

US ENDANGERS PUBLIC HEALTH EFFORTS WITH SPYING, AGAIN

Jim and I have both written a bunch about the dangers of using public health campaigns as cover for spying, as CIA did when it asked Dr. Shakeel Afridi to try to collect DNA from those on Osama bin Laden's compound under cover of a hepatitis vaccination campaign. If those hostile to US interests suspect such campaigns – and even more pointedly, Polio vaccination campaigns – it can taint important efforts.

Today we learn that Afridi's not the only case where US spooks have done this. As part of a campaign to have Latin American youths encourage oppositional culture in Cuba, USAID contractor Creative Associates had one contractor use an HIV prevention workshop as cover.

In one case, the workers formed an HIV-prevention workshop that memos called "the perfect excuse" for the program's political goals – a gambit that could undermine America's efforts to improve health globally.

[snip]

"USAID and the Obama administration are committed to supporting the Cuban people's desire to freely determine their own future," the agency said in response to written questions from the AP. "USAID works with independent youth groups in Cuba on community service projects, public health, the arts and other opportunities to engage publicly, consistent with democracy programs worldwide."

In a statement late Sunday, USAID said the HIV workshop had a dual purpose: It "enabled support for Cuban civil society while providing a secondary benefit of

addressing the desire Cubans expressed for information and training about HIV prevention.”

Page 3 of the included documents show the subcontractor describing the HIV training as the perfect excuse, as that was something authorities would permit.

I repeat what I said earlier: Cuba would open up far more quickly if the US ended its embargoes on Cuba, especially its ban on flights to Cuba.

But instead we have to scheme short-sighted plans to open up Cuba clandestinely.

Update: Here’s a more complete description of the HIV training from the extended story.

If the idea was to hold a series of seminars to recruit new “volunteers,” Murillo needed a theme that would both draw in potential recruits and still be sanctioned by the state.

An HIV-prevention workshop was just the thing.

Months later, in November 2010, the workshop drew 60 people. Pozo also participated – evidence, Murillo said, that his scheme was working.

The workshop was supposed to offer straightforward sex education for HIV prevention, such as the proper way to use a condom.

“Cubans expressed a desire for information and training about HIV prevention, and the workshop helped to address their needs,” USAID said in response to written questions.

But the ulterior motive, documents show, was to use the workshop as a recruiting ground for young people by showing them how to organize themselves.

[snip]

Reached in San Jose, Costa Rica, Murillo said he could not speak about the details of his Cuba trips because he had signed a nondisclosure agreement. He said he wasn't trying to do anything beyond teach people how to use condoms properly.

"I never said to a Cuban that he had to do something against the government. If that was the mission of others, I don't know," Murillo said. "I never told a Cuban what he had to do."

Nevertheless, Murillo's six-page report back to Creative Associates mentioned HIV only once, to note that it was "the perfect excuse for the treatment of the underlying theme." Elsewhere, the report revealed another objective: "to generate a network of volunteers for social transformation."

Update: Jim (who's prepping his daughter to go off to be-a-lawyer school) reminds me of how USAID fluffs the numbers on its health-related programs to make them look like successes.