**The U.N. and Human Trafficking**

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Cuba’s military dictatorship sent Ramona Matos Rodriguez to Brazil in September 2013 as part of its foreign “medical missions.” Posted to the Amazonian state of Pará, Dr. Matos Rodriguez was to be paid by Brazil for her services. But she says she received only about 10% of the salary Brazil allocated.

In a 2018 class-action lawsuit filed in federal court in Miami, Dr. Matos Rodriguez and three other Cuban doctors claim that 85% of the money went to Havana via the Pan American Health Organization, or PAHO, which acted as the go-between. By gaining PAHO’s cooperation, Brazil’s then-President Dilma Rousseff was able to conceal the illegal arrangement from the Brazilian Congress, other federal institutions and the international community, the suit alleges.

PAHO is a United Nations outfit, and member countries pay its annual budget, with the U.S. providing more than half. But the lawsuit claims that in its secret agreement with Cuba, the organization was also taking a 5% cut of the doctors’ salaries as they passed through Washington.

Dr. Matos Rodriguez lived a life of poverty in Brazil, and she couldn’t leave. She had effectively been sold into slavery by her own government. She had a 6 p.m. curfew and a “minder.” She was forbidden to move about socially in her free time. Her family in Cuba wasn’t allowed to visit, and she could go home only once a year.

The story of how Brazil, Cuba and PAHO allegedly conspired to traffic Cuban medical professionals may never have come to light if Dr. Matos Rodriguez hadn’t made a dramatic escape to Brasília in January 2014. There she asked the Brazilian Congress for protection and spilled the truth about the plight of the Cuban doctors in the country.

Cuba has been trafficking people for decades, and thousands of Cubans have told similar stories after fleeing their captors and making it to freedom. According to the World Trade Organization, in 2018 Cuba generated $10.7 billion from “exports of commercial services.” The bulk of this income came from its foreign servitude scheme.

The difference in this case is the charge in federal court that a U.N. agency played a pivotal role. In their lawsuit the Cuban doctors allege that PAHO “has collected over $75 million since 2013 by enabling, managing and enforcing illegal human trafficking of Cuban medical professionals in Brazil.”

PAHO told me in an email on Friday that “it is false to state that this Brazilian public health Program involved human trafficking in Cuban doctors” and that it “would never participate in any activity or program related to human trafficking.” But it didn’t address its alleged role in sending the doctors’ salaries to Cuba, making it the hub of the trafficking operation. As to PAHO’s fee, it said it collects “support costs” for every project it “implements.” Yet the lawsuit alleges that Brazil’s federal and local governments “paid for most if not all the expenses of the program.” A PAHO request for a change of venue to Washington is now pending before the district judge.

In an interview in Miami this month, Dr. Matos Rodriguez told me about the high-stakes gamble she took to get to freedom. When President Rousseff, a close ally of the Cuban dictatorship, realized the doctor had fled, she issued an arrest order for her deportation. That would have been devastating for Dr. Matos Rodriguez, who by attempting to claim her human rights had exposed herself as an enemy of the murderous ruling Cuban military elite.

Fortunately, by the time Ms. Rousseff unleashed her fury, the doctor was already inside the Brazilian Congress, where the constitution grants immunity. As long as Dr. Matos Rodriguez remained in the building, she couldn’t be touched. She stayed for three days until the Brazilian Supreme Court granted a petition to protect her civil liberties. Later the U.S. gave her humanitarian parole. Now, along with other victims, she is seeking justice.

Brazilian law mandates that all foreign medical workers, under its “More Doctors” program, receive equal compensation. But Cuba wanted to traffic its doctors for hard currency, and Ms. Rousseff wanted to help. Diplomatic cables between Cuba and Brazil—released to journalists under Brazilian transparency laws—indicate that the two ideologically aligned governments cooked up a plan to deceive Brazilians and violate the law by funneling the money through a willing PAHO. According to the cables, the PAHO representative to Brazil, a Cuban, assured Brasilia the scheme could go ahead.

We already know about Cuba’s crimes; Ms. Rousseff was ousted in a scandal and Brazil no longer participates in the Cuban slave trade. But now a U.N. agency is in the spotlight. The International Organization Immunities Act protects PAHO in the U.S., but President Trump can lift that immunity, which isn’t the same as impunity. If there was a U.N. conspiracy to engage in human trafficking, his administration hasn’t only the right but the obligation to ensure that it is exposed.