

INTERNATIONAL

South African hospitals in crisis

Pumla Tshego

Special to Sentinel-Voice

JOHANNESBURG (AIA/GIN) - It is a tough time to be poor and sick in South Africa's richest province, Gauteng, because the country's public hospitals are in crisis.

Africa's largest hospital, the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, has more than 3,000 beds and caters to more than two million people from the township and surrounding areas. But, the hospital, known as "Bara," has neither enough doctors nor nurses to cope with demands.

The same grim picture can be seen at Johannesburg General, known as the "Gen." It is an ugly conglomeration of squat concrete buildings high on a leafy ridge overlooking South Africa's main highway to the north.

Before democratic elections in 1994, the "Gen" mostly catered to Whites, while "Bara" was the main hospital for Blacks. All that changed with the end of apartheid. Poor people of all races are now admitted to both hospitals.

Both hospitals have also experienced massive budget and staff losses. Doctors and

nurses have departed for the more lucrative positions within the private sector, and they have been forced to limit their services.

Senior staff at these and other area hospitals recently took the unprecedented step of issuing public statements warning that patients will die unnecessarily, some wards will be closed, and casualty admissions will be stopped.

Their press conferences have reverberated around the country and caused a huge uproar. Johannesburg's main newspapers carried banner headlines that read "Wards of Death" and "Condemned

to Die." There were pictures of babies in incubators who would stop breathing because they lacked ventilators; reports of badly injured people treated after many hours of waiting in emergency rooms and shortages of equipment, drugs and bandages.

Joanne Collinge, head of public relations at the Gauteng Health Department, said part of the problem is that previous administrations were not forced to stick to their budgets, so overspending became part of public hospital culture.

(See Hospital, Page 18)

Washington's policy a problem for Cubans

Patrick Smikle

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MIAMI, FLORIDA (IPS) — Informally called the "wet foot/dry foot policy," Washington's current approach to managing the problem of refugees trying to flee Cuba for U.S. shores has had more detractors than supporters since it was put in place four years ago.

Protests against the Cuban Adjustment Act reached a peak in Florida this past June and have been sustained over the past five weeks with speeches, statements, pamphlets, rallies and high-profiled demonstrations by Cuban-American civic and political organizations.

Some of the demonstrations have brought together previously feuding Cuban-American politicians such as Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, Hialeah Mayor Raul Martinez and Miami City Mayor Joe Corollo.

And, unheard of groups such as "Unidos," an umbrella organization of seven Cuban-American civic clubs, have had their statements against the policy reproduced verbatim in South Florida's most respected newspapers, an unusual editorial practice.

The columnists and editorial writers in these publications have weighed in with repeated denunciations of the policy.

The "wet foot/dry foot policy" had its genesis during the 1994 crisis when hundreds of Cubans fled their country in makeshift boats and rafts. Some even used the inner tubes of automobile tires.

The U.S. policy toward Cuban refugees at that time virtually guaranteed them legal residency. More than 30,000 made it to Florida, but scores were presumed to have

drowned trying to make the trip. U.S. Coast Guard vessels — collaborating with pilots from the Cuban-exile group, "Brothers to the Rescue" — have saved hundreds of refugees.

Desperate to prevent another "Mariel boatlift" type situation, the Clinton administration made the highly unusual move of entering into an immigration agreement with Fidel Castro's government.

The Cuban government agreed to do more to stem the flow of refugees, and the U.S. resolved to provide 20,000 visas annually, allocated through a lottery.

As part of this new policy, refugees picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard were returned to Cuba.

However, those managing to make it to land would be granted asylum. Wet foot: you were returned to Cuba. Dry foot: you were allowed to stay.

There was an almost instant and dramatic reduction in the flow of refugees, now classified as migrants, under the new policy.

But, leaders in South Florida's exile community warned that it would not last. They said the numbers of Cubans wanting to migrate to the United States far outnumbered the 20,000 visas being allotted.

They said the Cuban government would make it difficult for even visa winners to leave. And they predicted that the "wet foot/dry foot policy" would drive people to do desperate things to reach land. They have been proven correct.

In 1997, there were more than 400,000 applicants for the 20,000 visas.

