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Dividing the Pie: Cuba's Ration System After 50 Years

By Medea Benjamin

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La libreta, the Cuba ration booklet, encapsulates the debate about Cuba's socialist experiment. Detractors say that the fact that food is still rationed after 50 years, and that over 60 percent of the island's food is still imported, proves the failure of a bureaucratic, state-run economy sapping the entrepreneurial spirit of workers and farmers. Supporters say the ration book exemplifies the Cuban government's commitment to the health and welfare of its people in the face of a relentless U.S. blockade. They say that thanks to Cuba's guaranteed food basket and free health care, the poor island nation has one of the lowest infant mortality rates and highest life expectancy rates in the world.

Both are right.

I lived in Cuba during the early 1980s, when the Soviet Union still existed and was subsidizing the Cuban economy to the tune of $4-6 billion a year. In those days, eating was an egalitarian exercise. The ration every family received for a small fee was enough to last all month and guaranteed everyone a decent diet. It included rice, beans, lentils, milk, coffee, weekly portions of chicken and hamburger meat, occasional fish and pork.

When the weekly chicken ration arrived at the market, you could smell chicken cooking in every kitchen in the neighborhood -- fried chicken, soups, stews. As a nutritionist who had worked with starving children in Africa, I delighted in the knowledge that every family would be enjoying a good dinner. Sure, Cubans complained that they often couldn't get the onion, garlic or tomatoes to cook the food to their taste, but the basics were always there.

Not today. The ration booklet has been shrinking over the decades. This would be fine if it reflected abundance, but it doesn't. The worst period was right after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Cuba's ability to import food dropped by 75 percent. During the terrible next decade, which the government dubbed the "Special Period" and people called "*el tiempo de los flacos*" (the skinny period), the rations fell by half, the average Cuban lost 20 pounds, and persistent hunger -- something not seen since before the revolution -- became a daily reality.

The Cuban economy has improved considerably since then, thanks in part to the rise in tourism dollars and to Venezuela's subsidized oil. Still, the monthly ration is just enough to keep people from starving but not enough for a good diet, much less a satisfying one.

Each Cuban receives a monthly ration of seven pounds of rice, a pound of beans, half a bottle of cooking oil, one bread roll per day, plus small quantities of eggs, chicken or fish, spaghetti, and sugar. There are items for special occasions -- cakes for birthdays, rum and beer for weddings -- and "vulnerable people" get extra rations. Children get a liter of milk and some yogurt. People with health problems, like diabetics, get extra rations.

Ninety-year-old Aleida Fernandez told me that when she developed high blood pressure, her doctor gave her a note that added three fish a month to her ration. "This way the government guarantees I get enough protein," said a grateful Fernandez, who lives on a pension of $15 a month but has free health care and like most Cubans, pays no rent.

Cubans pay less than $2 for their monthly rations, which is an estimated 12 percent of the food's real value. It's a lifesaver for the poor but it leaves the government subsidizing every man, woman and child, regardless of income. With a price tag of over $1 billion annually, it's clear why reform-minded President Raul Castro would like to see la libreta disappear.

In 2011, Castro said the ration system distributes food at "laughable prices" and that a system introduced in a time of shortages has turned into "an unbearable burden for the economy and a disincentive to work."

But his proposal to eliminate the ration was scrapped when met with fierce opposition, particularly from low-wage state workers and retirees struggling to get by on $15 a month. "I can't imagine how I'd survive if I had to buy my food on the open market," complained retiree Ophelia Muñoz. "The market prices are so high that I can barely afford potatoes and boniato, much less beans or chicken."

It's a different story for Cubans who work in the tourist sector or receive remittances from their families abroad. With access to hard currency, they can afford market prices and they can supplement their diets with restaurant meals.

But the best food is reserved for tourists. Gourmet meals are offered in private restaurants called paladares that have cropped up all over the island. Poor Cubans can now see the sumptuous fare offered to tourists -- lobster, shrimp, pork, steak -- and they are left wondering why they are stuck with rice and chickpeas. "We're not starving like people in Haiti," said Berta Fernandez, a clerk who lives on a salary of $20 a month. "But we smell the pork roasting in the restaurant down the block and we're left with this craving."

