

Rubio's invisible hand: How the US is trying to isolate Cuba



Washington is currently targeting Cuba's medical missions and diplomats (source: [Minsap/PD](#))

On Wednesday, Ecuador [declared](#) Cuban Ambassador Basilio Antonio Gutiérrez and the embassy's diplomatic staff persona non grata and gave them 48 hours to leave the country. According to the AP news agency, the Ecuadorian Foreign Ministry said the measure was taken in accordance with international diplomatic law, but did not give any reasons.

The day before, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa had already dismissed Ecuador's ambassador to Cuba, José María Borja, by decree – also without explanation.

In a statement on Wednesday evening, the Cuban government [strongly rejected](#) the move, calling it an “unfriendly and unprecedented act that significantly damages the historic relations of friendship and cooperation between the two countries.”

Washington's campaign against Cuba's medical brigades

The diplomatic escalation between Quito and Havana is part of a broader pattern: the US is currently increasing pressure on Cuba at all levels. In addition to a [de facto oil blockade](#), it is [specifically targeting](#) Cuba's medical program – one of the island nation's most important sources of foreign exchange, with revenues of \$4.8 billion annually ([2022](#)).

An [incident in Europe](#) illustrates how far Washington's influence extends: Mike Hammer, chargé d'affaires at the US Embassy in Cuba, [traveled](#) to the southern Italian region of Calabria at the end of February, where around 400 Cuban doctors are currently working in local hospitals – a number that is expected to grow to 1,000 over the course of the year.

Hammer spoke to the regional administration there and urged them to refrain from employing Cuban doctors.

Cuba sends medical personnel abroad and charges for their services. The Cuban government retains part of the remuneration, with the rest going to the doctors. The US State Department and government-affiliated think tanks refer to this as “forced labor” and “human trafficking” – an accusation that Cuba strongly rejects.

[According to](#) the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto*, the first agreement between Cuba and Calabria stipulated that the region would pay the Cuban state agency 3,200 euros per month per doctor, of which 1,200 euros would go directly to the doctors. This wage is many times higher than the usual salaries in Cuba, which is why working abroad is attractive. In addition, doctors on mission often receive additional compensation such as cars or home renovations upon their return.

Cuban doctors were [brought to Italy](#) in March 2020 at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic as emergency aid for overburdened clinics and have since become a structural pillar of the healthcare system in the economically weak south. Italy is the only EU country with such an agreement. According to the news agency *AFP*, Cuba had around 24,000 doctors working in 56 countries until last year.

Domino effect in Latin America

US pressure is increasingly having an effect. Just a few days ago, Honduras [announced](#) the withdrawal of its 128 Cuban doctors. The government of President Nasry Asfura, a declared Trump supporter who took office at the end of January, had decided not to renew the agreement with Cuba. Guatemala is also allowing the Cuban medical mission, which began 27 years ago after Hurricane Mitch and comprises 412 medical professionals, to [run out](#), as are [Antigua and Barbuda](#). The Bahamas and Grenada modified the terms of the agreement last year.

During Trump's first term in office, Brazil (2018), Bolivia (2019), Ecuador (2019), and El Salvador (2020) already ended the Cuban missions. The medical mission in Venezuela, traditionally Cuba's most important partner, is also on the brink of collapse following the [kidnapping of President Nicolás Maduro](#) by the US. In Africa, however, countries such as Angola and South Africa continue to welcome Cuban doctors, and Qatar has renewed its agreements with Cuba.

Resistance in the Caribbean and Europe

Not all governments are bowing to pressure from Washington. Jamaica's government [has stated](#) that its medical cooperation program with Cuba will remain in place, even though the agreement is currently being renegotiated under US pressure. Around 300 Cuban doctors work on the island, and the cooperation has been in place for more than five decades.

“Let's be clear that the Cuban doctors in Jamaica have helped us tremendously,” Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness said at a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

US pressure is also meeting resistance in Calabria. Regional President Roberto Occhiuto, deputy leader of the right-wing Forza Italia party and part of Giorgia Meloni's governing coalition, reiterated that he did not want to do without Cuban personnel. His top priority, he said, was the right to medical care for Calabrian citizens. "I told Hammer that the Cuban doctors who keep hospitals and emergency rooms open in Calabria remain indispensable to our region," Occhiuto [said](#). According to *Il Manifesto*, previous calls for applications to hire foreign doctors had been unsuccessful—no Italian or European doctors had applied due to unfavorable contract offers and working conditions.

The entirety of these measures – from the oil blockade to the systematic undermining of medical programs to diplomatic upheavals such as in Ecuador – points to a comprehensive strategy by Washington to cut off Cuba's economic lifelines and reorganize the geopolitical landscape of the American continent according to its own ideas. Whether this is in the interests of the countries concerned is irrelevant.

Update (06.03): Jamaica has now also [announced](#) that it will not renew its medical cooperation with Cuba, which has been in place for more than 50 years. ([Cubaheute](#))