The South African and Cuban governments:

engineers, expenses, doctors and donations since 2020



INTRODUCTION

In 2016, at a memorial for the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, South Africa's then Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa said that South Africans should aim to have "principled and fearless" leaders like Fidel Castro to govern their country.¹ In an April 2020 Twitter thread (now President) Ramaphosa praised South Africa's strategic relationship with Cuba.² Since 2020 – and particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic – the South African government has engaged in a number of guestionable transactions, donations and shared schemes with the Cuban government. Many of these actions display strong hallmarks of inter-government corruption and deserve to be outlined in detail.

ILLEGAL COVID-19 DRUGS

In April 2020, the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) confirmed that the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) had been invoiced more than R260 million to

import a medicine called Heberon Alpha R 2B. Manufactured by a Cuban-Chinese company, this drug is neither approved nor registered for use in South Africa, although it was claimed that it would help fight Covid-19. The AGSA stated that her office had determined that R34,68 million of the invoiced amount had already been paid by that time.³ An interministerial committee that was tasked with investigating the case reported that the Cuban state-owned company Tecnoimport had issued the SANDF with three invoices for three consignments of the drug. General Rudzani Maphwanya, Chief of the SANDF, informed parliament in January 2022 that the SANDF had returned the

unregistered Covid-19 drugs to Cuba.⁴ To date, the SANDF has already paid around R120 million to Cuba for the illegal medicine – and it appears unlikely that South African taxpayers will be reimbursed for the costs.⁵

ENGINEERS: WATER AND SANITATION

The Department of Water and Sanitation announced in April 2021 that it would be importing and employing 24 Cuban engineers.⁶ Trade union Solidarity stated that these Cuban engineers would be earning up to R300 000 per year more than their South African counterparts.⁷ Solidarity also pointed out that part of these engineers' remuneration package would be an extensive range of fringe benefits, including free flights for holidays in Cuba, furnished accommodation, and food and telephone allowances. Solidarity claimed that it had also discovered that the Cubans did not meet the South African requirements for registration and licensing. According to Solidarity, taxpayers would probably pay around R75 million for the initiative, and not R64 million as the Department of Water and Sanitation claimed.

MEDICAL MATERIALS AND FOOD SUPPLIES DONATION

Cuba thanked the ANC government publicly in July 2020 for two substantial donations of medical materials and food supplies.⁸ The Cuban embassy openly acknowledged the donations on its website and social media platforms, thanking the South African government for the generous donations. Compounding its decision to make such a donation, the South African government is said to have chartered a "special South African Airways flight" to make the delivery. The total value of these donations still remains unclear.

THE CUBAN HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS SCHEME

It was reported in April 2020 that almost 200 Cuban healthcare professionals would be arriving in South Africa to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic. The healthcare professionals apparently arrived on the same government-funded plane that carried the previously mentioned donation of medical supplies to Cuba.⁹ In June 2020 it was reported that the South African government would pay more than R239 million in salaries to these Cuban healthcare professionals.¹⁰ In 2020 the then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised South Africa and Qatar for accepting doctors from Cuba, and accused Cuba of cynically profiting from the pandemic.¹¹ In its 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report for South Africa, the US Department of State reported that the Cuban doctors who had been brought to South Africa had likely been trafficked.¹² In June 2021 the Department of Health defended the R83 million that had been spent annually on the services of the Cuban healthcare professionals in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.13

In February 2021 the South African Cabinet approved a proposal to nominate this contingent of Cuban doctors brought to the country for the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁴ In 2022 it was reported that the South African Department of Health was still paying Cuban doctors exorbitantly high salaries despite their contracts expiring and amid growing unemployment among local doctors, with many vacant positions left frozen.^{15, 16}

It is not an isolated phenomenon for South Africa to be dealing with the Cuban government to import doctors. Venezuela and Brazil have histories of paying for similar programmes. Life for these doctors is not easy. In 2017, the Cuban government tightened restrictions on Cuban doctors working in Brazil, banning them from taking Brazilian nedical exams and compelling pregnant women to return home to Cuba after 22 we of pregnancy to prevent their children from being born in Brazil and obtaining Brazilian citizenship.^{17, 18} It was also reported that Brazil was paying between US\$6 000 and US\$9 300 per professional Cuban doctor since 2013, and that the Cuban government was pocketing over 60% of these funds.¹⁸ There are also many detailed reports and articles documenting Cuba's export of doctors worldwide and its questionable elements.^{17, 18, 19, 20}