The unequal access to food is just one reflection of what is becoming more and more of a two-tiered economy, with one group scraping by on national pesos and the other benefitting from access to hard currency. The revolution wasn't supposed to turn out this way.

At an elementary school we visited in Havana, teacher Olivia Gonzalez said they don't allow students to bring their lunches from home. Why? Because some students would bring coveted items like meat and soda while poorer students would have simpler fare. "We want the children to all have the same opportunities and not grow up with a sense of inferiority," Gonzalez explained. "So it's better for them all to eat the same." To cut down on costs and provide healthy meals, many schools are trying to grow as much of their own food as they can.

Raul Castro is trying to find a middle way, stimulating the economy while preserving revolutionary gains like free healthcare and education. His market-oriented reforms include cutting back on subsidies, slashing bloated state payrolls and encouraging more private enterprise -- especially for farmers.

The historic opening with the U.S. has ignited hopes that the U.S. will stop sabotaging Cuba, and that greater tourism and trade will help the economy grow. Even before the opening, Cuba was buying $500 million worth of agricultural goods from the United States. Food sales were an exception to the embargo, but sales had to be made in cash. The new rules that allow Cuba to use U.S. banks and obtain loans will lead to more imports -- a win for both countries.

Many worry that the U.S. opening, accompanied by a flood of tourists and U.S. corporate investments, will be a recipe for an even greater gap between the haves and have-nots. Certainly the days are gone when Cubans eat the same meals at the same time, and perhaps the universal libreta will be replaced by a food stamp system based on need. But in Cuba, food is still considered a basic human right. As the economy expands, the hope is that Cubans across the island will have access to a more varied diet. In a world where so many people still go hungry, Cuba could become a model of how to grow the pie -- and make sure that everyone gets a piece.

Preventing Infant Deaths: What Can We Learn From Cuba?

By Mary Anne Mercer

On a recent trip to Cuba I determined to find out how that country manages to have an infant mortality rate well below that of the U.S., with dramatically fewer resources than we have. It defies logic, but in spite of its poverty Cuba demonstrates remarkably good health outcomes, particularly for infants. The most recent estimates show the Cuban infant mortality rate (IMR) to be 4.7 per thousand infants born alive, on par with much wealthier countries like Canada and New Zealand. That rate is significantly lower than the current U.S. rate of 6.2, much lower than the average IMR of 15 for other countries in the Latin America/Caribbean region. How did this happen?

As a public health professional, I know that the death rate for children under one year of age is a classic indicator of the health of a population. Not surprisingly, it's strongly

linked with national incomes. This year's UNICEF report on The State of the World's Children lists basic economic and health facts for every country, and that relationship is easy to see. For example, Norway has an estimated gross national income (GNI) of over $100,000 a year and an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 2 deaths for every 1000 infants born alive. In contrast, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa have average GNIs of around $1700, and average infant mortality of 61. Poorer countries nearly always have worse infant health.

Except when they don't.

Cuba is a very poor country by most measures. The per capita gross national income (GNI) is around $5900 USD a year, but the actual average income of most Cubans is much lower, with government salaries typically $300 to $500 a year (in addition to basic food rations provided to everyone). In the US, the average national income is $53,700 when last estimated. The economic disparity between Cuba and U.S. is huge.

I left on this trip knowing only the basic facts about Cuba. The revolution in 1958-59 overturned the despotic regime of Fulgencio Batista. From the beginning, the new government focused its public efforts on providing free, high quality education and health care for everyone. Within a few short years, literacy increased to essentially 100 percent, where it stands today. The new health care system trained thousands of primary care physicians, around half of them women, who were placed in communities as family doctors to assume care for the small populations that lived around them. Home visits are an important part of those services.

Cuba's 100 percent literacy is a possible explanation for its good standing in health, since literacy, particularly maternal literacy, has very important benefits for child health. But other nations with virtually universal literacy, such as Tajikistan and other countries of the former Soviet Union, have infant mortality rates five to ten times higher than Cuba's. Education alone, although a powerful factor in producing health, doesn't seem to be the explanation.

