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Caribbean Nations Brace for Fallout from U.S. Crackdown on Cuban Medical Missions

As the U.S. moves to sanction officials linked to Cuba's medical missions, Caribbean nations warn of severe consequences for regional healthcare. CARICOM foreign ministers are strategizing a response ahead of Secretary Marco Rubio's upcoming visit.

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Cuban doctors.

Caribbean nations were left reeling from a recent State Department announcement that “an existing Cuba-related visa restriction policy,” was being expanded.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the government was targeting Cuba's overseas medical missions. The country, under unilateral sanction by the United States since 1958, has

established programs with friendly governments under which Cuba regularly sends cadres of medical professionals to work in the recipient country's public healthcare system.

The receiving countries, including several independent Caribbean nations, view the arrangement as part of Cuba's medical philanthropy, which includes sending first response teams to emergencies and mass casualty events around the globe.

According to the State Department, however, the medical missions are a way for the Cuban government “to profit from the forced labor of its workers.” Not only does the practice display the government's “abusive and coercive labor practices,” but the missions “deprive ordinary Cubans of the medical care they desperately need in their home country,” the State Department argues. St. Vincent & the Grenadines Prime Minister Dr. Ralph Gonsalves hit back at the categorization of the medical mission as coercive. “If you call it trafficking in persons, then it loses all meaning because we are paying them, and it's done very openly and very transparently,” he said, as quoted by the St. Vincent Times.

In an attempt to curb the practice, Secretary Rubio says that U.S. visas may be stripped or withheld from “current or former Cuban government officials, and other individuals...believed to be responsible for, or involved in, the Cuban labor export program.” These other individuals include “foreign government officials” as well as their families, the State Department's announcement indicated. Several Venezuelan officials have already been sanctioned under the expanded policy, the announcement said.

The ramifications of this new policy for the region are vast. Cuban medical professionals have for years – decades in some cases – been filling gaps in the healthcare labor force of Caribbean countries left by the lack of homegrown talent. Specialty physicians in particular, are scarce, and the loss of Cuban doctors could lead to a calamitous reduction in access to medical care across the region.

Since the expanded State Department policy was rolled out last week, foreign ministers of CARICOM member nations have reportedly been huddled together to discuss the matter. In Parliament on Friday, Barbadian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade Kerrie Symmonds said that any response must be a considered one. “It is really important...that the temptation to respond in a manner full of testosterone does not overcome us,” he remarked, as quoted by Barbados Today.

The issue places a greater sense of urgency on the announced visit of Mr. Rubio to the Caribbean. The recently-concluded CARICOM Heads of Government meeting featured a declaration from current chair Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados that President Trump would be invited to visit the region.

For now, regional leaders will have to speak with the President's Secretary of State, who will be in the Caribbean in the coming weeks. The Miami Herald reports that President Trump's special envoy to the Americas, Mauricio Claver-Carone, will accompany Mr. Rubio.

Apart from concerns over how the region will be impacted by the expanded regime of visa restrictions, parties are also expected to discuss the gutting of U.S. Agency for International Development programs, the freezing of other foreign aid programs, and enhanced deportation policies.