Update on Cuba's Medical Mission in South Africa
February 2025

Excerpts from
"Forced/compelled labor (trafficking in persons) by the Cuban state: Information for the 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report for the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State," Free Society Project/Cuba Archive, February 2025

Edited excerpts from "Update on selected countries' medical brigades": South Africa

The 2024 U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP report) classified South Africa as a Tier 2 country because "the Government of South Africa does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so." Among the issues it highlights is the matter of Cuba's export workers: "There were 432 Cuban government-affiliated medical workers in South Africa at the end of 2022. Authorities continued to partner with the Government of Cuba to hire medical professionals to provide services in all provinces. South African officials indicated workers were in control of their passports and credentials and reported contracting and paying workers directly. However, it was unclear if Cuban workers controlled their own bank accounts, and there was no information on the contracts the workers signed with the Cuban government."[1] Among the Prioritized Recommendations are: "Using the SOPs for victim identification and referral to care, proactively identify trafficking victims by screening for trafficking indicators during law enforcement operations and labor inspections, and among vulnerable populations, including … Cuban government-affiliated medical workers, and systematically refer trafficking victims to care."

As described in earlier reports, the Government of South Africa and/or the governments of certain provinces enter into labor contracts with the Cuban regime, which provides them doctors, engineers, specialists in hydraulic and electrical generation, in mining and food production. The latest breakdown in numbers found are from late 2022 and mid 2023. In November 2022, South Africa media reported that 229 doctors and 65 engineers from Cuba were part of the collaboration agreements.[2] In May 2023, Cuba state-owned media reported that the Cuban Medical Brigade had 213 collaborators, including 4 directors.[3] South Africa's Water and Sanitation Deputy Minister reported in December 2023 that 25 Cuban engineers were in the country as part of the 2020 cooperation agreement assisting in electrical and mechanical operations and maintenance of pump stations and systems, dams, and reservoirs associated with the electricity generation, mining industries and food production.[4]

---

[1] https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/south-africa/

[2] Bongani Mdakane, "DA wants Cuban medical programme annual report released," *Sunday World,* Nov. 14, 2022.

[3] "Celebran en Sudáfrica aniversario 60 de colaboración médica cubana," Bloemfontein, South Africa, *Prensa Latina*, May 20, 2023. (A total of 1,548 Cubans had reportedly completed a medical mission in South Africa since 1996.)

[4] "SA commends Cuba's support in water sector," *SAnews* (South African government news agency), Dec. 1, 2023.

The collaboration agreements have been steeped in controversy for years. Civil society organizations such as unions and opposition parties, particularly Democratic Alliance (DA), have questioned the government's close relationship with Cuba and have uncovered and denounced several aspects of the collaboration. It costs South Africa an estimated $25.9 million a year just in wages for the medical brigade (assuming 432 members), not counting all the travel, housing, transportation, and administrative costs of relocating the Cubans.

In Gauteng, the Democratic Alliance (DA) has been complaining bitterly about the Cuban medical brigade. Guateng is the most populous province in South Africa, with more than a quarter of the national population and containing the largest city, Johannesburg, which is the administrative capital of Pretoria. In 2024, the DA complained that the Health Department was paying about R14 million (US$755 thousand) each year for eleven Cuban doctors[5] that had no specialist skills while local doctors faced huge levels of unemployment.[6] It also slammed the Department for gross mismanagement, lack of accountability, incompetence, and probable corruption for paying R3.9 million (US$210 thousand) in salaries to seven Cuban doctors for a year after they left the country having participated in a COVID brigade of 28 Cuban doctors.[7] (Despite contacting the Cuban government to recover the money, R2.7 million was outstanding on September 2024.) As described in earlier reports, hiring Cuban health workers during the Covid pandemic at a very high cost per doctor was also loudly criticized because many local doctors went unemployed.

Jack Bloom, the DA's shadow MEC (Member of the Executive Council) for health,[8] complained in a video interview of April 2024[9] that the unemployment of local doctors is a longstanding problem, with at least 600 to 1,000 local doctors unemployed nationwide. Newly graduated doctors who have done their community service, he said, "don't have a public service job they're actually very willing to work in the public health sector and as we can see there's actually 11 Cuban doctors filling positions that could be filled by South African doctors now." He reported that other provinces had opted out of the Cuban doctor training program and from employing Cuban doctors. Students who go to Cuba, he explained, must spend a whole year learning Spanish and, upon returning to South Africa, still have to do two more years at a local medical school. This is hugely expensive, costing more than double to train a doctor in Cuba than to do it locally, and the training is also not appropriate to the local conditions. Insisting that the Cuban doctors don't have irreplaceable skills, he added: "We have excellent medical training schools, we have people graduating from them every year, and every year

we've got community service. …It's just an absolute scandal and these are plum positions, some of them are in Johannesburg. … I really think that these contracts need to be cancelled. … [It's] important that any money available for health in Guaden and in South Africa as a whole should be spent where the priorities are, not with this treaty with Cuba." During the interview, he also said that

[5] This means that the Health Department of Guateng is paying $68.6 thousand a year per doctor, or $5,719 per month, just in wages.

[6] "Health Dept slammed for favouring Cuban doctors over local talent," *BizCommunity*, 16 Apr 2024.

[7] (Instead of their contracts terminating on 14 May 2021, the seven doctors had their contracts extended and they continued to receive salaries without working until May 2022.) Corné van Zyl, "Cuban Doctors paid millions after leaving South Africa," *Pretoria Rekord / Citizen*, Sep. 26, 2024; DA laments millions paid to 'unemployed' Cuban doctors, *SABC News*, Sep. 26, 2024.

