

- **Honourable Deputy Minister Dr Joe Phaahla**
- **Ambassador of Cuba His Excellency Radolfo Benitez Verson**
- **Deputy Head Cuban Embassy Minister Counselor Rebeca Hernández:**
- **Head Cuban Medical Brigade in South Africa Dr. Reynaldo Denis:**
- **Counselor for Trade and Economic Cooperation Aldo Valdés**
- **Director General of Health Dr Sandile Buthelezi**
- **All Senior Officials of the Department of Health**
- **Members of the Media**
- **And Finally to our fellow warriors in the war against COVID-19: The Cuban Brigade**

I greet you all in remembrance of the Fathers of our Nations: President Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president of South Africa, and El Comandante, His Excellency Fidel Castro.

The arrival of the Cuban Brigade in late April marked yet another seminal moment in the close and rich kinship that South Africa shares with Cuba.

It has been nothing short of a pleasure to have received regular reports of the Cuban Brigade's integration into our system. Whilst we understand that there may be issues of culture and language barriers we have learnt, over the years of fruitful partnership with Cuban medical expertise, that patience is a virtue and that the

investment is part of a long term strategy toward the ideals of our Freedom Charter, our Constitution and our Health Compact.

Indeed, one of the most famous and successful programmes is that of the The Nelson Mandela/ Fidel Castro Programme, better known as the Cuba Doctor Training Programme. Through this programme we have invested over 600 million rand training over 2900 doctors between 2012 and 2019. This year over 650 graduates from this programme will be absorbed into the South African health care system at a time when they are most needed.

It is particularly gratifying to note that many of the students that participate in the programme come from rural and underserved areas. Apart from the empowerment of those individuals and their immediate family and communities, this programme has driven human resources for health in a manner that no other programme has, as the graduates are well incentivized to return to their communities and serve as doctors in previously under-resourced areas.

This is proving to be an important strategy for building the pool of human resources for health in impoverished and rural areas.

Their ability to learn and speak Spanish gives them an extra edge in a country that looks after many foreign nationals that speak Latin derived languages.

This transformative programme has been running for 20 years. Enrolled students are contracted to work back the investment for the time their studies are funded- this guarantees the state at least 5 years of skills retention.

I am particularly proud that the programme has produced high excellence individuals; of note being Dr Lindiwe Sidali who became the first Black Female Cardiothoracic Surgeon in 2018. This programme has transformed lives and the picture of rural health care in South Africa forever

Apart from training South African medical doctors, Cuba has also given us the greatest gift a nation can give- her sons and daughters. Thousands of Cuban doctors live and work in this country, often in South Africa's harshest regions, transforming lives and giving hope to our people. This is the true definition of selfless devotion to the art of service. We know that many of these doctors have been toiling for many years, not returning home and even raising families in our beautiful country. To our brethren living amongst us- we see you and thank you for your invaluable contribution to the people of South Africa.

Even now, in our hour of need, we were able to call on our Cuban sisters and brothers and they answered to that call, leaving family, friends and relatives behind to join hands with us in solidarity against the Coronavirus.

The Brigade has been deployed throughout the country and I would like to reflect on some of the feedback that we have received from provinces as they have worked in partnership with members of the Brigade:

Eastern Cape was allocated 12 Medical Officers: 4 Biomedical Engineers, 2 Epidemiologists, and 2 Biostatitians. The Medical Officers have been resourceful in Primary Health Care as this is their specialty. Their Data analytics and information management has been key in assessing the impact of intervention strategies. The Biomedical Engineers have been critical in the design, installation, adjusting, repairing and provision of technical support for biomedical equipment.

In Gauteng Province, Members of the Cuban Medical Brigade are distributed throughout all five Districts and some have been doing work with the central office. They are mainly working in quarantine and isolation sights, ward-based contract tracing, epidemiological surveillance and in hospitals where there has been noticeable nosocomial spread.

In the Northern Cape the Brigade are doing outreach services in critical areas of need. They are Clinical Leaders to the management teams and assist in the screening, testing and quarantining of patients. The Northern Cape department of Health has attested to the invaluable contribution of the Covid-19 personnel from the Brigade.

In Limpopo, eight medical officers have been deployed into various facilities in five districts to boost Case Management. Three Clinical Engineering Technologists, one hygienist and one biostatistician are stationed in Capricorn District. The deployments were based on areas where it was identified there was a shortage of human resources. Their presence has reduced workload and pressure on staff members, provided much needed relief, improved processing of data and contributed to improved data reporting that feeds into the daily situational report on COVID-19 in the province. The health technologists have greatly assisted with the assessment of non-functional equipment

The 28 strong team deployed to the Western Cape Province consisted of health professionals with experience in planning, execution and management of the public health. They were fully integrated into the clinical teams working alongside the South African Health Professionals in order to strengthen the province's response to COVID-19. Several had worked in South Africa before and so were familiar with our systems.

In the Free State Province where 17 members of the Brigade were deployed, their allocation addressed issues of staff shortage and this also led to an improvement in data collation in the Province.

Whilst this is not an exhaustive account of the activities of the members of the Brigade, the reports reassure us that we have

invested well in this initiative with trusted allies during a critical phase of the national COVID-19 pandemic.

We are very privileged to be joined by members of the Cuban Brigade here today. It is an honour to be amongst compatriots who have tirelessly worked in the frontline alongside our own fellow countrymen in the health care sector. We thank you for answering the call during one of the toughest seasons experienced in modern times and we hope that this has been a fruitful and inspirational period for you all.

Finally, it remains for me to thank our Honourable President His Excellency M.C. Ramaphosa for leading and driving this partnership which saw the implementation of a critical programme of boosting human resources for health during the COVID-19 pandemic

South Africa and Cuba are undoubtedly two leading nations in medical expertise- especially in the fields of emergency outbreak responses. This is a natural and fitting collaboration that captures the spirit of global solidarity.

We have no doubt that this investment will leave a lasting legacy in our growing democracy and will help to pave the way towards the ideals that we share of delivering quality health care to all people, regardless of race, colour or creed.

I thank you

