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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

September 21, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I write to encourage you to continue elevating our shared concerns about the Diaz Canel regime's deployment of Cuban doctors under forced labor conditions and to urge the swift design and implementation of a diplomatic campaign to end the trafficking of Cuban medical professionals. This trafficking scheme, which has proliferated during the global pandemic, is present in at least 20 countries—all of which were rightfully highlighted in the 2021 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. Mexico alone has accepted at least 1,000 Cuban medical professionals since the start of the pandemic. The Cuban regime continues to coerce "participation" in these programs, generating income from forced labor practices, while compelling medical professionals to confront grave personal health and security risks. I implore you to mobilize an expanded international effort to demand an end to the Cuban regime's state-sponsored and state-facilitated human trafficking.

The Diaz Canel regime's foreign medical missions are tantamount to a human trafficking scheme through which the dictatorship lines its own coffers. As the 2021 TIP Report on Cuba documented, "participants" in the program receive just five to 25 percent of their salary, with the rest—estimated to collectively be up to \$6 to \$8 billion annually—going directly to the regime.¹ The report notes that Cuban medical professionals deployed abroad are frequently coerced into participation, denied personal control over their salaries, stripped of their personal documents, subject to continued surveillance and threats by Cuban authorities, and otherwise limited in their freedoms of speech and movement.² As a result, Cuba's dictatorship is among only 11 governments identified by the Department as having a state policy of human trafficking.³

Since the beginning of the global pandemic, the regime has deployed upwards of 1,000 Cuban medical professionals to Mexico.⁴ This includes 500 deployed in early 2021, despite Cuba's own

¹ "2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cuba," The U.S. Department of State, 1 July 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/cuba/>.

² *Ibid.*

³ "2021 Trafficking in Persons Report," The U.S. Department of State, 1 July 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

⁴ "Cuban Doctors' Monthly Pay in Mexico: \$220," *Diario de Cuba*, 11 June 2020, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1591872202_23104.html

challenges in responding to COVID on the island.⁵ Mexico paid the Cuban regime over \$6 million for the first contingent of 585 medical professionals in 2020, according to media reports.⁶ Of that amount, the medical professionals received just \$220 per month.⁷ Instead of protecting its frontline healthcare workers, Cuba's regime is using the global pandemic as an opportunity to further exploit them for income. Income it will inevitably use to enrich its own officials and continue repressing its own people.

I ask that the State Department use diplomatic channels to urge our allies and international partners, including Mexico, to end their participation in the Cuban regime's forced labor practices or to dramatically alter the terms of these programs in order to comply with international labor and human rights standards. I also request that you partner with the United Nations Secretary General Guterres and Organization of American States Secretary General Almagro, to raise greater international awareness about the Cuban regime's trafficking schemes. I further encourage the Department to work with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the private sector, and the international community to explore programs or initiatives that may help participating countries find alternatives for addressing gaps in their healthcare systems.

I welcome your prompt engagement on this matter, and look forward to working together to ensure that this Administration does all it can to prevent any country, ally or not, from being complicit in these unconscionable practices.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
Chairman

⁵ "Mexican President Thanks Cuba for Sending Doctors to Fight Pandemic," *Reuters*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/mexican-president-thanks-cuba-sending-doctors-fight-pandemic-2021-01-08/>.

⁶ "Cuban Doctors' Monthly Pay in Mexico: \$220," *Diario de Cuba*, 11 June 2020, https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1591872202_23104.html.

⁷ *Ibid.*