[8] A Shadow MEC is the opposition party's counterpart to the MEC (Member of the Executive Council), responsible for monitoring and critiquing the ruling party's policies and performance in that portfolio. The Shadow MEC provides alternative policies and holds the government accountable.

[9] "Gauteng Health spending millions of rands per year on Cuban doctors: Jack Bloom, weighs in," *SABC News*/YouTube, Apr. 18, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tb0x64lJhYM

he had yet to see the skills transfer plan for the Cuban nationals employed in the country demanded from the Labor Department by a colleague.

The South African Institution of Civil Engineering, a trade union, has also publicly opposed hiring Cuban engineers; together with assorted experts, it argues that the country has sufficient engineers and cites Cuba's grave water and sanitation problems.[10] The current 5-year agreement lapses in 2025 but South African government officials have said that they plan to renew it.

The South African Military Health Service, part of the National Defence Force (SANDF), cancelled the Cuban Medical Training Programme, describing it as wasteful expenditure. It said it will not send additional medical students to Cuba but that students already there will be allowed to complete their medical courses.[11] It was part of a Cuba-South Africa collaboration agreement, Project Thusano,[12] that since 2015 has Cubans assisting South Africa's National Defence Force (armed forces) in the repair and refurbishment of Army vehicles, aviation equipment, Air Force armament, medical equipment for the Military Health Service, and training of South African military in Cuba. As of August 2021, there were 105 SANDF personnel in Cuba, 30 enrolled in the Cuban equivalent of the South African Security and Defence Studies Programme (SDSP) and 75 doing "various vocational/cadet training".[13] The agreement ended in January 2025 with an accumulated cost until then of R2.7 billion[14] (around US$143.7 million[15]). A renewal has not been reported, however, it was announced in December 2024 that military training in Cuba, apparently the latest of two agreements part of Project Thusano, would be discontinued.

The South African Air Force (SAAF) had been sending cadets for training in Cuba, but terminated the program due to its incompatibility with South African protocols and standards. Training in Cuba was conducted on Russian or Eastern European-type aircraft and followed a doctrine "dramatically different from the Western aircraft and flight training standards of the SAAF." The pilots-cadets trained in Cuba had to be sent for administrative work and further integration flight training. South Africa had spent R359 million (US$19.4 million), excluding the travel back and forth to Cuba, which had a cost of R136.4 million (US $7.4 million) for 32 flights chartered from SAA since 2017.[16] An Auditor-General 2022/23 annual report to Parliament stated that medical training for South African troops in Cuba was 136% more expensive to an equivalent course in South Africa, and over R122

[10] Jenni Evans, "Solidarity wants Lindiwe Sisulu to suspend Cuban engineer programme to fix water infrastructure," *News24*, Apr. 26, 2021; "Why are Cuban engineers better than South African ones?," SpeciFile, retrieved Feb. 1, 2024.

[11] "SANDF cancels Cuban Medical Training Programme," *SABC News*, Nov. 27, 2024.

[12] Thusano means "help" or "assistance" in Sesotho**,** a language spoken in South Africa.

[13] Sarah Lesedi, "SAAF ends Cuban training for cadets," *Military Africa*, Dec. 23, 2024.

[14] From 2015 to 2021, the cost Project Thusano to South Africa was R1.4 billion (US$74 million) and the 2022-2025 agreement cost R1.3 billion (IS$69.4 million). "Project Thusano to cost SA close to R3 billion," *DefenceWeb*, Aug. 18, 2022; "Cubans and "Tiffies" thanked for refurbishing SA Army prime mission equipment defence," *DefenceWeb*, Oct. 30, 2023.

[15] Exchange rate on Feb. 5, 2024. https://www.forbes.com/advisor/money-transfer/currency-converter/zar-usd/

[16] S. Lesedi, op. cit.

million (US$$6.6 million) could have been saved if soldiers studied locally.[17] A military spokesperson, Siphiwe Dlamini, defended the training program stating it strengthened bilateral ties.[18]

Cuba has many friends –and likely agents—within the South African government and Armed Forces who celebrate the two countries strong friendship and solidarity. Aside from collaboration agreements that seemingly make no economic sense for South Africa, they have attempted other forms of assistance for the Cuban dictatorship. In October 2023, a court stopped an intended R50m (US$2.7 million) donation as humanitarian assistance to the Cuban government, declaring it illegal for skipping standard procedures. The civil rights organization AfriForum, which obtained an urgent interdict to prevent donation, argued: "A country with a struggling economy and government on the verge of running out of money cannot hand out tens of millions to its friends."[19]

South Africa can afford its largesse with Cuba thanks in great part to the United States government, which provided South Africa $440 million in aid in 2023, $364 million of which was dedicated to health projects.[20]

archivo CUBA
www.CubaArchive.org
Free Society Project, Inc.
info@CubaArchive.org

Reproduction or distribution of this material is authorized as long as its source is cited.

[17] Chris Hattingh, Executive Director of the Centre for Risk Analysis, Linked In post citing: "SANDF sent soldiers to Cuba for medical training that was 136% more expensive than local," *News24*, Oct. 16, 2023.

[18] S. Lesedi, "SAAF ends Cuban training for cadets," op. cit.

[19] Zelda Venter, "Court sets aside South Africa's R50m donation to Cuba following review application brought by AfriForum," *IOL/Pretoria News*, Oct. 27, 2023.

[20] https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/south%20africa/