



The 10-year-old X-ray machines at Agostinho Neto provincial hospital sometimes don't work 100 percent.

Sometimes, they don't work at all.

Just as residents on this island nation tinker with their 1950s Chevrolets to keep them running, the staff at Agostinho Neto jury-rigs medical equipment when replacement parts are in short supply.

But Project C.U.R.E., a Centennial-based aid organization, plans to send at least six containers of donated medical supplies worth some \$2.4 million for Agostinho Neto and two other medical facilities in Guantanamo Province. Three have already arrived.

"I can't say one thing is more important than another," said Dr. Roberto Nicot, director of Agostinho Neto, of the cargo. "We use it all."

The pale, five-story hospital sits near edge of Guantanamo city and was completed in 1985. Nicot's office has a framed, poster-sized photo of Fidel Castro. Two government officials sat in on an interview with him and tagged along on a hospital tour, but did not put any questions or areas off-limits.

Project C.U.R.E. has funneled donated medical supplies to countries ranging from Albania to Zimbabwe. Part of the Cuban shipment will end up in a place right next to one of the most disputed strips of land in the Western Hemisphere.

Some 14 miles from Agostinho Neto is the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay. The United States pays just over \$4,000 a year in rent but the Cubans refuse to cash the checks, apparently as a show of disgust.

Revolutionary billboards and posters are common throughout Cuba, and the local government headquarters in Guantanamo city is no exception: "Socialism or Death," declares the rooftop sign. Agostinho Neto hospital is named for the now deceased doctor and Angolan independence leader supported by Cuba.

Everyday life in Guantanamo, however, contrasts with the military posturing.

It is a city of more than 200,000 with few tourists and a mellow central square. Located on the other side of the island from Havana, it counts both horse-drawn carts and a large baseball stadium. And as in other parts of Cuba, the word on the street contrasts with the party line: Locals greet an American and are eager to practice their English.

Local Guantanamo officials also make a distinction between the American government, which they blame for the naval station, and the American people, which they credit for the donations.

"Perhaps it is ironic that the two types of people exist in America: Those who are interested in war and those who are interested in solidarity," said Alejandro Louit Correa, who handles international relations for the provincial government.

Project C.U.R.E. President Douglas Jackson calls the Cuban venture "fun" and "cutting edge." His organization, he said, is apolitical.

"Project C.U.R.E. is operating within the terms of the governmental policies and regulations of both countries and, within those constraints, we are trying to do as much good as we possibly can for as many people as we can impact in as short of a time as possible," Jackson wrote in an e-mail.

This medical supply donation also stands out for Project C.U.R.E. because of the red tape that had to be cut and the political sparks that spin off from a nearly 50-year duel between the U.S. and Cuba.

The Boulder Rotary Club, for example, donated \$3,000 for shipping only after its World Community Service Committee discussed whether the supplies might be improperly diverted to tourist hospitals or re-exported to other countries for Cuban propaganda purposes, according to the committee co-chairs. Those concerns were allayed by requirements that the donations be monitored.

The Boulder-Cuba Sister City Organization first spoke with Project C.U.R.E. about the donation in 2004, said Joan O'Connell, who coordinates the organization's health activities. Her group, along with Denver and Boulder rotary clubs, and a Denver fund-raiser, raised some of the \$105,000 to ship the six containers.

Earlier this year, Castro announced he was stepping down as president after nearly 50 years. It remains unclear whether Cuban, or U.S. politics, will change. But James Bonn, a co-chairman of the Boulder Rotary World Community Service Committee, thinks the medical donations could help warm relations.

"Castro leaves power," he said, "and the Cuban people see the generosity of Americans."

Travel rules

U.S. citizens and those under U.S. jurisdiction are prohibited from traveling to Cuba for tourism. But there are a number of ways to legally visit the Caribbean nation.

* The three main exceptions to the travel ban are:

* Members of the U.S. government, foreign governments and international organizations on official business.

* Regularly employed journalists on assignment.

* Research or attendance at certain professional meetings or conferences.

* Other exceptions, which require prior government approval or a "specific license," include activities such as:

Business

Educational programs

Freelance journalism

Human rights efforts

Humanitarian efforts

Performances and athletic competitions

Religious activities

Teaching

Visiting a family member

* How Americans travel there anyway:

Typically through a third country such as Mexico or Canada.

* If you break the law:

Up to 10 years in prison, \$1 million in corporate fines and \$250,000 in individual fines. Civil penalties up to \$55,000 per violation also may be imposed.

By Jeff Kass, Rocky Mountains News, 2008