

WK-83 politics

secret life

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Doctors — Castro's secret weapon?

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Havana

CUBAN President Fidel Castro plans to turn his island nation into a world medical centre and export what one Western diplomat called a potentially formidable weapon — doctors.

Castro wants to turn Cuba into what he called "a world centre of medicine, capable of exporting services to many nations or receiving many people for treatment here."

The Western diplomat said that if Castro's dream were fulfilled it would be a powerful propaganda weapon for raising the prestige of Cuba and its socialist system, especially in the Third World.

"Medical doctors are a...necessity in the world," Castro, 55, told 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," he said.

Castro said there would be a time when Cuba would be graduating as many as 3,000 physicians a year.

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

The president's optimism about Cuba's medical potential derives in part from the country's progress over the last 20 years.

When Castro's rebel army marched into Havana in January, 1959, there were 6,000 physicians in Cuba, according to the Cuban Medical Association.

Even before the revolutionary government officially introduced socialized medicine, doctors

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

Before the revolution, according to a 1979 report by UNESCO's Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), Cuba's single medical school in Havana turned out about 300 doctors annually.

By 1964 the number of medical school graduates reached 400 a year and by 1970, there were medical schools graduating 900 doctors a year.

Today Cuban medical schools graduate more than 1,000 doctors annually.

Castro said in a recent speech that Cuba now had 16,173 physicians — one for every 600 people. According to CEPAL statistics there was one doctor for

approximately 1,000 people before the revolution.

An unpublished report by the Cuban health ministry in 1977 said that if Cuba graduated 1,000 doctors a year the island would have 28,000 physicians by the year 2,000.

CEPAL's 1979 report found that Cuba's public health policy "permits it to reach the objective established by member governments of the Panamerican Sanitary office to extend medical coverage to the entire population..."

The report said that in 1958 the government of dictator Fulgencio Batista appropriated 16.4 million pesos (12 million dollars) for public health. Two years later, with Castro's revolutionary government in power, the outlay had risen to 60 million pesos (44 million dollars), in 1980,

Cuba's national assembly appropriated 445 million pesos (325 million dollars) for public health.

During a visit to Cuba last August, the director-general of the World Health Organization, Dr Halfdan Mahler, pointed to Cuba's infant mortality rate, which decreased from an official 33.4 per thousand in 1958 to 19.4 per thousand in 1980.

Dr Mahler also said the increase in life expectancy was a major indicator of improvements in public health in Cuba.

The Panamerican Health Organization reported in 1961 that life expectancy in Cuba was 69.7 years. Castro says the figure in 1980 was 72 years.

Castro says: "We can become an encyclopedia of world medicine, and above all of the Third World."

Referring to a recently established Cuban institute for tropical medicine, he said: "It can play a tremendously important role for nations of the Third World."

The president believes Cuban medical services could become "an important sphere of the Cuban economy."

Many Third World countries had asked Cuba to provide medical aid but there were not enough doctors to fulfil all the request.

He said there were already about 1,000 Cuban doctors in Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Kampuchea, South Yemen, Angola, Mozambique, Vietnam and other nations.

Castro said that while Cuba could make an important business out of medical services to non-

Cubans, "there will always be a number of nations to which we will give free medical aid — the very poor nations that have difficult situations."

He said that in Ethiopia, where Cuba has sent 150 doctors free of charge, a European doctor would cost the Ethiopian government 40,000 dollars a year.

Foreign currency earnings, Castro said, are not his main concern in projecting Cuba as a medical powerhouse.

"What motivates me in the first place is the improvement in human qualities our doctors would derive from the experiences."

He hoped "we can use this juncture that destiny has thrust before us to become the doctors of the Third World." (Reuters)