Cuba's universal access to health care is another likely reason for its good infant health. A common measure of how well a health system serves everyone is immunization coverage: what percent of children get the basic childhood vaccinations? But again, a number of the same high-education countries in Eastern Europe had nearly universal coverage, so that doesn't fully explain the differences either.

Something about the commitment of Cuba's post-revolution government to health care was eluding me. Then I looked at the proportion of public spending that was allocated to health purposes for a range of countries, and began to see a clearer picture. Nearly all the poor countries of the world allocate only 2 or 3 percent of their GNP for public health, while the most highly developed countries spend 7 to 9 percent. In Cuba that figure is 10 percent: one out of every ten dollars produced goes for public expenditures on health. That commitment is not just for the benefit of Cubans. In addition to training doctors for their own population, the Cuban medical system trains hundreds of doctors from other

countries. It sends medical brigades to countries with urgent need, such as following earthquakes and for the Ebola crisis in West Africa. As many as 15,000 Cuban doctors are now serving outside the country.

This full-on commitment to health was mirrored in what we heard and saw about care for pregnant women and newborns in Cuba. The community-based doctors pay close attention to pregnant women under their care, making sure they receive extra food rations. If a home visit reveals problems of either a social or medical nature, the women are offered a bed in a maternity home for as long as needed, and are provided with rest and special food. Essentially 100 percent of deliveries are a hospital or clinic.

After an infant is born, the community doctor makes regular home visits to assure the baby is healthy and growing well. Sick babies are provided referrals to specialists, if needed. And the uncommon event of an infant death is taken extremely seriously, with the investigation as to the causes reviewed at the very highest level in the Ministry of Health. If the attending physician is found to be negligent in care of an infant who dies, he or she might even lose the license to practice medicine.

Cuba has healthy infants because the health system and those working in it actually care about them. Despite a range of serious political and economic problems that Cuba still faces, its attention to the basic needs of the population was reflected in much of what we saw, even as casual observers, in our short time in the country. Homelessness is virtually nonexistent. With very rare exceptions, everyone looked well dressed and adequately nourished, with sufficient resources to maintain their self-respect.

At the national level, Cuba has the political will to assure that pregnant women and their offspring thrive. Can we learn anything from Cuba? What prevents the United States from demonstrating this same concern?

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5 Things Cuba Can Do to Speed the Normalization of Relations With the United States

By William M. LeoGrande, Professor at American University in Washington, D.C.

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Washington and Havana have taken the first steps toward normalizing relations after half a century of estrangement, but many tough issues remain to be resolved, and time is of the essence. President Obama has only two years left in his presidency, and Raúl Castro has only three. The pace at which the two presidents make progress will determine whether their rapprochement survives the coming successions.

No one expects Cuba's leaders to dismantle their political system and adopt multi-party electoral democracy in exchange for better relations with the United States. That's the demand Washington made for decades while trying to coerce Cuba into compliance. As President Obama pointed out in announcing his new policy on Dec. 17, 2014, it just didn't work.

That said, there a number of things Cuba can do to move the normalization process forward without compromising its sovereignty. The steps below flow directly out of the 18 months of secret talks between Washington and Havana. Except for the last, they are things to which Cuba has already agreed in principle but has not yet done.

Send a broadly representative civil society delegation to the Summit of the Americas.

After blocking Cuban participation in past summits, the United States is now prepared to welcome Cuba to the Seventh Summit in April -- if Cuba is represented at the civil society consultations that are part of the summit process. Working with the host country, Panama, Cuba should assure the United States that its delegation is broadly representative of its robust civil society, which is not limited to self-proclaimed dissidents (as the U.S. government has sometimes thought) or to official mass organizations (as the Cuban government has sometimes implied).

No civil society organization is more important in contemporary Cuba than the Catholic Church, and under Cardinal Jaime Ortega's leadership, the church has developed a good working relationship with the government. Together the church and state should put

together a civil society delegation that reflects Cuba's diversity of views, including artists, writers, independent entrepreneurs, trade unionists, women, students, clergy, and laity.

Cooperate with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Human Rights Council.

