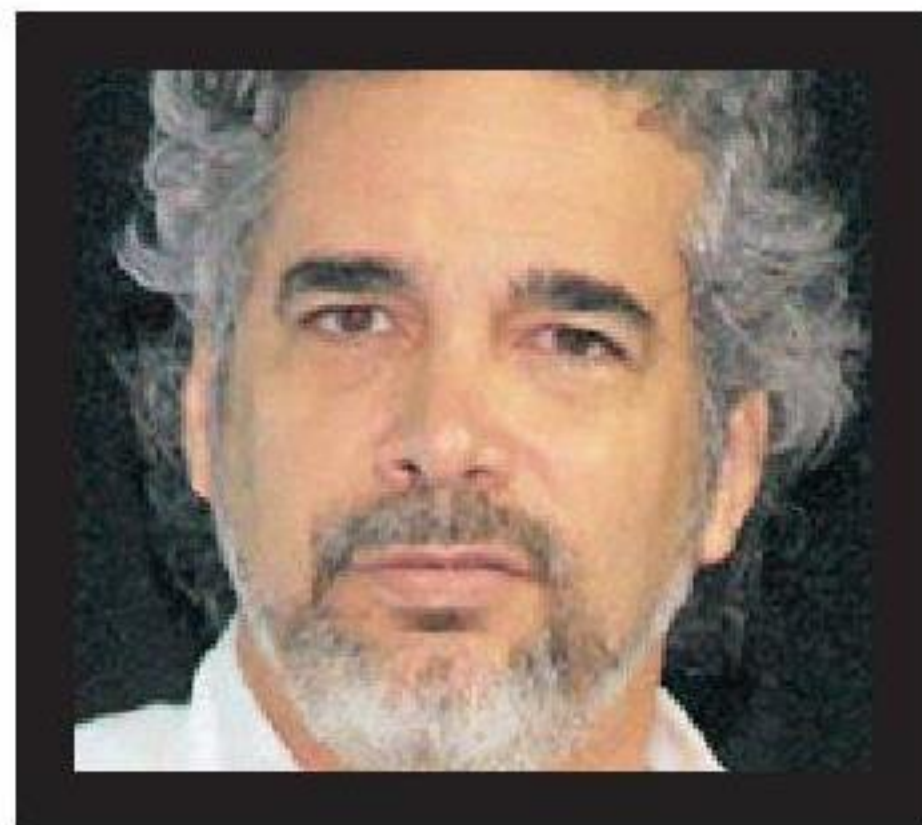


# Celebrating 25 years of diplomatic ties with Cuba

*Arrival of health professionals in 1997 marked beginning of new era in co-operation*



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TWENTY-five years ago, on May 11, 1994, presidents Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro formalised diplomatic relations between South Africa and Cuba. That was one of the first foreign policy actions of the new government in a liberated South Africa,

But before official bonds began, there was already a long history of special relations. From the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba became an active and loyal supporter of the struggle against apartheid.

In the UN and other international forums, Cuba strongly opposed the racist government of South Africa and called for the expulsion of the apartheid regime from the UN.

Cuba denounced the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and his comrades when they and their movement were labelled terrorists by several governments. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Madiba explained that while in prison, he found inspiration in Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution.

As early as in 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 medicine and sciences. In the following decades, many more would receive professional education and military training from Cuba. Our country was a home for many South Africans during the dark night of apartheid oppression.

Nelson Mandela said on those earliest contacts: "I must say that when we wanted to take up arms we approached



NELSON Mandela with Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1991. Mandela said that while in prison, he found inspiration in Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution. Cuba denounced the imprisonment of Mandela and his comrades under apartheid. | Telesur

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 deep and special relationship between Cuba and South Africa was cemented in the battlefields, where almost half a million Cuban combatants joined their fate with that of African fighters to reject apartheid, colonialism and foreign occupation on the continent.

Today, visitors to the Freedom Park, in Pretoria, can see on the Remembrance Wall the names of 2 289 Cubans martyrs of the fight against apartheid, who sacrificed their lives on African soil, a symbolic demonstration of the bonds that tie Cuba to this continent and to South Africa.

A first group of Cuban health professionals arrived here in 1997, marking the beginning of a new era in our bilateral co-operation.

Thousands of Cuban medical doctors have provided assistance in South Africa. Cuban universities have contributed to the formation of thousands of young South Africans, most of them as medical doctors.

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

The relationship between South Africa and Cuba is today vibrant and continuously expanding.

The bilateral co-operation is present in many fields, including health services, education, science and technology, agriculture, infrastructure development, housing, water and sanitation, defence, human settlements, public works, sports, information and communications technologies, among many others.

The co-operation between Cuba and South Africa is for the benefit of our peoples. It does not seek the prosperity of the few or to obtain economic advantages from other countries. It is a genuine example of South-South co-operation. Cuba is committed to

continuing its support of the efforts aimed at healing the deep wounds that have for centuries been inflicted on this beautiful country.

The relevance for all the world of the process that is taking place in South Africa should not be underestimated, particularly for the countries of the South. A successful South Africa after many terrible years of colonisation and apartheid will reinforce mankind's belief in justice and sustain our hopes of a better future for all.

South Africa will always occupy a special space in our hearts because it 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.

We will forever be thankful to the people and the government of South Africa for supporting the ending of the illegal and criminal blockade that our country has been enduring for 60 years.

That support is even more appreciated at this moment when the present US government has strengthened the blockade and increased the hostility against Cuba with the aim of imposing a "regime change". They will fail, as was the case with the previous 11 US administrations that tried to defeat the Cuban Revolution.

Cuba and South Africa will continue acting together in solidarity. The struggle for social justice has no borders. Solidarity with other peoples of the world must be an essential quality of every progressive nation.

Ours is a relationship of a true and deep friendship grounded in our liberation history. Cuba and South Africa have the right to be proud of these special relations and to celebrate them.

*Benitez Verson is the ambassador of Cuba to South Africa, Eswatini and Lesotho*