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THIS WEEK:

- Letter from the President: [Cuba's selfless contribution to African liberation driven by a genuine and passionate humanism](#)
 - Abuse in schools: [Stop the victimisation and marginalisation of girls](#)
 - Rights of the elderly: [Restore the dignity of the mothers and fathers of the nation](#)
 - National Values: [Social development must be accompanied by moral renewal](#)

 - [Previous issues](#)
-

Cuba's selfless contribution to African liberation driven by a genuine and passionate humanism



THIS WEEK, at the invitation of President Fidel Castro Ruz, we led a South African government delegation on a long-outstanding state visit to Cuba. The purpose of the visit was to strengthen the existing relations between our two countries. This related to a number of areas. These include the areas of education, health, science and technology, agriculture and sport. We will say something about these matters a little later.

With a population of 11 million, Cuba is a much smaller country than South Africa. This is also true of the size of its landmass. It would not need any statistical information to show any visiting South African that the country also has a much smaller economy than ours and is at a lower level of economic development. Yet the visit reminded all of us of the big heart of the Cuban people and how much we had benefited from this fact.

The visit also confirmed the strength of the continuing commitment of the Cubans to assist us to the extent they can in helping us to meet our challenges as a growing democratic country. Even as the memory was beginning to fade, our stay in Cuba could not but remind all of us of the

great contribution that the country made to the struggle for freedom and peace in our region of Southern Africa.

As we conversed with our hosts, we recollected the period in our region which ended just over a decade ago, which saw the involvement of apartheid South Africa in a massive and concerted effort to impose its will on the region and thus extend the life of the apartheid crime against humanity. Cuba's contribution to the defeat of that campaign of aggression and destabilisation against independent Africa was, of course, particularly exemplified by its decisive involvement in the military struggle to defeat the apartheid forces that had invaded Angola soon after that country's independence from Portugal.

The Cuban forces were to stay in Angola for over a decade. That stay ended only when, after their defeat at Cuito Cuanavale, the apartheid invaders understood that they would never be able to realise their objectives and that the Angolan people should have the freedom to determine their future. With that realisation came the understanding in Pretoria that it could not dictate to the independent African states through the use of force. Neither could it hold back the tide leading to the independence of Namibia and the liberation of South Africa.

Our delegation laid a wreath at the Veterans Pantheon in Havana, which contains the bodies of the heroes and heroines of the Cuban people, including those who died in the war of independence from Spain in the 19th century as well as the war in Angola for the liberation of the peoples of Africa. As we carried out this solemn act and walked around the pantheon, we could not but gain a fresh appreciation of how much this small island of Cuba had been a major contributor to our own freedom, without asking that we do anything in return.

As we listened to old soldiers at this monumental cemetery, we could not fail to see that here we had people who were genuinely committed to the cause of Africa's people, who felt great friendship for our own people and were prepared to make sacrifices in our interest. Therefore we understood well what they meant when they said that it was their commitment to internationalism and solidarity that had made it possible for them to decide that they were willing to die if necessary, so that we should be free.

That understanding was further enhanced at the African Memorial Park in Miramar, Havana, where, together with President Castro, we unveiled a bust of Oliver Tambo, after which the ANC Secretary General, Kgalema Motlanthe, addressed us all. The first bust to be unveiled at this park in honour of the peoples of Africa is that of the late, first President of Angola, Agostinho Neto. Oliver Tambo's is the second. We were informed that others that will be placed at the park include those of Abdel Gamal Nasser of Egypt, Modibo Keita of Mali, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel of Mozambique.

It felt strange and embarrassing that, seven years after our own liberation, we, an African country, did not have a single memorial to pay tribute to these and other outstanding African patriots. This feeling was also strengthened by our visit to the specially prepared grave of the outstanding South African writer, Alex La Guma, who had served as the Chief Representative of the ANC in Havana. Our interpreter informed us that one of his set works at University in Cuba had been La Guma's novel, 'The Stone Country', even as the book was banned in his own country of birth.

Needless to say, we did not visit Cuba to recall the past. Nevertheless that past of deeply felt friendship and solidarity with our people and country helps to explain the great willingness of the people of that country to help us in our struggle to eradicate the apartheid legacy and achieve the objective of a better life for all.



On many occasions, the citizens of this island state, including scientists and other professionals, such as teachers, openly expressed their willingness to come to South Africa to work with us to realise our goals. Even children spoke of their intention to become teachers and doctors so that they could carry out their international duties. It is because of this strong and prevalent spirit of Cuba that, today, we have 463 Cuban doctors working in our public hospitals, especially those in rural areas. Forty-seven of these are lecturers and would therefore be able to assist both in our medical schools and our teaching hospitals.

Accordingly, if we speak today of making progress towards the goal of honouring the fundamental human right to health for all, we say so because, in good measure, we have these significant numbers of Cuban health workers who volunteered to come and work even in areas where some of our own professionals might be reluctant to go. To help increase our own capacity in this area, Cuba has granted scholarships to 185 of our young people who are currently studying in Cuba to become medical doctors.

