

SA and Cuba have deep, enduring bond grounded in our liberation history

Rodolfo Benítez Verson

ON MAY 11, 1994, in one of the first foreign policy actions of the new government in a liberated South Africa, presidents Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro formalised diplomatic relations between our two nations.

But before official bonds began, there was already a long history of assistance to the liberation struggle, which forms the background to relations between Cuba and South Africa today.

After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba became an active and loyal supporter of the Struggle against apartheid. Commander Che Guevara said in 1961 at the UN that the racist government of South Africa “violates the charter of the UN by the inhuman and fascist policy of apartheid”, and called for South Africa’s expulsion from the UN.

Cuba denounced the imprisonment of Mandela and his comrades when they were still fairly unknown in many parts of the world, and were labelled terrorists by several governments. In his autobiography, Madiba said that while in prison, he found inspiration in Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution.

Many people don’t know that as early as 1961, even before the Rivonia Trial, young South Africans from the anti-apartheid forces started to arrive in our country to receive professional training in



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medicine. It was the first group of many who in the following decades would receive professional education and military training in Cuba.

Mandela said of those earliest contacts: “When we wanted to take up arms we approached numerous Western governments for assistance, and we were never able to see any but the most junior ministers.

“When we visited Cuba, we were received by the highest officials and were immediately offered whatever we wanted and needed. That was our earliest experience with Cuban internationalism.”

The official ANC diplomatic office in Cuba was established in December 1978. Alex la Guma was the head of mission until his death in 1985. The ANC office in

Havana became the main centre of anti-apartheid political activity in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1994 that office became the official South African embassy in Cuba.

The deep and special relationship between Cuba and South Africa was cemented on the battlefields of southern Angola, where almost half-a-million Cubans joined their fate with that of African combatants to reject the military intervention of apartheid and imperialism on the continent.

Travelling more than 10000km from the Caribbean, our soldiers were reversing the travels of the slave ships that brought nearly 1.3 million African slaves to Cuba in past centuries, and now our combatants returned to the land of their ancestors to rid the continent of racist domination.

It was a moral duty. We were repaying a historical debt. Africa is part of the very essence of the Cuban nation.

The defeat of the racist South African armed forces in the epic battle in the Angolan town of Cuito Cuanavale in March 1988, in which thousands of Cubans participated, was a major development in the southern African anti-colonial and national liberation struggle. It was a critical turning point in the struggle against apartheid.

Today, visitors to Freedom Park, in Pretoria, can see on the Wall of Names the 2289 Cubans martyrs of anti-apartheid, who sacrificed their lives on African soil, a symbolic



COMRADES: Nelson Mandela, left, and Cuban leader Fidel Castro embrace during a visit by Castro in Joburg, in 2001.

Picture: AP

demonstration of the bonds that tie Cuba to this continent and specifically to South Africa.

After Mandela was released from prison, he travelled to Cuba. He wanted to thank our country for its solidarity in the liberation Struggle.

His visit to Cuba in 1991 came at a very difficult time for us, when socialism worldwide was collapsing, to show solidarity with our country. We will never forget that. He was welcomed in Cuba by millions of people, and I can proudly say that I was among them.

South Africa has come from a

shameful history that fostered segregation in medical education. Presidents Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro agreed to alter this situation by concluding a co-operative agreement in the health sector that was signed in October 1996.

A first group of health professionals from Cuba arrived here in 1997, and with their dedication they marked the beginning of a new era in our bilateral co-operation. More than 1000 Cuban medical doctors have provided assistance in South Africa, and hundreds of young South Africans, mostly from

disadvantaged communities, have graduated as doctors in the Caribbean Island.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has described relations between South Africa and Cuba as solidarity in practice. We fully agree with that.

Our bilateral relationship today is vibrant and comprehensive and is present in many fields, including health services, education, science and technology, agriculture, infrastructure development, housing, water and sanitation, defence, human settlements and public works.

Our bonds are a challenge to those who argue that relations among nations can only be determined by self-interest, and the pursuit of power and wealth.

The co-operation between Cuba and South Africa is for the benefit of our peoples. It is not for the enrichment of individuals or transnational corporations. It does not seek the prosperity of the few, or to obtain economic advantages from other countries. It is a model of South-South co-operation based on genuine solidarity.

Cuba will continue to be a strategic partner for South Africa in the Latin American and Caribbean region and in multilateral organisations.

At the same time, we can do more. There is great potential in our relations, which can and should continue to be expanded, including through the strengthening of our trade and economic association.

Our people hold and will continue to cherish unwavering gratitude to South Africa for its sustained solidarity with the Cuban Revolution.

We will forever be thankful to South Africa for supporting the end of the illegal and criminal economic, commercial and financial blockade that our country has endured for almost 60 years, the longest blockade recorded in history. We could never thank South African people enough for their support in the struggle for the release of our Five Anti-terrorist Cuban Heroes.

South Africa has always been with us in demanding that Cuba’s right to self-determination and sovereignty, and our right to decide the political system of our choice, be respected.

There are thousands of friends of Cuba throughout this beautiful country. The solidarity confirms that international relations are, first and foremost, relations among peoples.

There is an African saying that goes, “The footprints of people who walked together can never be erased”. Our futures and indeed our paths are inextricably linked. Ours is a relationship of true and deep friendship and solidarity grounded in our liberation history.

Cuba and South Africa have the right to be proud of these relations and to celebrate them.

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