

Cuba is the Second Haiti

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Haiti was the first Cuba—actually, Cuba is the second Haiti. "Haiti was isolated at birth - ostracised and denied access to world trade, finance, and institutional development" (Beckles). Haiti punished by France, with the support of other Western, slave-owning nations. The French lifted their embargo after 21 years, extorting a massive 'Independence debt' for the loss of their 'property'—which included members of the Haitian Cabinet. The US withheld recognition from Haiti for 58 years. The US embargo on Cuba is 48 years old, and still counting.

The embargo—blockade—was punishment for Cuba's declaration of economic independence from the US. After the U.S. occupation in 1898, Cuba had become a virtual American colony. The Platt Amendment, incorporated into the Cuban Constitution of 1901, gave the US the unilateral right to intervene in Cuban affairs. American capital poured into the country, and U.S. firms acquired vast swathes of Cuban land, the sugar mills, utilities, railways, factories and hotels.

All this was a thorn in the side of Cuban patriots. To them, the War of Independence from Spain, launched in 1868, was unfinished business. The Revolution that triumphed in 1959 was the culmination of a struggle that had gone on for nearly one hundred years. The struggle continues.

The Revolution carried out a massive agrarian reform—naturally US properties were affected. The Eisenhower Administration imposed trade restrictions; Cuba responded by expropriating US property. Acts of sabotage and violence were organised by US-based groups with the collusion of US authorities. It is a recorded historical fact that as early as March 1960 President Eisenhower authorised the CIA

to organise, train and equip a force of Cuban exiles aimed at overthrowing the Cuban Government. The US imposed a total economic commercial and financial embargo in October 1960. It has since been strengthened by additional measures including a travel ban on US citizens and prohibition of foreign-based subsidiaries of US-owned firms from doing business with Cuba.

As a side show to the main drama, the Kennedy Administration (successor to Eisenhower in 1961) determined that Cheddi Jagan, an avowed Marxist, would not be allowed to lead Guyana into Independence. A second Cuba could not happen on Kennedy's watch. An scheme was concocted, with British collusion, to remove Jagan by fomenting ethnic strife and violence and then imposing proportional representation. Jagan was removed in 1964. The squalid episode left a bitter legacy of racial animosity among Indo- and Afro-Guyanese that continues to this day. But that is another story.

The purpose of the embargo was to bring Cuba to its knees. Together with the Bay of Pigs invasion (1961), followed by hundreds of acts of sabotage, intimidation and assassination plots over the years; its aim was to eliminate the leader of the Cuban Revolution and overthrow its government. The Americans had every reason to believe they would prevail. After all, had they not succeeded in overthrowing Mossadegh in Iran in 1952 and Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954?

They did not count on the Cuban will to resist. Cubans believe that "it is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees". When they say "Patria o Muerte"—Fatherland or Death -- they mean it, quite literally. Everyone I have met in Cuba—men and women, from University professors to taxi drivers—has undergone military training. In the event of an invasion, they know exactly where to go and what to do.

I have been reading reports of the imminent collapse of the Cuban economy in the American media for the past 48 years. The Cuban economy must be the most frequently collapsed economy in the world! And one that still manages to afford the basic necessities of a decent life to its citizens. Cuba, with an average per capita income of \$9,700, has a higher level of human development than Trinidad and Tobago, with \$25,700 (UNDP figures, Purchasing Power Parity per capita GDP). Cuba ranks 51st in the world and Trinidad and Tobago 64th. Cuba outranks several other countries in human development, which have a higher per capita income;

among them the Bahamas, Panama and Brazil. All this, in spite of the embargo and the disappearance of Soviet support for nearly two decades. The reason, of course, is the high life expectancy and high enrolment and literacy ratios—a reflection of the priority given to health and education by the Cuban government.

The official American line is that they want to bring “democracy” to Cuba. But America trades extensively with Communist China and with Communist Vietnam; supports a highly undemocratic Saudi regime; and pours billions of dollars into Israel, which continues to deny Palestinians in Gaza the most basic of human rights.

