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SOCIAL JUSTICE  
HUMAN RIGHTS*

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Testimony of Bob Schwartz, Executive Director, The Disarm Education Fund

UPR Submission – Cuba – April-May, 2013

(1) The United Nations Human Rights Council evaluates countries, in part, by their commitment to protect and guarantee to their citizens “the human right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.” Based on my experience over the past 17 years of direct engagement with the Cuban healthcare system, in my capacity as Executive Director of the Disarm Education Fund, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization, I believe that Cuba has an exemplary record of upholding health as a fundamental human right. In some 90 visits to Cuba to deliver and monitor the use of our humanitarian medical assistance, I have regularly reviewed numerous hospitals and community-based clinics, meeting with administrators, medical staff at all levels, and hundreds of patients and their families. I have also consulted on an ongoing basis with Cuba’s Minister of Health and other leading Health Ministry officials on the country’s health policies, priorities, and most pressing medical needs.

(2) My organization was founded in 1976 to promote peace, and social and economic justice; Disarm holds Special Consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council. Since 1995, we have delivered more than \$100 million (USD) in medicine and medical supplies to stock Cuban hospitals and community-based clinics; we have organized more than two dozen surgical teams from across the U.S. to share skills with their Cuban counterparts; and we have taken several high-profile delegations to Cuba, including the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali and two former U.S. Surgeons General, in an effort to document and draw international attention to the damage the U.S. embargo has inflicted on Cuban healthcare.

(3) My extensive experience with the Cuban healthcare system has convinced me that the Cuban government views the health needs of its population as a top priority and has worked consistently, humanely, and very effectively to ensure universal, free access to high-quality healthcare for all. My concrete experience has also convinced me that the longstanding U.S. embargo against Cuba has taken a terrible toll on Cuba’s public health system. And sadly, it is the most vulnerable Cubans -- children and the elderly -- who pay the highest cost for this cruel, immoral policy that kills just as surely as bombs and bullets.

(4) Over the years I've met with hundreds of doctors, nurses, and medical administrators who movingly describe shortages of basic medical supplies and inexpensive medicines that we in the United States take for granted. I've met women who are struggling to survive breast cancer that was diagnosed at a late stage – the result of Cuba's inability to obtain desperately needed diagnostic equipment from U.S. manufacturers. And perhaps most painful for me as grandfather, I've sat with mothers and fathers who are watching as their children die from cancers that would and should be treatable, but for the fact that Cuba is unable to purchase chemotherapy drugs from companies only 90 miles away. Disarm has helped to save the lives of many children with cancer by partnering with Havana's Juan Manuel Marquez Pediatric Hospital to supply some of these scarce cancer medicines, along with anti-nausea drugs that enable these young patients to withstand chemotherapy. As part of a Disarm humanitarian delegation, Muhammad Ali personally delivered such aid to the Marquez hospital and met with the children and their very grateful parents.

(5) But NGOs like Disarm, despite the scale and scope of our assistance, cannot decisively combat medical scarcities the embargo imposes on the Cuban public health system, and the country's dedicated doctors are often left empty-handed and unable to fully extend their healing skills to sick and disabled children and adults. Although U.S. law permits the sale of medicines and medical supplies to Cuba, grueling and cumbersome licensing procedures actively discourage medical companies from selling their products to Cuba. Since the U.S. has the world's leading pharmaceutical research and production pipeline, these licensing conditions effectively bar Cuba from accessing nearly half of all new world-class drugs on the market today.

(6) I have also seen first-hand the way in which the embargo blocks Cuba's access to vital medical equipment. This summer, Disarm obtained a donation for Cuba of a supply – worth nearly \$1 million dollars – of plates, screws and instruments necessary for maxillofacial surgery. The embargo has made these tools so scarce in Cuba that most maxillofacial surgeries for disabled children and adults have been postponed over the past year. Our shipment reached Cuba on September 12, 2012 and the surgical supplies are now in use at two Havana facilities, the Marquez Pediatric Hospital and the Calixto Garcia Hospital, another longtime Disarm partner. "This gift from friends in the U.S. means so much to so many Cuban families," Dr. Guillermo Sanchez, Chief of Maxillofacial Surgery at Calixto Garcia, told me. "Imagine the anguish of waiting long months for an operation that will change the life of your loved one." Sanchez, who is also President of the Cuban Society of Maxillofacial Surgery, adds that the generous supply of plates and screws will ensure that the doctors on his staff can make maximum use of their skills to benefit their patients, which also include trauma victims and cancer survivors. "Now we don't have to turn anyone away; we have what we need to make them well."

(7) Cuba has built a public health system that has garnered worldwide respect, with health indicators that rival those of developed countries. The lowering of the infant mortality rate is one such shining example: 5.3 per thousand live births. And Cubans have a life expectancy of 77.97 years. But these remarkable achievements are undermined by the embargo, which since 2007 has forbidden meaningful collaboration between Cuban and U.S. doctors. The inhumane impact of this rollback is evident at the Calixto Garcia Hospital, where U.S. doctors recruited and sent by Disarm are no longer permitted to share skills with their Cuban counterparts. Washington bars U.S. doctors from Cuba's operating rooms and medical lecture halls. A leading surgeon and former President of the Cuban Society of Maxillofacial Surgery, Dr. José Basulto, told me, "Forbidding our two countries' doctors from learning together to save lives is irrational and extremely cruel."

(8) This blocking of medical collaboration between U.S. and Cuban doctors also has a negative “ripple effect” throughout the Caribbean region. Cuba has long shared its own public health experience with its neighbors, and Cuban volunteer doctors have alleviated suffering and saved lives throughout the region. Because Cuba has the best medical training facilities in the Caribbean, its neighbors have long depended upon it to train their own medical personnel. But embargo-related limits on the advanced training opportunities and new equipment available to Cuban doctors and hospitals thus undermine the quality of health services throughout the region.

(9) One striking current example of Cuba’s internationalist commitment to healthcare as a human right is the work of Cuban doctors who have been providing free health care in 120 Haitian communities still-ravaged by the 2010 earthquake, including the hard-hit capital of Port-au-Prince. Despite the large-scale international donations for Haiti relief and reconstruction efforts, very little has reached the Cuban volunteers and the millions of Haitians they are serving. Shockingly, there is still a desperate need for essential medicines and medical supplies. Disarm is preparing to ship a container-load of medical aid to support these Cuban doctors and nurses, who have made a commitment to stay in Haiti’s desperate communities for as long as necessary. Although Cuba is itself combating shortages caused by the U.S. embargo, it is extending humanitarian aid to its neighbors because of its deeply held belief that health is a human right.

(10) In conclusion, I have personally witnessed Cuba’s huge advances in public health and provision of high-quality, free and universal healthcare for its people. And I have directly witnessed the devastating impact of the U.S. embargo on Cuba’s public health system. What is remarkable to me is that Cuba has been able to provide such a high level of medical care to its people in the face of these externally imposed hardships. I truly hope that this Council will both recognize Cuba’s commitment to the fundamental human right of healthcare, and the need to remove the terrible obstacles imposed by the U.S. embargo. Let us all imagine how many more lives would be saved or suffering eased if the embargo were lifted – and continue to press for an end to a policy that mocks the principles and goals of the United Nations Human Rights Council.