In the secret talks with the United States, Cuba agreed to increase its cooperation with the ICRC and UN. The ICRC is interested in resuming inspections of prison conditions, which ended in 1989. In 2013 the UN Human Rights Council made 290 recommendations to improve human rights practices on the island. Cuba should move quickly to allow ICRC visits to resume and announce what additional steps it will take in response to the UNHRC recommendations. The sooner Cuba fulfills these commitments, the harder it will be for opponents of normalization to wield the human rights issue to derail the process.

Expand Internet access.

Cuba has the lowest Internet access rate in Latin America, limited by both infrastructure deficiencies and political concerns -- concerns exacerbated by USAID's attempts to build digital networks outside the government's control and use social media (including the infamous ZunZuneo message service) to foster opposition. Nevertheless, Cuba's leaders have concluded that the Internet is indispensable for economic development and are publicly committed to extending access throughout the nation.

Obama's decision to license the sale of U.S. telecommunications equipment and services gives Cuba the opportunity to rapidly expand the island's meager bandwidth. It will be good for the Cuban economy and do more to reduce the alienation of youth than any other policy the government could adopt. To be sure, the pace of expansion will depend in part on how eager U.S. telecom companies are to jump into the Cuban market, but Havana can put negotiations with the Cuban telephone company (ETECSA) on a fast track if it wants to. The first agreement, between ETECSA and IDT Telecom, is a good sign.

Facilitate U.S. trade with the private sector.

Commerce with Cuba's growing private sector is another area in which President Obama has licensed an exception to the embargo. President Bill Clinton did something similar in 1999 when he licensed sales of agricultural inputs to Cuba's private farmers, but Havana refused to cooperate and the initiative fizzled.

Raúl Castro's new economic model envisions a dynamic private sector that provides significant employment and contributes to economic growth. Cuban agriculture, in particular, would benefit from access to inputs from the United States. With Cuba's cooperation, this exception to the embargo could become an even larger source of trade than the sale of food, which peaked at $710 million in 2008. Large-scale trade will also solidify the U.S. business community's support for lifting the embargo entirely.

However, managing U.S. trade with hundreds or even thousands of small businesses will represent real challenges for Cuba's state bureaucracy. Cuba should prepare now for the deluge of inquiries from U.S. exporters, because nothing stifles international trade and investment as effectively as an unresponsive government bureaucracy.

Work with the United States to refocus democracy programs.

Washington's programs to promote democracy in Cuba stem from the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton), which also wrote the embargo into law. The unequivocal goal of Helms-Burton is regime change, so the Cuban government has always regarded these programs as irredeemably subversive. It passed laws making any cooperation with Helms-Burton a criminal offense.

Cuba demands an end to these programs, but U.S. officials have been equally adamant that they are not going away. Those same officials are well aware, however, that the covert and provocative nature of the programs is incompatible with the new relationship President Obama is trying to build with Cuba. Therein lies an opportunity to reorient the programs away from regime change, instead focusing them on supporting authentic ties between Cuban and U.S. civil society -- ties not manufactured or manipulated by government.

The United States has programs around the world that seek to strengthen civil society openly, with the knowledge and at least tacit consent of host governments. If Havana were willing to work with Washington to refocus the democracy programs in a way that is not an affront to Cuban sovereignty, a very large stumbling block on the road to normalization could be removed.

The burden for making faster progress toward normal U.S.-Cuban relations does not fall solely on Havana, of course. There are many things Washington could and should do to accelerate the process. But as President Obama comes under political attack for getting "nothing" in return for his opening to Havana, Cuba's leaders have an opportunity to demonstrate that Obama made the right call -- that engagement and coexistence produce results.

U.S.-Cuban Relations Aren't Normalizing As Fast As You Might Think

By Roque Planas

The U.S. and Cuba joint announcement on Dec. 17 that they would work toward re-establishing diplomatic relations seemed to symbolize the dawning of a new era for the Cold War foes.

But in the weeks that followed, Cuban officials have demanded that the U.S. meet ambitious conditions before describing diplomatic relations as "normalized," highlighting obstacles that remain to mending the fractured relationship.