Part of the reason for this contradiction, I think, lies in imperial hubris and fear of the power of example. Historically, America’s rulers have thought of Cuba as lying in their own backyard. John Quincy Adams once famously referred to Cuba as a “ripe fruit” waiting to fall into the US lap. Successful defiance undermines the myth of imperial invincibility. Cuba must be made to pay a high price, in order to teach other potential rebels a lesson. Like Haiti in the 19th century.

But history has a curious habit of reversing itself. Sometimes, the more things remain the same, the more they change. Today, it is America’s rulers who are globally isolated. 187 to 3 in the United Nations General Assembly. The other two are Israel and Palau. Nuff said.

The embargo has manifestly failed. It has merely served to stiffen the resolve of the Cuban people. But it has hurt. Among those who have been hurt are children and the sick who are unable to access vital medical supplies.

A few months ago a close friend and colleague died from cancer. When we first learnt of his illness, we explored the possibility of having him treated in Cuba. But then the answer came back—the drugs needed to treat his particular form of cancer were not available. Today we have heard of some rare cancer treatment drugs, which the Cubans cannot source because of the embargo. I cannot say for sure that these were the drugs needed to treat my friend. I do not know if it would have made a difference. But the information brought home the human cost of the embargo.

The Cubans estimate the total cost of the embargo at just over \$100 billion at current prices. That is 179 percent of the annual Cuban GNP (CIA estimate of the Cuban GNP). The equivalent cost to the United States economy would be nearly \$26 trillion. That's \$84,366 for every member of the US population.

The embargo is inhuman, immoral, and illegal by international law. It has been condemned for the past 18 years by an overwhelming majority of the member states in the United Nations General Assembly. It has been condemned by the member states of the Caribbean Community, CARICOM. It has been condemned by the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean at their first summit in Brazil in 2008. Last year the Summit of the Americas in POS practically collapsed because of the failure to condemn the embargo in the Summit Declaration. The Declaration was not signed by the Heads of State (only by the Chairman, as host).

There are many sane and humane voices in the United States who oppose the embargo. There are commercial interests as well who want to export to and invest in Cuba. It is even questionable that it is supported by the majority of the American people, including the majority of Cuban-Americans, as several polls suggest.

The embargo is a significant detriment to trade between Caricom countries and Cuba. Banks are not allowed to conduct US dollar transactions with Cuba. Last year some of us were trying to send just \$5,000 to Cuba to help pay for the Spanish edition of the *Theory of Plantation Economy* by Best and Levitt. We had no end of trouble; spent weeks trying to find a way to get the money there. What does that mean for Cuba-CARICOM trade? Ships that take cargo to Cuba may not be allowed to call at US ports. Executives of firms that invest in Cuba may be subject to fines and imprisonment in the United States. A Jamaican hotel firm that invested in Cuba had their executives threatened with punitive action by the US authorities. How can the Cuba-CARICOM trade and economic cooperation agreement flourish under these conditions?

The extra-territorial extension of the embargo is obnoxious, illegal and unacceptable. It deserves to be vigorously opposed.

Ultimately it is the pressure from the American people and commercial interests that will lead to the lifting of the embargo. The embargo will be lifted when the political and economic costs to the US power structure exceed the benefits. This will can only be helped by widespread international condemnation.

The determination of the Cuban people to resist is the most potent force of all. It proves the futility of the embargo, even within its own terms.

I want to make the following points. To condemn the embargo is not to declare love of Fidel Castro, or to declare support for Communism, or to endorse every action of the Cuban Government. The member states of the UN which have condemned the embargo for the past 18 years contain governments of every orientation and persuasion. To condemn the embargo is to support a regime of international law and morality, the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states and the right to self-determination.

It is also to show solidarity with the Cuban people, who over the years have shown extraordinary solidarity with the peoples of the world. 20,000 Cubans shed their blood in Angola to help defeat the forces of apartheid—a sacrifice acknowledged by Nelson Mandela. Cuban doctors serving in dozens of countries throughout the world have saved thousands of lives. The Cuban 'Operation Milagro' programme has restored the eyesight of thousands of cataract suffering patients, many from our own region. Thousands of CARICOM students have received scholarships to study medicine and other subjects at Cuban universities, free of cost.

Cuba has done all this, in spite of the embargo. And they have asked for nothing in return; except that we spread knowledge about the embargo. Cuba deserves our solidarity.

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