Many who have won visas in the lottery have been unable to leave as the Cuban government requires payment of various fees amounting to more than \$600.

And since 1997 the number of Cubans trying to reach the U.S. has again started to grow, partly some suspect, because of a thriving trade in refugee smuggling.

Things reached a head on June 29 when a U.S. Coast Guard vessel intercepted a small boat carrying six refugees.

They resisted efforts to get them into the Coast Guard cutter, and instead jumped overboard and tried to swim to shore and to automatic residency. Coast Guard personnel managed to subdue four of them with water hoses and pepper spray.

The two who made it to the beach were immediately handcuffed and taken into custody.

The Coast Guard admits that these have been routine occurrences.

This time, however, television news helicopters were in the area. The pictures were beamed live to afternoon viewers.

In less than an hour Cuban exile groups took to the streets in protest.

In one demonstration more than 3,000 Cuban-Americans massed outside the Coast Guard station in Miami Beach, shutting down afternoon rush hour traffic and trading insults with annoyed motorists.

In one incident the Mayor of Hialeah traded blows with a motorist.

As the demonstration continued into the early hours of the morning the Immigration and Naturalization Service

backed down and all six Cuban refugees were released to relatives in Miami.

Since then the confrontations between the Coast Guard and refugees have continued and the protests have been sustained.

On July 10 a woman was killed when a Coast Guard vessel and a small boat carrying 12 Cuban refugees collided. The 11 survivors were returned to Cuba.

Senior Coast Guard officers say there has been a growing tendency among the refugees they intercept to use confrontational tactics. Lt. Ron LaBrec recalls an incident in which refugees in a boat ordered by the Coast Guard to stop, brandished wooden oars some of which had nails in them.

The officers also complain about their change of role from rescuers to enforcers but insist that they have no choice.

"The Coast Guard has a policy of using the minimum amount of force necessary to enforce U.S. law and to keep our people safe," said LaBrec.

The influential American Civil Liberties Union says it is considering contesting the policy on the grounds that U.S. territory stretches for 12 miles from the Florida shore. Thus, a refugee who makes it into U.S. waters but not to shore is protected by the American constitution.

"When has someone reached the United States?" asked Howard Simon, the ACLU executive director for Florida. "It's at 12 miles for other purposes, and no court has ruled otherwise."

This, he says, raises the question, "What happens at low tide and high tide? Does the constitution vary? This policy is absurd."

WORLD BRIEFS

MENINGITIS VACCINE MAY OPEN WINDOW IN US-CUBAN TRADE

HAVANA (IPS) — A Cuban vaccine for meningitis could find its way onto pharmacy shelves in the United States, opening a crack in the trade embargo Washington has imposed on Cuba since 1961. According to Washington sources, President Bill Clinton's government agreed to authorize the British firm, SmithKline Beecham Pharmaceuticals, to market the Cuban anti-meningitis vaccine, VA-MENGOC-BC, in the United States. Produced by the country's Carlos J. Finlay Institute, the anti-meningococcus vaccine is already exported to 12 countries. It became part of the National Immunization Program of Cuba's Public Health Ministry in 1991. Proven safe and effective in preventing meningitis outbreaks, it is administered in two doses — the first at age 3.5 months, and the second at 5.5 months. — Patricia Grogg

U.S. OPPOSES INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) — The United States remains opposed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) — more than one year after 120 governments voted to set up such a body to prosecute genocide cases and major war crimes. Jesse Helms, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, dismissed the ICC as "dead on arrival." Other U.S. officials have warned that, unless governments supporting the ICC address their concerns about the scope of the Court's power, Washington would oppose it. However, the Court's supporters appeared upbeat that the required number of governments would ratify the agreement, allowing it to be enforced without U.S. support, perhaps as early as two years from now. Under its rules, the Court can operate after the U.N. Security Council refers a case to it. Otherwise, it can only act after the Court's prosecutor is given a green light from the nation where a crime is committed, or from the home country of the suspected criminal or victim. Sixty countries must ratify the ICC statute before it can enter into force. To date, 83 countries have signed the statute, but 79 of that number still have to go through the ratification process. Late last month Italy joined Senegal, Trinidad and Tobago and San Marino in ratifying the ICC statute — Farhan Haq

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