

Cuba: first among equals

Many countries supported Africa's anticolonial struggles, but none with as much commitment as Cuba



Analysis

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SOUTH Africa and Cuba mark the 20th anniversary of bilateral relations this year. We chose to mark this landmark event during the past month of May, which was designated as Africa Month and which marks the founding on May 25, 1963 of the Organisation of African Unity, now known as the African Union.

We do this because when we reflect on the history of the struggle for independence against colonialism, imperialism and apartheid in Africa we cannot do so without reflecting on the role of Cuba in our continental struggle. Although many countries supported these struggles, Cuba remains the first among equals.

Cubans are compatriots who assisted the African continent to realise independence, freedom, justice and self-reliance. From the Cape Verde to Guinea Bissau, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Western Sahara, from Angola to Mozambique and South Africa to mention but a few, Cuban combatants fought side by side with our liberation movements. They provided our liberation movements with financial and material support, education, food and military support and their own sweat and blood. They paid the ultimate price, with thousands of Cuban combatants dying in these struggles and many more injured. Their spirit of self-sacrifice and human solidarity with the oppressed people of Africa knew no limits.

The apartheid regime implemented a destructive regional destabilisation foreign policy in our frontline states in the '70s and '80s led by the mighty and ruthless South African Defence Force (SADF) to prevent them from becoming independent and hosting the ANC. Cuba deployed more than 50 000 combatants and spent billions of rands in fighting the SADF in this regard.

More than 2 000 Cubans were killed and thousands more were injured before sending the SADF into retreat at the historic Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

Their role in the fight against the imperialist forces in Angola and the victory at Cuito Cuanavale not only freed Angola but became a key game changer which resulted in the independence of Namibia and the fall of apartheid.

Cubans were also never hesitant to raise their voices on behalf of the oppressed masses in international forums. They ensured that apartheid was declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations.

As early as 1964, at the UN General Assembly, the revolutionary leader, Che Guevara, called upon the international community to act against South Africa's repressive apartheid regime.

Cuba also hosted the historic Tri-Continental Conference in 1966 during which it pledged solidarity and support in the struggle for self-



COMRADES: From left to right, John Tettegah (Ghana), Youssef el Sebai (Ghana), Raul Castro, Fidel Castro, O Dorticos, Raul Roa, and Pedro Medina Silva at a tricontinental conference in Havana. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

determination of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Cuba's continued involvement in the struggle against apartheid began shortly after its revolution and was further strengthened in 1977 during the visit to Cuba by then ANC president, Oliver Tambo. This was followed by the establishment of the ANC representative office in Havana in 1978.

In our collective resolve to further strengthen our longstanding friendship, we opened a diplomatic mission in Havana immediately after the democratic government assumed office in 1994. Similarly, our Cuban compatriots established a resident diplomatic mission in Pretoria in 1995. This was a time when a new era in our already strong relations was ushered in.

Cuba's contribution in Africa did not end with its independence. It has continued to assist many countries across our continent with the deployment of health and other professionals and the development of cheaper vaccinations for malaria, tuberculosis and the Ebola virus amongst others. This was done despite Cuba's own economic difficulties and continues to endure due to the illegitimate economic blockade and stranglehold imposed on it by the US.

Since the establishment of our formal diplomatic ties we too have continued to benefit from Cuba's assistance to help us build a better life for all and ensure our vision of a nonracial and nonsexist democratic society.

Over the past two decades the Cuban government has deployed Cuban professionals in areas where we have a shortage of skills.

Beginning in the area of health it has now

Key points

- » South Africa and Cuba mark the 20th anniversary of bilateral relations this year
- » We chose the month of May, designated as Africa Month, which marks the founding on May 25, 1963 of the Organisation of African Unity, now known as the African Union
- » We do this because when we reflect on the history of the struggle for independence against colonialism, imperialism and apartheid in Africa we cannot do so without reflecting on the role of Cuba in our continental struggle
- » Although many countries supported these struggles, Cuba remains the first among equals
- » Cubans are compatriots

expanded to areas such as labour, defence, social development, housing, water, sanitation and infrastructure.

Over the past two decades hundreds of Cuban medical staff, engineers, planners and architects worked in South Africa, most of them deployed to the poorest and most rural areas of the country. They unselfishly rendered important services to our poor and marginalised communities on a daily basis. There are more than 300 of them still selflessly serving our communities.

Equally, more than 400 South Africans from disadvantaged backgrounds have qualified as medical doctors and about 3 000 young South Africans are receiving medical training in Cuba.

In a world where the dominant narrative is

free market fundamentalism which is characterised by individualism, materialism, greed, poverty and inequality, Cuba has shown us that it is possible to create an alternative society premised on the principles and spirit of selflessness, sacrifice, equality and human solidarity with the oppressed and marginalised. This, I believe, is their greatest export.

As we move forward into the next two decades of our bilateral relations we must build on our historic relationship at a political, cultural and economic level.

To this end while we acknowledge the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US we must not become complacent in applying pressure at all levels (multilateral, bilateral and civil society) for an end to the economic blockade against Cuba by the US. Furthermore, we must intensify our activism for the return of Guantanamo Bay to its rightful owners, Cuba.

As Cuba opens up economically we must also prepare ourselves to strengthen our economic cooperation. Cuba and South Africa have much to offer each other in various sectors, including, among others, tourism, pharmaceuticals, commodities and tourism.

Finally, South Africa and Cuba remain active members of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 and China. As members of these forums we will continue to advocate for the needs and aspirations of developing countries. South Africa-Cuba relations will continue to be steered in the direction of mutual respect, prosperity, growth and development.

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