



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**SPEECH BY THE DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND SANITATION MINISTER
NOMVULA MOKONYANE AT THE OCCASION OF THE WELCOMING CEREMONY
OF THE CUBAN EXPERTS
SHERATON HOTEL, PRETORIA
15 FEBRUARY 2015**

Your Excellency /Boa noite Cuban Ambassador De Cassio;

In absentia, my colleague Cuban Minister of Water Affairs, Ms Chapman-Waugh;

Deputy Minister, Mme Pamela Tshwete;

The Director General, Ms. Margaret Diedricks;

Heads of the Water Sector Family;

The VIPs of the day, Cuban engineering experts here with us, who are now part of the SA Water Family)

Bem-vinda Suda Afrika! Welcome to SA!

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to address you at this event which holds great significance to the South African water sector and the South African people who will benefit from this partnership in a great way. This occasion reminds us of one of the slogans that South Africa employed when we hosted the Soccer World Cup in 2010, "Feel it, it is here!"; today we are saying "feel the partnership of SA-Cuba, it is here".

The friendship between our countries dates back many decades and it is partnerships like these that will see our bond growing even stronger in years to come.

Even though Cuba is a country small in land space, it is a country with a very big heart. We shall not forget the many Cuban souls who sacrificed their lives in Angola, Namibia and South Africa for the plight of freedom of the Southern African nations.

Even though referred to by some historians as the Forgotten War, I can assure you that South Africa did not forget - we shall not forget. We still cherish the brave and victorious men and women who left their country and sacrificed so much in a selfless act of brotherliness. The warmth in our hearts is still strong towards this country of greatness.

Ambassador De Cossio, Cuba is one of our key partners as South Africa on our foreign policy in the pursuit of our domestic priorities as outlined in the President's State of the Nation Address on the 12 February 2015.

We all know that Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, and offers free, universal and high-quality healthcare and education to all its citizens. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) its infant mortality rate is lower than the United Kingdom and United States of America.

On gender, Cuba is one of the countries that promoted women's rights, and wiped out racism and has good community spirit which we can emulate.

Bilateral, political and multilateral relations between South Africa and Cuba are excellent and were underpinned by historical ties forged in the common struggle against apartheid, colonization and repression. South African/Cuban relations were established a long time ago between the then-liberation movement of the African National Congress (ANC) and the government of the Communist Party of Cuba. We had noted their activism was also felt with our neighbours from Namibia and Angola.

Prior to 1994, support given to the liberation struggle in South Africa included the education of South African students, international, military, political and material support. Cuba has therefore been a backbone of the South African liberation, despite its own challenges. After 1994, Cuba was one of the first countries to offer material and human resource support as well and there have been many continuing high-level interactions that took place to date. Cuba was amongst the first countries to set up an embassy in a democratic South Africa and the two countries' governments shared similar interests in addressing the socio-economic needs and aspirations of their people.

President Jacob Zuma's state visit to Cuba in December 2010 was a major development that served to further enhance the excellent relations between South Africa and Cuba. Cuba has always been a key partner on enhancing the foreign policy objectives in pursuit of South Africa's identified domestic priorities.

A number of bilateral agreements have been signed already in the areas of science and technology, arts and culture, sport and recreation, air services, merchant shipping, trade and economic assistance. Cuba has been training South African doctors for the past years as part of the SA-Cuba bi-national relations. In 2010, Cabinet approved a R350 million economic assistance package to Cuba to strengthen bilateral trade and investment and assist in addressing the effects of natural disasters.

South Africa remains a beneficiary of Cuba's on-going assistance in the form of exchange programmes for students in different fields. Currently, there are close to 1 400 South African students studying medicine at Cuban universities. 323 South African graduates from the Cuban programme work as medical doctors in various South African hospitals. In 2012, the South Africa/Cuba relations further extended to include the Cooperation Agreement in the fields of health and medical science.

