

The new blockade: How Cuba handles Aids sufferers

One of the most controversial aspects of Cuban health care — and a direct result of the US blockade of the island — is its approach to Aids sufferers.

Since October 1992, 150 Aids cases have been diagnosed in Cuba. Extensive testing revealed 850 HIV-positive people. Compared to most third world and developed countries, these statistics are phenomenally low.

But Cuba's way of dealing with Aids — to quarantine HIV carriers in a sanatorium — has stirred controversy throughout the western world. The US (which implemented the blockade 33 years ago) has slammed it as a violation of human rights.

Because of the blockade, the Cuban government had to assess its ability to contain the spread of Aids. And the shortage of medical supplies, plus the lack of knowledge on the island about how to treat Aids victims, called for drastic measures.

A national programme was launched to test all people likely to have come into contact with HIV — in particular, people who travelled outside Cuba, or who had contact with tourists, and soldiers who had returned from battle in other parts of the world. Acting on the premise that Aids is a sexually-transmitted disease, and that HIV-positive people are potentially contagious, the Cuban government then ruled that those who tested HIV positive should be isolated in sanatoria to protect the unaffected population.

Although the government has emphasised that the quarantine programme is not intended to be permanent, and has already made several amendments to conditions in sanatoria, the policy remains controversial.

Not prisons

The western media image portrays the sanatoria as prisons with high fences and guards. This was not the impression I gained from visiting the Los Cocos sanatorium in Havana and from speaking to families of HIV-positive individuals in Santiago.

Los Cocos is situated in pleasant surroundings with extensive grounds and recreational facilities, including a swimming pool. Residents do not live in dormitories but in small individual or couple units. Couples who are both HIV-positive live together. It was pointed out to me that many couples met and married in the sanatorium. Four hourly daily visits from friends and family are permitted.

The sanatorium, and all it has to offer — including meals and medical care — are free of charge. Residents who had to quit their jobs to move to the sanatorium continue receiving their salary and others receive allowances.

Residents expressed different views about the sanatorium. A few middle aged men and women said they were thankful to the government for providing them with comfortable surroundings and medical care which their families would not have been able to offer.

But younger residents spoke of restlessness and a feeling of being trapped. "I want to live with the people, with my family. I want to dance and swim with my friends. Sometimes I think I'll die tomorrow, so I want to get away from here and enjoy the time I have left," J, a 27-year-old man, told me.

Health officials pointed out that conscious efforts were made to ensure that the sanatoria are not places of death. Once patients become very ill they are sent to the Institute for Tropical Medicine for treatment — and it is here that most patients die.

Gentle persuasion

Not all HIV-positive Cubans go to a sanatorium willingly. However, "extreme methods of force" — although sanctioned by the government — are avoided, according to health workers. After much discussion and psychological support, patients who initially refuse to go are "gently" persuaded to do so.

This aspect of Cuba's Aids policy is particularly controversial and has raised strong criticism in the west.

Deputy health minister Hector Terry stresses that the government "spares no resources to make sure our people get the best health care. This is what we are trying to maintain in our battle against Aids..."

Cuban health workers are particularly proud of the fact that the government pays full salaries to sanatorium inmates, and that health care is provided free of charge.

They compare this to the US, where Aids treatment costs several hundred dollars a day and is way beyond the reach of many Americans.

"An Aids sufferer in the US could die of hunger after losing his job, or die prematurely because he could not afford a hospital bed and medicines," one health-worker pointed out. "We will not abandon our people like that." — *Shereen Singh*

man chancellor Helmut Kohl has chosen to provide that model democracy Indonesia with a number of leftover warships from the GDR fleet. The hypocrisy of the victors knows no bounds.

Wretched

Yes, it's true. The triumphant reports in the Western press are quite right when they tote up the successful outcome. Havana looks wretched. Shop windows are empty or else they display a few dreary wares, testimony to the growing shortages. Bookstore shelves do not groan under letteristic overproduction. Where foodstuffs are sold for ration coupons, people have to stand in line. These people do not express any particular faith in communism, yet a few days later they will participate, albeit reluctantly, in something called an election.

The results, after a turnout alarmingly close to 100%, cannot but confirm the existing power structure, which has undergone only slight and all-too-cautious changes.

No, these were not democratic elections following the Western model. To be sure, they were carried out properly, as we observed in the town of Trinidad. There were election booths and a folded ballot. But nothing like a recognisable opposition was allowed to present itself to the voters. Instead — as was stressed again and again — for the first time voters had a choice of candidates, among them surprisingly many who did not belong to the ruling party of this one-party regime: doctors, scientists, artists. Take, for example, the writer Miguel Barnet, who won 98% of the vote in his electoral district, yet received the news of his landslide diffidently, saying this represented too great a responsibility. It was his first time running for public office: he had always been an outsider, not only as a Christian, but as someone who had not been allowed to publish any of his books in the 1970s — those had been the worst years. Now all this recognition! He felt crushed; so much was expected of him.

Barnet has often travelled abroad. His books are now widely distributed. The difficulties he experienced at the hands of the party and the Writers' League did not lead him to turn his back on his country and escape animos-