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE AND DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE

In 2022 the SANDF spent between R2,1 million and R7 million on a chartered Air Zimbabwe flight to bring home eight trainee South African pilots who had failed their eye tests in Cuba.²¹ This forms part of a much larger pattern of exorbitant spending by the SANDF in relation to Cuba. Between approximately 2014 and 2019 the government spent close to R1 billion to pay Cuban mechanics and technicians to repair and maintain SANDF vehicles and equipment.²²

In March 2022 it was reported that the Department of Defence had spent more than R1,3 billion in irregular contracts with Cuba, and that the projected additional costs amounted to R1,3 billion.²³ The two contracts are for the repair of vehicles, aircraft, defence equipment and more. The Department of Defence does not plan to cancel these contracts with Cuba, which are set to continue until the end of 2024, despite the AGSA's finding that the agreements were irregular.²⁴ It was also reported in March 2022 that the South African government had spent approximately R359 million on training for members of the South African military in Cuba since 2014.²⁵ Despite the dire financial struggles of the South African military,²⁶ Thandi Modise, South Africa's Minister of Defence, defended the choice to send army personnel for expensive training in Cuba.²⁷

THE R50 MILLION DONATION

It was reported in February 2022 that the South African government would be making a donation of approximately R50 million to Cuba; the government claimed that this is to assist Cuba, which had been affected by food security problems due to sanctions imposed by the USA.²⁸ Alvin Botes, Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco), informed the Portfolio Committee on International Relations and Cooperation on 2 February 2022 about this donation.²⁹ AfriForum sent a lawyer's letter to Dirco, demanding a written explanation and reasons for this donation.³⁰ AfriForum then approached the courts to obtain an urgent interdict to prevent the government to transfer this donation. The application also enclosed a review application to overturn the decision to donate the money to Cuba.³¹ The planned donation is widely condemned by South African civil society. 32, 33

In March 2022 AfriForum successfully obtained an interdict to stop the planned donation to Cuba.³⁴ In May 2022 the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria dismissed (with costs) the South African government's application for leave to appeal the Court's ruling that AfriForum could interdict it from donating R50 million to Cuba.³⁵ After this dismissal in court, Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, said:³⁶

We are also prepared to act in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Cuba. As we cannot turn a blind eye to their plight while their economy is strangled by illegal blockades and sanctions. The Cuban economy has been brought to its knees after 61 years of draconian US sanctions imposed on the impoverished island nation.

It was revealed in May 2022 that court records in the case against Dirco show the planned donation to Cuba actually amounted to R350 million - and not R50 million as was initially reported.37

In the wake of AfriForum's success in court, Tito Mboweni, a former Minister of Finance (2018–2021) tweeted an image of Oliver Tambo and Fidel Castro with the following caption:38

Friendships that last forever, Cuba and the ANC, OR Tambo and Fidel Castro

Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, current Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, also tweeted:39

23 March [19]88 was a turning point in the fight againts [sic] the apartheid regime. Thanks to the Cuban intervention, we defeated the SADF army in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. We shall never forget the Cuban friendship, solidarity, internationalism, love, and humanity. Long live Cuba!

CONCLUSION

The South African government's multiple and sizeable donations and payments to Cuba occurred during a time when South Africa had to borrow funds from the International Monetary Fund,⁴⁰ the World Bank⁴¹ and other institutions to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic. While the SANDF is struggling with serious financial issues,⁴² it is still spending millions of rands on expensive personnel training in Cuba, as well as other exorbitant expenses. Finally, while South African healthcare workers and engineers are struggling to find employment, the South African government is importing Cuban healthcare professionals and engineers at costs higher than what would have been the case if local doctors and engineers were employed, with most of the funds probably ending up in the hands of the Cuban government. In June 2022 the Democratic Alliance received a reply to a parliamentary question which revealed that a cumulative total of

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