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FEA:SCANDAL

1986
DOCTORS' SCANDAL SHOCKS PROFESSION: BRINGS STRONG SANCTIONS:
BY LIONEL MARTIN

HAVANA, OCT 20, REUTER -- THE NEWS, GIVEN PROMINANT DISPLAY IN CUBA'S MASS MEDIA, THAT A GROUP OF DOCTORS AND MEDICAL TECHNICIANS IN THE PROVINCE OF PINAR DEL RIO TO THE EAST OF HAVANA HAVE BEEN SANCTIONED WITH JAIL SENTENCES RANGING UP TO EIGHT YEARS FOR FRAUDULENT PRACTICES, INDICATES THAT EVEN CUBA'S MEDICAL PROFESSION, WHICH PRIDES ITSELF ON ITS HIGH ETHICAL STANDARDS, CAN SUFFER FROM THE TARNISH OF CORRUPTION.

MOST CUBAN AND FOREIGN OBSERVERS HERE CONSIDER THE CASE AN ABBERATION. IT IS THE FIRST MAJOR SCANDAL OF ITS KIND TO HIT THE CUBAN MEDICAL PROFESSION SINCE SOCIALIZED MEDICINE WAS INTRODUCED FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTIONARY VICTORY A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO.

THE DOCTORS AND MEDICAL TECHNICIANS WERE FOUND GUILTY OF SELLING OR HELPING TO OBTAIN MEDICAL CERTIFICATES WHICH FALSELY ASCRIBED AILMENTS THAT HELPED SOME TO OBTAIN EARLY RETIREMENT PENSIONS,, DISABILITY BENEFITS OR EXEMPTION FROM COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE.

THE SCANDAL WAS ANNOUNCED IN THE HEAT OF A CAMPAIGN INITIATED BY CUBAN PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO AIMED AT FERRETING OUT CORRUPTION AMONG GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND CRACKING DOWN HARD ON DELINQUENTS OF ALL KINDS. THE SIXTY YEAR OLD CUBAN LEADER SAID IN LATE SEPTEMBER THAT "WE HAVE TO OVERCOME THE INDISCIPLINE, IRRESPONSIBILITY AND CORRUPTION SO THAT IT DOES'NT BECOME A CANCER."

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THE DOCTORS AND MEDICAL TECHNICIANS WERE TRIED IN CRIMINAL COURT. ONE NEUROLOGIST WAS SENTENCED TO SEVEN YEARS IN JAIL, A UROLOGIST AND AN ORTHOPEDIST WERE EACH SENTENCED TO THREE YEARS IMPRISONMENT AND ALL THREE, AFTER ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS, HAD THEIR RIGHT TO PRACTICE MEDICINE SUSPENDED FOR LIFE. THREE OTHER PHYSICIANS, WHILE NOT RECEIVING JAIL TERMS, WERE ALSO SUSPENDED, ONE FOR LIFE, ANOTHER FOR TWO YEARS AND STILL ANOTHER FOR ONE YEAR. THREE X-RAY TECHNICIANS WERE ALSO SENT TO JAIL, ONE FOR EIGHT YEARS, THE SECOND FOR FIVE YEARS AND THE THIRD FOR ONE YEAR.

THE SCANDAL HAS BEEN RECEIVED WITH ANGER AND CHAGRIN. +ONE IS MOVED TO INDIGNATION BY THINGS SUCH AS THIS,+ THE PUBLIC HEALTH WORKERS' TRADE UNION SAID IN A STATEMENT. +IT PAINS ONE TO DISCOVER THAT THERE EXIST PROFESSIONALS AND TECHNICIANS, TO WHOM THE REVOLUTION AND THE PEOPLE HAVE OFFERED EVERY FACILITY FOR THEIR EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT, WHO BECOME MEDICAL MERCHANTS AND BETRAY THE PRINCIPLES OF MEDICAL PRACTICE IN A SOCIETY SUCH AS OURS.+

GRANMA, THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF CUBA'S COMMUNIST PARTY, WROTE: +OUR SOCIALIST MORALITY DOES NOT ACCEPT THE EXISTENCE OF PROFESSIONALS WHO USE THEIR SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE CONFIDENCE THEY ENJOY AMONG THE PEOPLE, TO OBTAIN PERSONAL BENEFITS THROUGH DECEIT AND FRAUD SUCH AS ADVANTAGES AND PROFITS.+

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ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN THE SCANDAL WORKED AT GOVERNMENT-RUN INSTITUTIONS AS DO MORE THAN NINETY-NINE PERCENT OF THE MEDICAL PERSONNEL IN CUBA. SINCE THE EARLY SIXTIES, ALL MEDICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES HAVE TAKEN OATHS TO FOREGO THE PRACTICE OF PRIVATE MEDICINE. ONLY A HANDFUL OF ~~PRIVATE~~ PRACTITIONERS, ALL OLDER DOCTORS, STILL HAVE PRIVATE PRACTICES.

