



# CUBA NEWS

March, 2021

## CUBA FARES FAIRLY WELL DURING PANDEMIC

Like every other country, Cuba has not escaped the ravages of Covid-19. Since the beginning of February, it has seen a rise of Covid-19 cases and witnessed its death toll slowly climb. But when compared to the other countries in the region, its death toll is relatively low now pegged at 328 with a total of 51,587 cases in all.

This tiny country of 11.3 million, however, has a world class biotechnology sector and a state-owned biopharma industry and has been developing effective vaccines and pharmaceuticals for a number of ailments, such as cancer, meningitis, and HIV-AIDS. Currently, they are developing four corona virus vaccine candidates. Cuba may well be one of the first nations to immunize its entire population. (Source – Winnipeg Free Press – February 22<sup>nd</sup>)

## CUBA FACES MAJOR CHANGES IN ITS ECONOMY

A long talked about major change in the economic system of Cuba finally took place on January 1, 2021. One of their two currencies, the Cuban convertible peso (CUC), which was the approximate value of the American dollar, has been eliminated. The remaining currency the CUP, which has been worth about four cents against our dollar, is now the one remaining official currency. The CUP was decreased in value. Instead of being worth the four to five cents against our dollar, as it still is officially, on the street (black market) it is taking 50 CUPs to buy an American dollar.

Salaries for government workers increased greatly but along with that prices for food and other goods rose, in some cases, by up to 400%. Along with serious (and I mean serious) food shortages and hours long line-ups at stores the Cuban people have been very adversely affected.

To assist pastors in the Eastern Baptist Convention that we work with, we have taken on 100 of their pastors and are assisting them with, first of all, a donation of \$70 Canadian last fall and later a donation of \$100 Canadian. Pastor Samuel currently is overseeing the distribution of this money. It will be awhile before the financially struggling churches will be able to augment their pastors' salaries. These two donations are designed to help them bridge that gap. (Source – John Harder – February, '21)

## US – CUBAN RELATIONS TO THAW??

During President Obama's administration, then Vice President Biden, helped thaw US-Cuban diplomatic relations that had been broken for decades. Under this new administration in the US

significant changes in foreign policy are already taking place. Will Cuba be one of those countries to benefit?

Cuba has not been an innocent party in the cooling off of relations with the US however. Remember when President Obama was visiting the island and tried to give a Latin American “embraso” to President Raul Castro? Cuba has not been without its reluctance.

## **AND REMEMBER THE MYSTERIOUS MALADIES SUFFERED BY EMBASSY PERSONNEL??**

A very few years ago embassy personnel from the United States and Canada stationed in Cuba suffered mysterious symptoms called the Havana Syndrome. Staff complained of headaches, nausea, dizziness, blurred vision and other ailments.

Possible explanations ranged from mosquito fumigation to noisy crickets. A recent study in December of 2020 by the National Academy of Sciences has found that directed microwave radiation is the likely cause of illnesses among American diplomats in Cuba. The study found that directed pulsed radio-frequency energy appears to be the most plausible explanation for symptoms that included intense head pressure, dizziness and cognitive difficulties. (Source – Aljazeera News – Dec/’20)

## **COULD WE USE HELP FROM CUBA TO QUELCH COVID-19?**

Dozens of poor countries and some more affluent will attest to the fact that they have received tremendous help from Cuban medical professionals. Cuban doctors, nurses and health specialists, all with extensive expertise in treating infectious diseases, have been assisting less developed countries in the global south with their pandemic strategies to both treat and mitigate the deadly virus. Some 3700 medical professionals (part of the so called “Army of White Coats” that Cuba sends abroad) have been deployed to save lives (by treating over one million patients by the end of December) in close to 40 countries including Barbados, Italy, Mexico and South Africa.

According to the Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, “The Cubans are life savers.”

For the Cubans, the key drivers seem to be kinship with the developing world and a strong sense of responsibility to offer humanitarian assistance whenever they can.

Starting in April of this year, Cuba plans to deliver some 100 million doses of its Soberana II vaccine this year. These trials will probably take place in Iran, as well as possibly India, Vietnam and Venezuela to name a few.

