

# Why Cuban doctors are on the coronavirus

YOSSI MEKELBERG

It is a rarity these days for Cuba to receive much attention in the news. The days of the island being at the heart, even a symbol, of revolutionary fervor and superpower rivalry have long gone. However, every time there is a health crisis, this small Caribbean island distinguishes itself with selfless readiness to heed the call to arms, and sends its brigades of doctors and nurses to help those most in need, while the wealthiest countries can barely look after the health of their own people.

For those of us who regularly visit Cuba and have become familiar with the legacy of the revolution, the Cuban government's decision to send hundreds of doctors to combat coronavirus not only to its neighbors, but to a total of 14 countries, including Italy and Andorra in Europe, came as no surprise. Neither did the country's decision to allow a British cruise ship with five confirmed cases of coronavirus on board to dock near Havana after it had been turned away from multiple ports in the Caribbean and the US. Since the early 1960s, when Cuba sent its first medical mission to Algeria to replace French doctors who had left the North African country after it gained independence from France, medical help and humanitarian aid for the less fortunate have become part of Cuba's DNA.

From the very early days of the

"Barbudos" (the bearded) seizing power in 1959, Cuba's two main paths to achieving social justice have been through investing in its education and health care systems. This comes from a deep conviction that a successful society requires universal education and health services, instead of these benefits being available only to those privileged enough to be able to pay for them. And, through the years, the expansion of medical internationalism has evolved from a universalist humanitarian ideology to also being a source of influential soft power — what became known as "doctor diplomacy" — and a major source of income for the country; bigger even than tourism or agriculture.

In its drive to improve the human condition, Cuba followed the thinking of one of the leaders of its revolution, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, an Argentinian physician who declared in the early days of the revolution that, "we must strive every day so that this love of living humanity is transformed into actual deeds, into acts that serve as examples, as a moving force." In a speech to Cuban militiamen in 1960, Guevara reminisced about his travels throughout Latin America after his graduation (immortalized in "The Motorcycle Diaries"), when, as a young middle-class doctor, he became acquainted with "poverty, hunger and disease; with the inability to treat a child because of lack of money; with the stupe-



A contingent of Cuban doctors arrive at Milan's Malpensa airport to assist in the battle against COVID-19, March 22, 2020.

faction provoked by the continual hunger and punishment, to the point that a father can accept

the loss of a son as an unimportant accident, as occurs often in the downtrodden classes of our

American homeland." This led him to leave the medical profession and become a revolutionary

and, on reaching a position of power, to advance the cause of medical internationalism together

# How China can take the lead on protecting nature

AKANKSHA KHATRI, CHUNQUAN ZHU

- In China's recovery to COVID-19, it can take the lead in environmental action.
- The country can take concrete measures to balance environmental and commercial interests.
- Humanity has an unprecedented opportunity to transition to a carbon-neutral and nature-positive global economy.

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic is having undeniable human and economic impacts. China has been hit hard by the virus but, as one of the first countries to see a decline in the rate of infections, also has a leadership opportunity in the post-COVID-19 future. A focus on nature could provide opportunities to recover from this pandemic, as well as prevent future such crises.

While no conclusive link has been made with COVID-19, some evidence shows that loss of habitat and the illegal wildlife trade could lead to an increase in animal-borne, so-called zoonotic, diseases. This raises important questions about the interlinkage of biodiversity loss and the resilience of interconnected supply

chains in the global economy.

Healthy ecosystems can support economic growth, societal wellbeing and climate stabilization. As such, while encroachment and the misuse of nature is increasingly being thought of as a source of future pandemics, nature also offers solutions that we desperately need to recover from this crisis and to build our resilience to face others.

Last week, more than 500 top business leaders, government representatives, and scholars met at the World Economic Forum's China Business Roundtable (CBR) to discuss how to deal with this rapidly-changing reality and ensure a stable post-COVID recovery. China's philosophy of an Ecological Civilization, enshrined in the 2018 Chinese constitution and also the theme of the UN CBD COP15 puts forward an ambitious vision that could provide a broad framework within which to assess and calibrate humanity's current relationship with nature and a vision of a harmonization between environmental and commercial interests.

China was not always seen as an environmental leader. However, in the early 2010s after a year of severe smog in 2011/12 dubbed "airpocalypse," the Government



of China initiated a large national action plan to combat air pollution and other environmental challenges. It is around this time that the government also began the China Ecological Conserva-

tion Red Line (ECRL) initiative to protect more than one-quarter of the Chinese mainland — an area almost the size of France, Spain, Turkey, Germany and Italy combined, totalling more than 2.4

million square kilometres.

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic is causing business and government leaders to make difficult decisions. We are at a turning point where we cannot

go back to business-as-usual and instead must use this opportunity to transition to a carbon-neutral and nature-positive global economy.

While initial investments and