At a summit of Latin American leaders in San José, Costa Rica, last month, Cuban head of state Raúl Castro said the U.S. would have to return the territory upon which the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo is built and do away with the trade embargo before relations could be normalized.

The top Cuban official charged with U.S. diplomacy, Josefina Vidal, said last week the U.S. also must tone down its financial support for political dissidents on the island before the two countries can reopen their embassies.

U.S. officials have responded that returning Gitmo isn't on the table, and that support for dissidents will continue. The authority to end the embargo rests not with the Obama administration, but with the Republican-dominated U.S. Congress, which is unlikely to pass such legislation.

The Cuban demands haven't derailed diplomatic talks, scheduled to continue in Washington next month. But they show that, even as the U.S. and Cuba roll out the closest thing to diplomatic rapprochement in a half-century, major divisions continue.

U.S. law mandates that the federal government support the dismantling of Cuban communism. The U.S. trade embargo against Cuba, for example, is aimed at toppling the Communist regime.

Wayne Smith, a former head of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana -- the top American diplomatic post -- told HuffPost that he expects diplomacy to improve, but the relationship will remain tense.

"Yes, we're going to move toward diplomatic relations, but we are a long way from normal relations," Smith said. "Still, it's good that we're talking. And apparently we're going to have embassies to talk about these things that we basically disagree about."

Arturo López-Levy, an academic who studies the Raúl Castro administration, said any improvement in communication marks progress, but harmonious relations remain a lofty goal.

"They are trying to get a deal on this issue," López-Levy said, referring to the re-establishment of embassies. "And I think that part of getting the deal is about being constructive, about framing that this is not about normalization -- this is about building a relationship. If you try to set very ambitious goals, you are setting yourself up for disaster."

Others, however, say the conditions Cuba has imposed on improving diplomatic relations point to backtracking by the Cuban government.

“Here’s the thing -- the normalization of relations with Cuba scares the Cubans,” Jason Marczak, a Latin America expert at the Atlantic Council, told HuffPost. “The Cubans were not prepared for everything the president announced on Dec. 17. The fundamental structure of the [Cuban] regime is based on slow, orderly transition and what was announced on Dec. 17 was a series of potentially very fast and chaotic movements that could fundamentally reshape the island.”

The next major test will be whether the two countries can hammer out a deal to reopen their embassies for the first time since 1961 before the region's leaders gather at the Summit of the Americas in Panama in April.

Marczak said the U.S. “would love to come to the Summit of the Americas with an embassy,” but Cuban officials have said they first expect the U.S. to ease banking restrictions and to remove Cuba from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The Obama administration ordered the State Department to review Cuba’s inclusion on the list in December when announcing the changes in diplomacy. The list subjects Cuba to additional sanctions beyond the embargo.

An updated version of the list will be published in April, according to the news service EFE.

What Will We Do With Cubans' Overflowing Hopes?

By Yoani Sanchez, award-winning Cuban blogger

"Any frustration is the daughter of excessive expectations," I shared my concern with the U.S. members of Congress who visited Cuba in January. The phrase was designed to stress the flow of illusions that has been let loose in the population since December 17. The announcement of the restoration of relations between Cuba and the United States has provoked a resurgence in this country of a feeling lost for decades: hope.

However, the expectations that have been created are so high and so difficult to meet in the short-term that many may feel disappointed. There is no way that reality can satisfy such extravagant fantasies of change. The level of deterioration in Cuba needs enormous resources and urgent transformations to be overcome. Time is of the essence, but the Cuban government still has shown no real political will for the new scenario to benefit a wide spectrum of Cuban society.

Before December 17, each person had been focused on aspirations in his or her area of interests and needs. An old locomotive engineer, who saw the dismantling of the railroad of which he spoke with great pride, now says, "You'll see... we'll even have a bullet train." If you ask him the source of such a conviction, he assures you that, "When *los yumas* - the Americans - start to arrive they will improve transportation and surely bring

us investments to improve the lines and buy the latest generation cars." His dreams take the form of an iron serpent, brilliant and fast, crossing the island.

