



Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons

Trafficking In Persons and Cuba's Labor Export Program

Cuba's Labor Export Program In Context

Each year, the Cuban government sends tens of thousands of workers around the globe under multi-year cooperation agreements negotiated with receiving countries. According to reporting from the Cuban government, there were roughly 28,000 workers in over 60 countries by the end of 2021. The greatest number of Cuban workers in foreign countries are medical professionals. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for medical workers in many places around the world, and the Cuban government helped fill the gap by increasing the number of its medical workers abroad, including through the use of its Henry Reeve Brigade, which Cuba first initiated in 2005 to respond to natural disasters and epidemics. There are serious concerns with Cuba's recruitment and retention practices surrounding this program, exacerbating workers' vulnerability to being subject to forced labor. In the 2023 TIP report, the Department carefully documented government-affiliated Cuban workers' current or recent presence in 56 countries around the world. According to the Cuban government, medical professionals compose 75 percent of its exported workforce. Experts estimate the Cuban government collects \$6 billion to \$8 billion annually from its export of services, principally the foreign medical missions' program.

Trafficking Indicators

The conditions of each medical mission vary from country to country. However, in 2021, 1,111 former participants filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court and the UN, claiming the Cuban government exploited them and forced them to work in the labor export program. The complaint stated 75 percent of these participants did not volunteer for the program, 33 percent never saw a contract, 69 percent did not know their final destination, 38 percent had their passport confiscated by Cuban officials once they arrived at their destination, 76 percent had "minders" and were subjected to surveillance, 76 percent could not freely associate with locals, 79 percent had restrictions on their movement, 91 percent were told they could not return to Cuba if they defected, 75 percent suffered threats or witnessed coworkers being threatened, and 40 percent were separated from their children as punishment for defecting. Many medical professionals reported being sexually abused by their Cuban government supervisors. While the medical missions remain the most prevalent, the government profited from other similarly coercive labor export programs, including those involving teachers, artists, athletes and coaches, engineers, forestry technicians, and nearly 7,000 merchant mariners across the world.

How Is The Labor Export Program Coercive?

Cuban government officials promote the program as altruistic, seeking new countries to partner with and increasing profit at the expense of often vulnerable and disempowered workers. International observers and former participants report that Cuban government officials force or coerce individuals to participate and remain in the labor export program by subjecting workers to inherently coercive laws and regulations that manipulate workers and violate their rights.

The Cuban Ministry of Interior labels workers who do not return to the island upon completing their assignment as "deserters," a category that under Cuban immigration law deems them as "undesirable." The government bans workers labeled as "deserters" and "undesirables" from returning to Cuba for eight years, preventing them from visiting their family in Cuba. In addition, the government categorizes Cuban nationals who do not return to the country within 24 months as having "emigrated." Individuals who emigrate lose all their citizen protections, rights under Cuban law, and any property left behind. These government policies and legal provisions, taken together, coerce workers and punish those seeking to exercise freedom of movement. A report published by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted concern over Cuba's policy to prohibit parents who terminated a civilian contract abroad

from reuniting with their children. According to an international NGO, by 2021, the Cuban government had sanctioned 40,000 professionals under these provisions, and in 2022, there were approximately 5,000 children forcibly separated from their parents due to the government's policies surrounding the program.

Recommended Anti-Trafficking Measures

Each worker should:

- Have full awareness of the nature of the job, location, and contractual expectations.
- Have ample time to review their employment contract and or any binding agreement before signing and be able to retain a copy of that contract or agreement.
- Have the ability to terminate their employment at any time and without government retaliation against them or their families.
- Have immediate and permanent access to personal travel documentation and professional certifications.
- Have the opportunity to be joined by their family, if possible.
- Receive compensation that closely matches other skilled foreign workers doing similar work.
- Have a personal bank account to receive salary payments directly and be under their access and control.
- Receive protection from retaliation and access to adequate victim services, if needed.
- Have freedom of movement and the ability to befriend locals and others without constraints or supervision.

Host governments should:

- Conduct frequent and unannounced labor inspections to screen foreign workers, including Cuban workers, for trafficking indicators and employ victim-centered interviewing techniques. Confirm foreign workers maintain control of their passports and can provide proof of salary payment, if needed.
- Ensure workers are paid directly to a bank account they control.
- Vigorously and adequately protect Cuban workers who are victims of trafficking and hold alleged traffickers accountable.
- Raise awareness of trafficking risks by widely distributing information, in relevant languages and formats, on human trafficking and the rights of foreign workers, including in places of employment and during inspections.
- Ensure relevant officials, including health service professionals, are trained to identify human trafficking victims and signs.
- Provide long-term care and services for identified trafficking victims, including legal alternatives to their removal to countries in which they would face retribution or hardship.

The Government of Cuba should:

- Remove existing protocols used by the Ministry of Interior punishing and labeling medical workers who terminate their employment in foreign countries as “deserters.”
- Revise Cuban immigration law currently labeling and punishing those who don't return to Cuba after departing an international mission as “undesirable.”
- Cease banning workers labeled as “deserters” or “undesirable” from returning to Cuba.
- Allow former participants who terminate their employment to return to Cuba without punishment or retribution.
- Allow workers to review proposed employment contracts with a reasonable time to consider the agreement.
- Compensate workers fairly and similarly to other foreign workers in their country of destination.
- Allow government-affiliated workers to befriend locals and move freely without supervision.
- Cease the separation of families as punishment for terminating civilian contracts abroad.
- Allow workers complete control of their personal passport and professional certifications.

The Big Picture: State-Sponsored Trafficking In Persons

The Palermo Protocol calls on governments to proactively address trafficking crimes; however, some governments are part of the problem, directly compelling their citizens into sex trafficking or forced labor. From forced labor in local or national public work projects, military operations, economically important sectors, or as part of government-funded projects or missions abroad to sexual slavery on government compounds, officials use their power to exploit their nationals. To extract this work or service, governments coerce by threatening the withdrawal of public benefits, withholding salaries, failing to adhere to limits on national service, manipulating the lack of legal status of stateless individuals and other minority groups, threatening to punish family members, or conditioning services, food, or freedom of movement on labor or sex. The U.S. Department of State has reported on these concerns among Cuba's medical missions since 2010 and assessed Cuba to have such a policy or pattern of trafficking through this program since the 2020 TIP Report.

