The United States Longest War

By Mel Goldberg

I had always heard that despite the United States' embargo, Cuba's health care system was a model for developing countries, with more well-trained physicians per capita than the United States. Cuban doctors were in demand because of their expertise in public health. So I was surprised on a recent visit to Havana to see virtually empty shelves at a *farmacia*, so unlike the *farmacias* here in Mexico. Some antibiotics were available, but not the medicine I use, readily accessible here.

The cause for the scarcity of medicine, in large part, has been the United States' embargo of Cuba, an embargo that might properly be called Washington's longest war spanning over fifty years under ten American presidents. Since 1962, the United States has waged a cruel war against Cuba's people using the crushing force of its power and embargo.

After the failed Bay of Pigs invasion (1961), the successful Cuban Missile Blockade (1962), and the unsuccessful Operation Mongoose to “help Cuba overthrow the Communist regime” (1962), American military leaders urged President Kennedy to conduct an air and sea invasion.

Kennedy and all eight presidents since opted for a strangling embargo as the best way topple Fidel Castro without precipitating World War III. Acting like a petulant bully who didn’t win, Washington resorted to figuratively kicking his opponent’s cat.

Unable to eliminate a communist dictator only ninety miles from Miami, and because Castro symbolically gave them the finger, the United States has inflicted pain and suffering on the Cuban people. Other dictators, no matter how brutal, were tolerated as long as they had things Washington needed and were on the other side of the globe or the equator.

The world has condemned the United States’ arrogance. For the past seventeen years the United Nations 192-member General Assembly has voted overwhelmingly to condemn The United States’ economic, commercial and financial embargo against Cuba. Last year the vote was 185-3.

What has the embargo accomplished? One painful result of the embargo is that today, many types of goods are unavailable, making life difficult for the Cuban people. The U.S. embargo against Cuba is one of the few that includes both food and medicine, obstructing the Cuban government’s ability to supply inexpensive or free food to nurseries, schools, hospitals, and homes for the elderly. The current global economic problems and Cuba’s limited finances, coupled with the disappearance of aid from the former Soviet Union have effectively crippled progress.

In the past fifteen years, Cuba’s model health care system has become threatened by these serious shortages of food and pharmaceutical products. The intended or unintended effect has been on the health and nutrition of the most vulnerable citizens - women, children, and the elderly - who rely on access to Cuba’s free health care.

And as if the embargo were not enough, Washington effectively prohibits foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba, a sanction that blocks access to medical supplies, forcing Cuban physicians to face a lack of critical medicines, diagnostic tools, and vaccines that

had previously been available. Non-U.S. companies have been threatened with lawsuits in U.S. courts.

This loss of suppliers restricts delivery of critical laboratory products, radiology equipment, operating tables, and surgery equipment. The production of vaccines within Cuba is further hampered by the frequent lack of spare parts and of essential components that must be imported, shortages that make it difficult to treat breast cancer, heart or kidney diseases, or HIV.

The embargo also contradicts human rights, which the people in the United States desire for themselves and claim to desire for the rest of the world.

The unilateral sanctions violate both the spirit and letter of the United Nations Charter and the fundamentals of international law. This embargo causes unjustified suffering for millions of guiltless Cubans whose only goal is to live a decent, productive life. Several Cubans told me the historical and childish animosity between Fidel Castro and Washington will not end until Fidel dies. But why wait? It is time for this embargo, this war against innocent Cuban people, to end.

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