

Wayne Smith's Statement on Cuban Offer of Doctors for Hurricane Relief Effort

I'm sure that most of our readers know by now that On September 2, President Fidel Castro offered to send up some 1100 Cuban doctors and about 25 tons of medicines and medical equipment to help treat the injured and ill in the hurricane-devastated areas on the U.S. Gulf coast. All the doctors, he said, were competent in English. Subsequently, Castro increased the offer to more than 1500 doctors and almost 30 tons of medicines and equipment. He also said that Cuban planes could fly the medical teams to the U.S. An alternative to that was quickly offered by Ft. Lauderdale-based Gulfstream Airways, which offered to fly the Cuban medical teams and equipment to the U.S. free of charge should there be any difficulty in using Cuban planes.

Given the desperate situation on the Gulf coast, one might have expected a rapid and grateful response from Washington, especially as Castro repeated the offer on several occasions over the week-end. But of course we are talking about relations with Cuba! And so, there was no response at all until September 6, when State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said only that the Cuban offer was being reviewed. He suggested, however, that it was unlikely to be accepted given that the response of the U.S. medical community had been so "robust." In other words, he was suggesting, we had plenty of doctors and the Cubans weren't likely to be needed.

That, however, isn't the way they tell it in New Orleans. A local TV channel there says people are begging for doctors and any medical assistance they can get. A prominent New Orleans citizen, Randy Poindexter, is quoted as expressing appreciation for the Cuban offer and saying that if it were up to the Mayor of New Orleans or the Governor of Louisiana, the doctors, who are desperately needed, would be most welcome. Clearly, she said, it was the Bush administration that didn't want them in.

What a shame! At a time when the struggling survivors of Katrina need all the medical assistance they can get, the Bush administration continues its game of petty politics with Cuba, a game reflected again on September 6 when the State Department refused visas to Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon and the rest of the Cuban delegation to the meeting of the International Parliamentary Union to be held at the United Nations, even though the refusal violates the UN headquarters agreement.