There are others whose illusions take on the lightness of a kilobyte. A young man, 20, who only know the Internet through a few hours of slow and expensive connections in a Nauta Internet room, says that before the end of the year, "We will have data service on our cellphones." His certainty is not born from any classified information to which he has access, but because, as he explains, "Obama already said so, the telecommunications companies can negotiate with Cuba, so what's lacking for me to connect to Facebook and Skype all day long, it's nothing... nothing."

The great national obsession, which is food, also has had a space within the imaginative dreams of recent weeks. A housewife, who defines herself as "sick of having to cook the same thing, because there is nothing else," has projected her illusions on the arrival of goods from the north. "Some lost products will return and the stores won't have empty freezers like now." Her perspectives are direct and clear, experiencing the lost taste of beef, the texture of oil and the smell of an onion browning in the pan.

Small private entrepreneurs are not far behind. For the owner of a luxurious private restaurant in the Vedado neighborhood, hope takes the contours of a ferry connecting Havana and Florida. "It will come soon and then we can bring cars, large imports and fresh food for our menu," he explains with a conviction that provokes a certain anguished denial. He gives the impression that a full lounge, with drinks, bottles of wine and dimmed lights, will cross the water and arrive at the new place he's building right next to his restaurant.

While expectations grow like a balloon about to burst, others contribute to them with projections from the artistic and creative field. A friend, a private film producer, believes that shortly, "Hollywood could be filming here and Cuban film talent could finally have the resources to do big productions." For this celluloid artist, "What's missing is a starting bell to authorize independent productions and allow us to have investors from the United States."

Among the dissidence and civil society more than a few are preparing to legalize their groups or parties at the least opportunity. Among the hopeful, they are the most cautious because they know that the spigot of political liberties will be the last to open... if it opens at all. They project their own transition from the "illegal, clandestine and heroic phase" to the stage of a "legal, public and intelligent opposition." Nor should we discount the illusions that have reached Cuban academia, the schools and other official institutions, where people are dusting off their old ideas of jumping into the arena of politics when the single-party system is a bad memory of the past.

All these hopes, born on St. Lazarus Day and fed with the visits to Cuba of members of Congress and American negotiators, are now a double-edged sword for the Island's government. On the one hand, the existence of so many illusions buys time and sets the horizon at the end of a long process of conversations between both administrations,

which could go on for years. But, also, the disappointment derived from not meeting or from postponing such dreams will be focused directly on the Plaza of the Revolution.

The anger towards failure will not fall on Obama, but on Raul Castro. He knows this and in recent weeks his spokespeople have emphasized cutting back on the perspectives filling the streets of the entire country. They are trying to anticipate that everything will be more or less the same and that too many expectations can't be met. But there is nothing harder than countering dreams. The symbolic weight of the beginning of the "thaw" between David and Goliath, cannot be alleviated with calls for calm, nor energetic speeches that point toward a halt in the negotiations.

When the months pass and the "bullet train" doesn't arrive, the Internet continues to be impossible, the store freezers are as empty as they are today, the customs rules continue to block commercial imports to private hands, the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) maintains its monopoly on film production, and being a member of an opposition party still results in official repression and ideological stigmatization... when the bubble of dreams bursts and the excessive expectations bring collective frustration, what will happen? Maybe from there the energy necessary to push for change will be born.

Medical Servants, Not Slaves

By Phil Thompson

"What I will miss most about Cuba is waiting in the bread line."

So says a young Cuban doctor, displaying humor before leaving for Venezuela. The Medica is strikingly beautiful, resembling a young Gloria Estefan of Miami Sound machine fame. But there the resemblance ends. The women -- both Cuban -- are as opposite socially, politically and ideologically, as music is to medicine. Twenty-four-year old Dr. Yaquelin Manero Bastista believes that music may soothe the savage beast, but it takes a doctor to cure him.

Medicine propelled Dr. Bastista, from the tiny sugar-mill town of Baquanos to the University of Holguin, in the eastern province's capital city. There, after six years of intense study, she earned her medical degree with a specialty in physical rehabilitation.

"The most rewarding experience in my career so far was helping to bring a child into the world," she says, her dark eyes sparkling.

