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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000442

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
EMBASSY BOGOTA FOR REF CORD (SHIGGINS)
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)
DEPARTMENT PASS TO G/TIP (BFLECK)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KTIP](#) [VE](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: CUBAN MEDICAL PERSONNEL FLEE VENEZUELA

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Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco Fernandez,
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1](#). (C) Summary: Embassy Caracas notes a significant number of Cuban medical personnel applying to be paroled into the United States under the Significant Public Benefit Parole (SPBP) for Cuban Medical Professionals outside of Cuba (CMPP). During Consular Section interviews in March, Cuban Medical personnel affiliated with Chavez's Barrio Adentro program complained of poor working conditions, inadequate medical supplies, and of constantly being watched and monitored by coworkers. As result of the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) clamp down on Cubans attempting to flee the island through Venezuela, recent asylum seekers have complained of having difficulty in exiting Venezuela and being forced to pay exorbitant bribes

to GBRV officials when attempting to leave the country en-route to Miami. End Summary.

CUBANS DOCTORS FLEE VENEZUELA

¶2. (S) The Consular Section at US Embassy Caracas began accepting applications for SPBP on August 18, 2006. To date, the Embassy has received paperwork and forwarded to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) applications for 739 Cuban asylum seekers, of which 69% or 510 were approved, 91 were denied and 138 are pending. Since February of 2009, DHS has notified Post that 73 Cuban Medical Personnel Program (CMPP) applicants have been approved for parole through the CMPP.

¶3. (S) In 2006 and 2007 Embassy Caracas facilitated travel to Miami for program applicants through the issuance of transportation letters authorizing Cubans to board US bound aircraft. By October 2007, Venezuelan immigration officials began refusing to board defecting Cubans on onward flights to Miami in an unpredictable and ad-hoc manner. To enhance fraud protection due to insecurity of the travel letter, (one letter was used by an imposture), Post sought and received CA approval to issue YY visa foils instead of transportation letters. Having a visa foil in their passports has facilitated the departure of most parolees. The Consular Section began issuing YY visa foils in February 2009 to approved Cuban Medical Parolees. Of the 73 approved CMPP applicants in 2009, 43 have been issued YY visa foils, 39 have successfully passed through immigration and boarded their flight to Miami, and two have confirmed plans to travel in the near future. Thirty approved applicants have not yet confirmed travel plans because they currently are unable to travel, do not have the financial resources to leave Venezuela, or have been forced to return to Cuba. Two applicants were unsuccessful in their attempt to leave Venezuela from the Barcelona (Venezuela) airport. Note: Most CMPP applicants departing from the Caracas airport have been successful in boarding their flight to Miami. Following the approval of parole by DHS, CMPP applicants must enter the US within 60 days. End Note.

CUBAN MEDICS CLAIM MISTREATMENT

¶4. (C) The majority of the CMPP applicants interviewed by

Post were originally conscripted to work in social programs such as Mission Barrio Adentro, a GBRV sponsored program that provides health care to city slums and rural communities, or similar GBRV poverty reduction programs in medicine, sports, and the arts. In its annual 2008 report, the Caracas based human rights NGO PROVEA estimated that 14,345 Cuban medical professionals were originally assigned to work in Venezuela following the inauguration of Barrio Adentro in December 2003. Currently only about 8,500 Cubans are estimated to be employed in social programs across the country. While some CMPP applicants told Consular officials they volunteered to come to Venezuela, many others have complained of being forced (or directed) by Cuban authorities to work in Venezuela under President Chavez's social mission programs for a period of 1-3 years.

