

(15)

social

Castro plans to develop Cuba into world medical center

Reuters

HAVANA — President Fidel Castro plans to turn Cuba into a world medical center and export what one Western diplomat called a potentially formidable weapon — doctors.

Castro wants to turn the island into "a world center of medicine, capable of exporting services to many nations or receiving many people for treatment here."

If Castro's dream is fulfilled, it will be a powerful propaganda weapon for raising the prestige of

Cuba and its socialist system, especially in the Third World, the Western diplomat said.

"Medical doctors are a ... necessity in the world," Castro, 55, said during a congress of Cuban health workers earlier this month. "When we think of the necessities of Latin America, Asia, Africa, of the underdeveloped world, millions of doctors are needed and they are not training them anywhere."

The Cuban goal is to graduate 3,000 physicians a year, Castro said.

"I don't think there will ever be too many doctors or public health workers," he said.

The country's progress in 20 years contributes to Castro's optimism. When Castro's rebel army marched into Havana in January 1959, there were 6,286 doctors in Cuba, the Cuban Medical Association said.

Even before the revolutionary government officially introduced

socialized medicine, doctors began to leave the country. By 1961, when Cuba began an ambitious program of medical education, only 3,000 doctors were on the island.

Before the revolution, the only Cuban medical school in Havana turned out about 300 doctors annually, a 1979 report by UNESCO's Economic Commission for Latin America, or CEPAL, said.

Cuban medical schools now

graduate more than 1,000 doctors annually.

Cuba has 16,173 doctors — one for every 600 people, Castro said. CEPAL statistics show there was one doctor for about 1,000 people before the revolution.

Castro said the recently established Cuban institute for tropical medicine "can play a tremendously important role for nations of the Third World."

Cuban medical services could become "an important sphere of the Cuban economy," Castro said.

Many Third World countries have asked Cuba to provide medical aid but all the requests could not be fulfilled.

Already about 1,000 Cuban doctors were in Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Cambodia, South Yemen, Angola, Mozambique, Vietnam and other countries, he said.