Tomorrow, Dr. Batista will board a bus to Havana, the first leg of a journey that trades her healing skills for oil.

Like the majority of Cubans, she's never been off the island. That changes next week when she boards a plane for Caracas, Venezuela. On the eve of her departure on a two-year mission, though nervous and excited, Dr. Bastista gathers with her cousins, economist Susan, and Tanya, the owner of a soon-to-open hair salon. The trio, close in age, are flowers from the same stem, raised together in the countryside as sisters, best friends.

Tanya -- my fiancée -- and I had rushed back from the beautiful beaches of Guadalavaca to attend this intimate gathering. We met last June in Havana, where I was competing in the Hemingway Marlin tournament. Now, I had flown from Miami to Holquin to arrange wedding plans. Upon my arrival, my soon-to-be-Cuban extended family had welcomed me like a prodigal son with a pig roast in the remote countryside of Baquanos.

The exchanges tonight are lively, full of remembrances punctuated with laughter. But, beneath the surface of the gathering, apprehension lingers. It's fear for Dr. Bastista's future. The young women are aware of how dangerous Venezuela has become, so concern for the dedicated doctor is real.

"I will miss the freedom of Cuba," she adds seriously. In Venezuela, she will be behind locked doors, from dusk to dawn, a necessity for her and her colleague's safety. "I like to walk the streets of Holguin, sometimes late at night. I will miss that."

Once in country -- after a week of orientation -- she will be assigned to one of the barrios or rural pueblos where she and other health professionals will treat Venezuela's poor. "Doctors for oil" it's called. And it's the most important exchange in Cuba today. Venezuela supplies the largest of the Antilles with 100,000 barrels a day in payment for these trained medical professionals -- a sweetheart deal, say some.

To Dr. Batista, the politics are unimportant. In serving, she sees only the chance to help and learn. Many of the health problems she will deal with in Venezuela have been eradicated in Cuba, so opportunity overshadows the danger of living in a country with one of the highest murder rates in the world.

Dr. Bastista describes the selection process with pride -- passing the interviews, background checks, and personal recommendations by neighbors, colleagues and teachers.

For her service, two-hundred convertible pesos (approximately two-hundred dollars) per month will be deposited in a Cuban bank. On her return, Dr. Bastista will be issued a debit card for the account, which also authorizes a 30 percent discount for purchases in government stores. Should she serve another two-year term, she would be eligible to purchase a late-model car at a substantially reduced price.

Oil for Doctors would appear a win-win situation for Cuba and Venezuela alike. But critics of the program exist in both countries.

Many complain the assignment of so many medical workers across South and Central America and Africa deprives Cubans themselves of sufficient doctors needed to staff its own highly touted free-health-care system.

On the Venezuela side, many criticize the cost of the medical service, believing it overpriced.

"Even though my group will total 70 doctors from Holguin province," Dr.Batista explains, "it will create no shortage. Each year, Holguin University graduates between 500 and 550 new doctors. Add those to the returning medical personnel and the care of our countrymen will not suffer."

"As far as the cost, what price can one place on a life, be it the birth of a healthy baby, the curing of disease or the relief of pain? Ask a poor Venezuelan mother or father what price they place on the health of their children."

The party breaks up finally, no one wanting to leave. These women have grown up together, sharing so much of their young lives and are fully aware tomorrow will bring an end to a chapter, one that will never be relived.

Susan will soon will leave the island to live with her new husband in Switzerland, Tanya will remain in Holguin and, with the opening of her business, join an emerging class of Cuban entrepreneurs.

It's a new story in Cuba -- young people heading off island, striking out, experiencing a world outside the revolution.

And today, thanks to the 2013 elimination of the hated "exit visa" by current president Raul Castro, most Cubans may come and go as they please -- or as their personal finances allow. No longer branded traitors to the revolution, now they retain their property and citizenship while traveling abroad.

Cuba currently claims some 80,000 medical personnel, who serve in more than 20 countries worldwide. In Brazil, arriving doctors have been met with protest and branded "medical slaves."

Told of this, Dr. Batista merely smiles. "Do I look like a slave to you?