

When the flames challenge us

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By Roberto Morejón

Cubans have reasons to reaffirm -- as they do this week -- respect, admiration and gratitude to the Fire Department, made up of people with courage, technique and humanity to overcome flames and other contingencies.

Three hundred and twenty-six years after the emergence of the first firefighter in the once central province of Las Villas, the commandos of these brave men and women remain on the alert all year long.

While others work, study or rest, Cuban firefighters -like those of the rest of the planet- seem to chase away idleness in their barracks, but their ears are trained to rush to the firefighting vehicles at the sound of an alarm.

That was the speed with which the firefighters rushed on their rudimentary means, typical of the time, when they faced a major fire at the Isasi Hardware Store in Old Havana.

It was the last decade of the 19th century and due to its causes and consequences, with the loss of 38 lives, including 25 firefighters, the deflagration went down in the history of Havana and the country.

Unfortunately, in 2022, two accidents of major proportions again required the prompt and efficient intervention of the Fire Brigade, volunteers and other expert personnel in Cuba.

Last March, several teams faced a dreadful ignition at the Saratoga Hotel in Havana, from where an expansive wave demolished the facade of adjacent buildings and damaged a nearby school and theater.

On August 5, a voracious fire started in the industrial zone of the western province of Matanzas in crude oil deposits.

A week passed from the beginning of the combustion and the members of the Fire Brigade of several provinces of the largest of the Antilles, supported by Venezuela and Mexico, did not leave the area.

The huge fire in Matanzas left 16 dead and 146 injured, whose fate was followed by Cubans through the media.

They also narrated how, in spite of the fact that the explosions sent bodies and vehicles flying through the air, the firefighting crews faced it, trying, of course, to preserve their lives.

The subsequent and well-deserved tributes to those who in the front line resisted the advance of combustion both in the hotel and in the supertanker base, highlighted the moving gratitude of the Cubans.

This profession, in its variant of fire extinguishing, salvage or rescue, is one of the most dangerous in the world and on many occasions it is crowned with a feat.

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