

Cuba's Tower of Babel gives free medical education

October 30 2013, by Rigoberto Diaz

On a beach outside Havana stands the crown jewel of Cuba's renowned international program of medical education, training 13,000 students from around the world free of charge.

"Studying medicine was my life's dream. But for a poor family like mine, that was impossible," 18-year-old Merady Gomez of Honduras told AFP at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM).

"Here, I am making my dream come true, and I have high hopes of being able to help my country. This school is a blessing."

Some 25 kilometers (16 miles) west of the Cuban capital, the school welcomes [students](#) from 124 different [countries](#), most of them from low-income families.

Spread across 120 hectares (297 acres) dotted with palm trees, its 28 buildings, recently painted in blue and white, hold more than 130 classrooms, labs, dormitories, cafeterias and a hospital.

ELAM is one of three universities launched by Cuban revolutionary leader and former president Fidel Castro to boost his international credentials, with the other two dedicated to sports and film.

But unlike the film school, it has always been free, representing Castro's view that healthcare is a fundamental right.

With an average of one doctor per 148 inhabitants, Cuba is among the best-served countries in terms of health, according to the World Health Organization.

Ahmed Bokovi, a 22-year-old from Chad, thanked "God and Cuba" for giving him this "great opportunity to study medicine for free."

Douglas Macheri, 20, of Zimbabwe said he was following in the footsteps of his father, who studied medicine in Cuba before returning home to treat the poor in his country.

Of the 13,282 students currently enrolled, only 1,349 live in Santa Fe, where the first two years of the six-year program are taught.

The rest of the coursework is taught in more than a dozen institutions spread across the communist island, all in Spanish.

The school trains students in nearly all medical specialties, and students often choose their focus depending on the needs of their home country.

"One of our big successes is that we are like a big family, despite our many ethnic, cultural, religious or political differences," said Victor Diaz of the school's external relations team.

In the 14 years since it first opened its doors, explained co-director Heidi Soca, ELAM has graduated 17,272 doctors from 70 countries, "with the basic objective of having them return to their home countries and work with the most disadvantaged people."

No politics allowed

But the school is not without its critics. Many of Cuba's opponents abroad claim the island's communist regime is using school to

indoctrinate a global network of leftist medical professionals.

Soca rejects this.

"No politics at school," she insisted. "Here, we study medicine humanely and in solidarity... Not like other countries where medicine is considered a merchandise."

She said critics were just frustrated to see ELAM students compete with more "commercial doctors".

"Our students often go work in places where local doctors do not want to go, and their scientific and technical level is recognized around the world," she added.

ELAM's internationalist mission carries it beyond Cuba's shores. The school leads training programs in 67 countries and serves 26,000 students.

But Cuba has fallen on hard economic times. And ELAM's ability to provide quality education free of charge is being eroded.

Last year, the [school](#) received its first paying students, though they had received grants from their home countries.

"The country's economic hardship is no secret to anyone, and we need to find new sources of funding," Soca acknowledged.

One of the solutions being studied is to make students pay for specialized studies.

Cuba is now being forced to boost the number of bilateral agreements with different countries so that they can pay for part of the costs

currently assumed by Havana.

Among the experts in training is an Ecuadoran couple—Ingrid Toapanda, 28, and Fernando Cruz, 31.

They are finishing a specialization in clinical genetic [medicine](#), after working with the Cuban mission in Haiti and with handicapped people in Ecuador.

"After so many years living away from family, it's true that you lose something. But the reward is this unique opportunity Cuba provides to train us and allow us to give back this knowledge to our people," Toapanda said.

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