A few years ago the Winnipeg Free Press wrote that Cuba has been helping approximately 168 poorer countries by sending medical personnel to assist. A few years ago when Ebola was raging in West Africa, the Winnipeg Free Press reported that approximately 400 professional medical personnel from Cuba were there in the front lines against Ebola in that region of Africa.

Cuba's contribution to world health has been surely understated. (Source – Winnipeg Free Press – Feb/'21)

## **CUBA RESTORES BEACHES DURING PANDEMIC**

Cayo Santamaria and Varadero (both in Cuba) are among the best 25 beaches worldwide according to Trip Advisor. Cayo Santamaria ranks the second best on the planet and Varadero comes in twelfth. Another participant called Varadero a “postcard landscape of fine sand and the bluest water I have ever seen.”

However, over time erosion and hurricanes have been taking their toll. So during the pandemic when tourists are not going to Cuba, the government will take advantage of using large machinery to deposit fine white sand and build up the beaches. Around 86% of the 505 existing beaches in Cuba show evidence of erosion.

Before the pandemic, both above mentioned beaches received almost two million visitors a year all attracted by the crystal blue water and the tourist facilities available. Tourism for Cuba is one of its main sources of hard currency. (Source – Cuba News –March '21)

## **NUMBER OF CUBANS TRYING TO REACH FLORIDA**

Since October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, to date, according to the US coastguard, 67 Cuban immigrants have been intercepted approaching Florida. Forty nine rafters from Cuba were intercepted the previous year. They are coming in small precarious boats that are overloaded. One group indicated that they had spent 16 days at sea since they had left Cuba. The distance is only 90 miles.

One coastguard officer said recently, “Trips like these are never worth the risk. The waters of the Straits of Florida are unpredictable and the risk of loss of life is great in vessels like these.”

## **SPIRITUAL HAPPENINGS IN CUBA**

Last year I calculated a number of factors occurring in the Cuban churches. It is a day of spiritual revival in Cuba as seen by the following information.

In 1990-1, after President Fidel Castro loosened restrictions and stopped persecuting the churches, from what I have researched, there were approximately 1200 evangelical churches left in Cuba that were functioning. However, they were full to overflowing. So President Castro permitted people to meet in homes. This started the “house church movement”. Today the number of evangelical churches (of different stripes) number approximately 30,000. Many of these, it may be safe to say, meet in homes and so do not have a church building. Others have a very humble building where they meet and still others have fine church buildings which would almost rival ours here in North America.

The Eastern Baptist Convention is the church association that we are working with and seeking to assist in our ministry of helping financially these struggling groups of believers.

The churches in Cuba are ALIVE AND WELL in spite of government restrictions and adverse conditions. I calculated the figures here from the Eastern Baptist Convention General Assembly Report for 2018. That is the latest edition I have but it coincides with what we have experienced in my 30 trips to Cuba. I have had the privilege of visiting these groups of believers in churches large and small on over 500 occasions.

Here is what the 2018 Assembly Report reveals:

1. Total number of churches in Eastern Baptist Convention – 672 organized churches.
2. The average membership of these 672 churches is 62.
3. The average number of professions of faith in each of these 672 churches is 68 for that year.
4. The average number of baptisms for these churches was seven each.
5. The average Sunday morning attendance of all of these churches was 55.
6. There are 1003 Sunday Schools among these 672 churches.
7. The average number of attendees in the evening services was 30.
8. The average number of prayer cells that each church has is seven and the average number of missions by each one is one. Just to explain here. There are three phases in Cuba that the developing church goes through. The first phase is a prayer cell develops when a local family opens their home for a Bible study. When the group grows to be roughly a dozen or so baptized believers, then a Cuban missionary or seminary student comes to assist. That is phase two. At that point it becomes a mission. When the group reaches 18-20 baptized believers and has programs for men, women, youth and children, it then applies to the Convention to become an organized church.
9. They practise the discipling of new believers in Cuba and the average church of these 672 is discipling 26 professing believers.
10. The average among these 672 churches of people who are being ministered to outside of the church in care homes, among dysfunctional families, or receiving care in one form or another, is 520 per church.

That year when the report by the convention came out, 25 new churches reached organized church status to bring the total number of organized churches in the convention to 672. This is why we can say the church in Cuba is ALIVE AND WELL.

In His glad service,

*Don*

Don Pickel

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