
Lula Tells Obama How to Solve US's Health Crisis: Go the Brazilian Way

Contributed by José Wilson Miranda
Wednesday, 04 November 2009

"Next time I see Obama I'm going to say: "Make a SUS. It costs less, it has quality and it's universal."" This is the Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva talking and he believes he can contribute to solve the decades-old health insurance problem that plagues the United States.

SUS stands for Sistema Único de Saúde (Universal Health System) and is the Brazilian National Health System, which in theory guarantees that every Brazilian is kept in good health and taken care when he or she falls ill.

Lula's comment was made in the northeastern state of Pernambuco where the Brazilian leader took part, this Tuesday, November 3, in the 9th Brazilian Congress of Collective Health.

It was a stopover for the president who is flying to London for some high-level encounters. In Pernambuco, Lula participated in a special session celebrating the 100 years of Josué de Castro, a Brazilian scholar and diplomat who fought to end hunger in Brazil and the discovery of Chagas disease, an illness common in South America, which is spread by insects.

The president of the United States is a campaign to change the American health system, which leaves tens of millions without health insurance. "See how Obama is taking a beating. The conservatives don't want to change anything," observes Lula, adding:

"I know what is waiting, sitting on your butt on a hospital bench for three, four hours and then be informed that the doctor isn't there. Then, I know the VIP treatment that a President gets."

He described his own medical check up going from machine to machine: "I'm an expert at this. I feel like Charles Chaplin in that film Modern Times. There is no more contact, no presence of that comrade who asks: "Do you have a headache? Is your belly swollen? Does your head hurt?"

The SUS is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2010. The program is part of Brazil's 1988 Federal Constitution, which recognized that every Brazilian has the right to free access to health care. The service, however, would be regulated only two years later.

"Today it's very easy for us to support the SUS. But in 1988, when we approved the SUS into the Federal Constitution, it was hard to face the debate because we were starting to live the period in which the State wasn't good for anything, the State was useless and the State only got in the way of doing things," said Lula.

Things have changed a lot in two decades, the president pondered. "Now, with this economic crisis, the State has become important, because the States were the ones that saved the world's wealthier countries from the economic crisis."

In his speech, Lula also called for a faster pace in the works of a blood and hemoderivates factory being built in Pernambuco since 2005. He wanted to know from Health Minister José Gomes Temporão why the facility is not ready yet:

"You need to see who is looking after this and reprimand him. You keep putting the money out there and then things don't happen. We need to know why this had such a long delay."

The president will stay in Britain till Friday. Among the president's commitments in England there are a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II and another one with prime minister Gordon Brown. Lula will also participate in a seminar promoted by the Financial Times about the Brazilian economy and the world economic crisis.

The Brazilian leader will be awarded the Chatham House prize from London's Institute of International Affairs. The annual award is given to the statesperson who made the most important contribution to improve international relations in the previous year. Lula is being recognized for his work in stabilizing and integrating Latin America as well as for his performance in solving Brazil's regional crises.