the Cubans had put forward in 2009, Barclay made clear that though there would be no formal declaration, cooperation is already happening. "We have not turned down any scientist who wanted to go [to the U.S.] in the two years I've been here," he said.

Barclay had visited Alan Gross just the day before. He said the Cuban charges against Gross were innocuous and had nothing to do with subversion or undermining the state, only with distributing plug-ins for uploading to satellites for the internet. However, he sees the case as hard to move forward.

Cuba is no longer subjecting dissidents to long-term prison sentences but rather short-term detentions. "The big red line," he said, "is mounting a public demonstration." Those who do are quickly picked up and taken away. Dissidents have no platform and no voice. Reliable internet access is available to only a tiny percentage of Cubans, 2-3%. Cuban bloggers such as Yaoni Sanchez, who are known in the U.S. and elsewhere, are almost unknown in Cuba.

Barclay noted the very good work Cuba does on the medical front in many countries, but said that many Cubans questioned this allocation of a scarce resource when domestic needs are so great.

DELEGATION PARTICIPANTS

1. **Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré** (ret), former commander of Joint Task Force Katrina.
2. **John Barry**, New Orleans flood control expert and author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*.
3. **Alberto Vazquez de la Cerda**, oceanographer and retired vice admiral of the Mexican navy.
4. **Randy Poindexter**, International Cuba Society.
5. **Dr. Wayne Smith**, senior fellow at CIP and Cuba Project director.
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