

Brazil hires 4,000 Cuban doctors to treat poor (Update)

August 22 2013, by Stan Lehman

Brazil will import thousands of Cuban doctors to work in areas where medical services and physicians are scarce, and Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota defended the plan Thursday as a way to give "the best possible medical services for the Brazilian population."

The Health Ministry said in a statement posted on its website that it signed an agreement with the Pan-American Health Organization to hire 4,000 Cuban doctors, who are expected to arrive in Latin America's biggest country by the end of the year. The first 400 are scheduled to arrive within the next few days.

The government is bringing in Cuban doctors after failing to attract enough Brazilian and foreign physicians to its "More Doctors" program meant to send professionals to work in needy urban and rural areas for three years.

The government created the program following mass street demonstrations across Brazil in which protesters demanded better public services.

The effort has drawn the ire of Brazilian doctors, who say there are plenty of homegrown physicians to work in those areas, if only the government would invest in hospital infrastructure and provide better wages in public health care. They also sharply criticize the qualifications of the Cuban doctors.

Government officials from President Dilma Rousseff on down have repeatedly criticized Brazilian physicians seeking to block the import of foreign doctors as elitists who only want to work in cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where they can earn big incomes in pristinely equipped private hospitals. In July, the government proposed making medical students work in poor areas as part of their residencies, drawing widespread criticism from doctors as too much official meddling in training. Congress is expected to take up the measure in the coming months.

The Health Ministry said 3,500 cities and towns across Brazil are taking part in the "More Doctors" program and have requested 15,000 physicians. So far 1,300 have signed up. Of that total, 1,000 are Brazilian and 300 are either Brazilian who studied overseas or foreign doctors, mainly from Argentina, Spain and Portugal.

Foreign doctors in the program will receive a monthly salary of \$4,080. In the case of the Cubans, the government will send their wages to Cuba's government through the Pan-American Health Organization. Cuba will then decide how much each doctor will receive.

Foreign doctors will have to first spend three weeks studying Brazil's public health system and the Portuguese language, the ministry said.

The Federal Medical Council, which oversees the licensing of Brazilian doctors, said in a statement that the hiring of Cuban doctors who cannot speak Portuguese and whose diplomas have not been revalidated locally violates Brazilian laws and human rights by endangering the lives of Brazilians in poor and remote regions.

Speaking to a congressional committee, Patriota defended the program, saying that "there are a lot of Cuban doctors willing to work in the interior of Brazil and many have experience working in areas like

Africa."

The medical council's own statistics show that just 8 percent of Brazilian doctors work in cities of 50,000 people or less, which represent 90 percent of all the country's municipalities, illustrating the poor distribution of physicians.

Cuban medical schools graduate large classes each year, and those doctors have increasingly been a key source of revenue for the country since the medical missions program began in the early 1960s.

A Cuban Health Ministry official said last year that 38,868 Cuban medical workers, including 15,407 doctors, were working in 66 nations.

Some 30,000 Cuban health care professionals are believed to be in Venezuela alone, which provides the island with about 92,000 barrels of oil a day worth an estimated \$3.2 billion a year.

Analysts say the export of medical services adds about \$6 billion a year to Cuba's economy. By contrast, tourism, the official No. 1 source of incoming cash, brought in \$2.5 billion in 2011, according to the most recent statistics available.

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