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5. (C) Many CMPP applicants have reported that upon arrival in Venezuela, Barrio Adentro Mission officials have confiscated the passports of program participants to prevent their fleeing the mission. According to one applicant who was interviewed on January 27, 2009, the coordinator of the Cuban medical mission (Barrio Adentro 2, Aragua state) had been holding his and his other colleagues' passports since April 2008, when another Cuban had abandoned the mission, as a "means of preventing other desertions." The applicant did not receive his passport back until he went on a scheduled vacation in September 2008 to Cuba. Upon his return to Venezuela in October 2008 he was not required by mission authorities to turn over his passport a second time. The CMPP applicant received Significant Public Benefit Parole on March 2, 2009, was issued a YY visa foil, successfully fled Venezuela, and arrived in Miami on March 16, 2009.

6. (C) During Consular section interviews in March, Cuban medical personnel affiliated with Chavez's Barrio Adentro program complained of extremely poor working conditions, low pay, limited medical supplies, and of constantly being watched and monitored by co-workers. According to one doctor who successfully fled on March 10, "All the effort I put into my work is not recognized by anyone... I am not well paid and only make 715 BsF (332 USD) a month in Venezuela, I want to change my life." The doctor told Consular Officers that he is forced to attend to 250-300 patients a week and "can only use obsolete and inferior Cuban medicine". A rehabilitation therapist who successfully fled on March 16 opined, "I feel politically manipulated. The system is closing my chances

and I want to be a better professional. I have a lack of equipment and medicine in my job. I want to be a free man. I want to be a surgeon specialist." On March 30 one CMPP applicant, who managed to escape his mission for several hours and was clearly anxious to return before his supervisor realized he was gone, told Poloff "They are always watching us, checking in with us at random times, asking what we are doing and calling us on our cell phones." While noting that he has not received any physical threats so far during his time in Venezuela, he commented "It is a psychological battle that we must endure every day."

CORRUPTION, DESPERATION, GBRV CLAMP DOWN

¶7. (S) The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) began clamping down on Cubans attempting to flee the island via Venezuela in 2007. While many applicants have successfully fled Cuba through Venezuela, others have been detained upon attempting to depart and presumably deported to Cuba. Recent asylum seekers have complained of having to pay exorbitant bribes (usually around 1,000 USD) to Venezuelan customs officials when attempting to exit the country en-route to Miami.

¶8. (S) As recently as March 24 a Cuban couple attempted to board a flight from Barcelona (Venezuela) to Miami after the US Embassy issued YY visa foils for their onward travel. The couple paid over 4,600 USD to "a contact" to assist them in clearing GBRV immigration. After their flight was delayed and a shift change occurred at the airport, the couple was questioned by Venezuelan immigration authorities who turned them over to the National Guard. The military later contacted Cuban officials. The couple was eventually moved to a hotel by Cuban "security" and told they would be deported to Cuba. The CMPP applicants later escaped their captors and fled to the US Embassy, where a local contact picked them up and reportedly took them into hiding. The traumatized couple told US Consular officers the Cuban "police" who detained them were also "Barrio Adentro Mission officials". According to the female CMPP applicant, the "Cuban police" threatened to rape her and beat up her boyfriend. Note: Recent CMPP applicants have reported to Consular Officers that after leaving Barrio Adentro, occasionally some Venezuelans are willing to help Cubans who are in hiding. Little is known about the individuals who assist Cuban medical personnel once they abandon Chavez's "missions." End Note.

Â¶9. (S) Comment: Due to the risk CMPP applicants have of being stopped by GBRV authorities prior to boarding Miami

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bound aircraft, some Cuban parolees have considered (or are considering) undertaking a cross border overland trip to Bogota. While Post does not advise parolees on which route (if any) is less risky, the issuance of YY visa foils by Post has reduced the probability of GBRV immigration officials detecting a parolee prior to his or her departure. Post believes, however, that it is only a matter of time before GBRV immigration officials become alert to the YY visa foils and are able to further tighten the GBRV's clamp down on Cubans planning to abandon the social missions and flee the country. With the February approval of 73 applicants by DHS, (over 25 applicants have been issued YY visa foils in the past two weeks alone), and more cases pending approval, Post continues to meet the demand of Cuban medical personnel hoping to flee Venezuela rather than face the prospect of returning to Cuba. End Comment.