CUBA'S MEDICAL PROFESSION HAS BEEN ALMOST ENTIRELY RENOVATED SINCE THE TRIUMPH OF THE REVOLUTION IN 1959. AT THAT TIME CUBA HAD SIX THOUSAND PHYSICIANS. BY THE EARLY SIXTIES, THREE THOUSAND OF THEM HAD FLED THE COUNTRY. TODAY CUBA HAS TWENTY-FOUR THOUSAND MEDICAL DOCTORS AND ITS MEDICAL FACULTIES GRADUATE THREE THOUSAND NEW ONES, HALF OF THEM WOMEN, EACH YEAR.

THE DRAMATIC BURGEONING OF CUBA'S FREE OF CHARGE MEDICAL SYSTEM HAS BEEN GUIDED BY CASTRO HIMSELF AS PART OF A MASTER PLAN TO MAKE CUBA THE MAJOR MEDICAL CENTER OF THE THIRD WORLD..

IN ORDER TO MAKE THE AMBITIOUS MEDICAL SYSTEM ECONOMICALLY POSSIBLE IN A POOR COUNTRY, STRICT LIMITS HAVE BEEN PLACED ON THE SALARIES OF DOCTORS. MOST OF THEM RECEIVE MONTHLY WAGES OF BETWEEN THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY PESOS (430 DOLLARS) AND FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY PESOS (676 DOLLARS). THIS COMPARES TO THE MONTHLY SALARY OF A SKILLED WORKER WHO CAN EARN TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY PESOS (307 DOLLARS) OR A HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER WHO MAKES THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY PESOS A MONTH (430 DOLLARS). THE AVERAGE MONTHLY WAGE IN CUBA IS ABOUT ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY FIVE PESOS (202 DOLLARS).

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PRIOR TO THE REVOLUTION VIRTUALLY ALL OF CUBA'S PHYSICIANS PRACTICED IN THE LARGER CITIES. TODAY, CLINICS ARE SPOTTED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, EVEN IN REMOTE MOUNTAINOUS AREAS. AT THE SAME TIME, NEW HOSPITALS HAVE BEEN BUILT IN THE CITIES AND OLDER ONES HAVE BEEN EXPANDED. CONSIDERING THE AUSTERITY THAT REIGNS IN CUBA, MANY FOREIGN MEDICAL OBSERVERS HAVE BEEN SURPRISED TO FIND THE MOST UP-TO-DATE MEDICAL EQUIPMENT IN THE ISLAND'S HOSPITALS.

INTENSIVE CARE UNITS HAVE BEEN INSTALLED IN MOST MAJOR HOSPITALS AND COSTLY DIAGNOSTIC EQUIPMENT BOUGHT WITH HARD CURRENCY SUCH AS CATSCANS AND MAGNETIC RESONANCE SCANNERS ARE NOW BEING USED.

FIDEL CASTRO'S LATEST BRAINCHILD IS THE +FAMILY DOCTOR PLAN+ (MEDICO DE LA FAMILIA). THE IDEA, ALREADY BEING PUT IN PRACTICE, IS TO HAVE A PHYSICIAN IN EVERY LOCAL NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE CITIES AND TOWNS AS WELL AS IN THE MOUNTAINS THAT WILL CARE FOR SEVEN HUNDRED PERSONS. THE DOCTORS WILL LIVE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD IN HOMES NOW BEING BUILT FOR THEM. THEY WILL BE AVAILABLE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY AND, IN CASTRO'S VIEW, WILL BECOME A REGULAR PART OF THE COMMUNITY.

BY THE END OF THIS YEAR, THERE WILL BE OVER EIGHT HUNDRED +FAMILY DOCTORS+ IN HAVANA. BY 1993 CASTRO SAYS THERE WILL BE FOUR THOUSAND +FAMILY DOCTORS+ IN THE CITY.

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CASTRO, WHO PERSONALLY DIRECTS THE STRATEGY OF MEDICAL DEVELOPMENT, PREDICTS THAT CUBA WILL HAVE SIXTY-FIVE THOUSAND PHYSICIANS BY THE END OF THE CENTURY. HE FORESEES TEN THOUSAND PHYSICIANS WORKING OVERSEAS, PRIMARILY IN THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES.

THE EXPORT OF MEDICAL SERVICES WILL BE A SOURCE OF INCOME TO CUBA BUT CASTRO HAS SAID THAT IN THE CASE OF POORER NATIONS, AS IN THE CASE OF NICARAGUA TODAY, MEDICAL AID WOULD BE FREE OF CHARGE.

SINCE 1963 WHEN THE FIRST CUBAN MEDICAL TEAMS WENT OVERSEAS, CUBA HAS SENT TWO THOUSAND THREE HUNDRED MEDICAL WORKERS TO TWENTY EIGHT NATIONS WHILE SIX HUNDRED AND EIGHTY STUDENTS FROM EIGHTY NATIONS HAVE STUDIED MEDICINE IN CUBA.

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RE HAVANA SCANDAL FEATURE -- PIX WILL FOLLOW