Ladies and gentlemen, the SA Ambassador Manana, during the recruitment drive visit of Deputy Minister Tshwete, stressed that when the 1st and 2nd batches of engineers were hosted in SA, both Cubans and South Africans had learnt a lot about each other, thus it gives me great pleasure to welcome the 3rd batch of Cubans in SA.

Prior to the opening of the current Cuba-USA discussions, Cuba's GDP was around 7.1 billion dollars. It had limited economic strength, but its social achievements had been very great because of the political will to extend social justice. Cuba is satisfied that it has achieved social justice.

With regard to multilateral issues, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to advancing the agenda of the South in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement. On regional matters, both sides discussed the feasibility of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to engage with the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) bloc. Both Latin America and Africa are

regarded as hubs of economic development and growth and therefore, cooperation with BRICS is mutually beneficial.

We have noted that there are about 1 200 Cuban doctors working on the African continent, including in Angola, Botswana, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and areas in the Sahara.

Moreover, over 40,000 Africans have studied in Cuba, with Cuba offering to cover some of the expenses. By these estimates, it is evident that Cuba has played a significant role in recent formative African history. Since the end of Soviet aid to Cuba and of the denominated "special period", a programme has been set up sending physicians, nurses, dentists, engineers and other professionals to more than 52 countries in the developing world.

Programme Director and the SA water family, we are humbled by the continued support of our Cuban friends which is still evident in this Agreement we are celebrating today. Please note that as the official representative of the South African people in the water and sanitation sector, I bear the gratitude of the nation as I speak to you today.

Our need for engineers exceeds our ability to produce this scarce skill locally. However we are encouraged by the successful efforts of our own Learning Academy in association with our universities to increase the number of engineering graduates.

We take cognisance of the need for mentoring of these engineers, since we do appreciate the fact that even though producing engineering graduates is a step in the right direction, the development of the graduates into becoming professional engineers is the all-important final step of this process.

I am very glad that we can have our Cuban brothers and sisters to provide this mentoring to our young engineers. We are convinced that your knowledge to operate and maintain your precious water resources and associated infrastructure will be of great value to us as well.

I was told that the Deputy Minister and the delegation she led had the privilege to visit a water treatment plant in Havana which was commissioned way back in 1874 and it is still fully functional and in impeccable state. This plant stands as great testimony that efficient operations and maintenance are invaluable. As South Africans we will strive towards this level of asset management as part of our programmes.

We look forward to the day when we can expose our young engineering graduates to your local asset management in as part of a formalised international experience sharing initiative. This will lay the foundation for a paradigm shift away from major capital investment in that which is new, and more towards maintaining and sustaining our existing infrastructure.

I am encouraged that past skills sharing initiatives between Cuba and South Africa also proved to be of immense value to your engineers. The fact that so many of them are holding very important positions within the Cuban water sector, serves as evidence that this partnership is of mutual benefit to the two countries.

There are many challenges we are facing but these also present an opportunity for Cuban engineers and scientists to hone their problem-solving capacity. Our unique water resources management situation requires constant planning to ensure that we remain ahead of what climate change and other challenges may bring across our way.

Again I am encouraged by the level of expertise we are receiving in this regard. I am told that between Mr Guillermo and Mr Vega they jointly bring an average wealth of 25 years of experience to our country. They were instrumental in similar efforts in Venezuela. We look forward to these newly acquired officials proving their worth in our own water resource management and providing skills in our institutional water sector family.

I can assure you that we will do our best in taking good care of these wonderful men and women. They will be guests in our country for two years whilst they will be serving our people side-by-side with our own public servants.

Allow me to express the gratitude of my fellow-citizens to our Cuban friends for your selflessness and kindness in sharing your skills with us. Back home our little children are taught: "Go abelana ke lerato i.e. Sharing is Caring". In this instance it is proven that Cuba is caring, and this leaves us humbled with deepest appreciation.

Bem-vinda! Welcome.

Muito obrigada! Thank you very much.