Cuba also has done and is doing important work in research into and the development of drugs and medicines. Because of her commitment to help us radically to improve the health of our people, she has offered to waive her intellectual property rights over these health products as well as cooperate with us in their production, so that we can provide affordable medicaments to the poor people of our country. In addition to this, Cuba has agreed to work with us in the important scientific area of biotechnology to increase our research capacity in this area.

She has also agreed to share with us the important work she has done in the area of animal and plant health and productivity, so that we are better able to address the question of better nutrition and therefore better health for our people. Immediately, she is ready to send some tens of veterinary scientists to help us further improve the health of our animal stock, including in the former homeland areas. This is especially timely in the light of the recent outbreak of various animal diseases globally, including mad-cow, foot-and-mouth and anthrax diseases.

Recognising the importance of sport and recreation to the health and general well being especially of our youth, Cuba is also working with us to increase our capacity in this area. Already, we have three of our people studying sport in Cuba, assisted by the Sports Scholarships given to them by Cuba. We have also reached agreement with the Cuban Government that Cuba will assist us to develop our own sports academies so that we have larger numbers of properly qualified sports instructors and better access by our youth to modern instruction in this field. We are also of the same mind with the Cubans, that we should both do everything possible to facilitate access by other African sportspeople to these facilities once they exist.

As is clear from this report, Cuba is also in agreement with us about the critical importance of human resource development. In part, this derives from her own reality and experience of development. Among other things, the country is not as well endowed with natural resources as we are, and, has had to depend greatly on the skill of her own people to achieve the outstanding results she has with regard to such areas as health and education.

Once more, driven by the firm internationalist commitment to help us succeed, the Cuban leadership engaged us in intense discussions about measures we could take together to raise the level of education of our people and to improve the quality of that education. Accordingly, we will be receiving Cuban teachers in mathematics and science to help us in our schools. These will be followed by teacher trainers in these subjects, once again to build up our own domestic capacity to improve the performance of our student youth in these critical areas. We will also work together to



draw on Cuba's experience with regard to the use of radio and television in the field of education, including the area of basic literacy.

These are some of the agreements we concluded during our visit to Cuba this week. Together they constitute the clearest demonstration of that country's resolve to help us accelerate progress towards the attainment of the objective of a better life for all, by intensifying the struggle for freedom from hunger, ignorance and disease. They demonstrate the fact that when the Cuban people helped us to defeat the apartheid monster, they did so as friends for all seasons, and not as fair weather partners.

Our engagement with Cuba and their preparedness to increase the number of doctors, teachers, engineers and other professionals to assist not only South Africa but the rest of the African continent to face the challenges of development, is informed by a desire from all of us, to strengthen South-South relations. While Africans are involved in the important work of finalising the elaboration of the practical elements of the vision of the African Renaissance, Cuban doctors, teachers and other professionals, are already involved in a number of African countries giving practical meaning to our shared objectives of the reawakening of the continent.

Cuba, an island in the Caribbean, is host to 96 diplomatic missions representing countries from all parts of the globe as well as international organisations, such as the UN Special Agencies. As we left Cuba, we had come to understand that the Cuban people are driven by a genuine and passionate humanism. They are proud of their rich and long history of struggle to attain their own freedom and social progress.

They do not hesitate to share what they have with those who are in want. They wish to be part of a world of freedom, peace, prosperity and friendship among the peoples, and are determined to make their contribution to the achievement of these goals. To some extent, that helped to explain why so many countries have representatives in Havana, if only to gain a better understanding of a friendly Caribbean people.

Thabo Mbeki.

ABUSE IN SCHOOLS

Stop the victimisation and marginalisation of girls

THE SEXUAL ABUSE of girls in South African schools, documented in a report released this week by Human Rights Watch, should be a source of concern for the entire society. The report says South African girls continue to be raped, sexually abused, sexually harassed and assaulted at school by male classmates and teachers: "For many, violence and abuse are an inevitable part of the school environment.

The Department of Education welcomed the report as an opportunity to focus the attention of the entire nation on the security and safety of female students.

Widespread violence against girls in schools amounts to a gross violation of human rights, and, if allowed to continue unchecked, will represent a failure of society to protect a vulnerable section of the community. Such violence and harassment not only causes direct physical and emotional harm to those affected; it also undermines the safety of the general schooling environment. On a broader level it threatens to make access to an equitable education even more difficult for girls, who as a group already face a number of obstacles in accessing education.

The report found sexual violence had a profoundly destabilising effect on the education of girl children. Rape survivors interviewed reported that their school performance suffered, some reported losing interest in school, many transferred schools and other simply left the schooling system. Parents said their children had become depressed, disruptive and anxious.

This violence is a particularly worrying element of the wider social problem of high levels of violence against women. It should also be seen in the context of a schooling system which for years has been subject to violence and conflict for many years.

"Violence is often sexualized, with devastating consequences for women and girls who disproportionately bear the brunt of sexual violence, not only in society at large but in schools as well," the report says.

The report found that while some schools try hard to respond to such violence, school officials have too often concealed sexual violence or delayed disciplinary action against perpetrators. Girls who report abuse are often further victimised and stigmatised. "Rarely do school authorities take steps to ensure girls have a sense of security and comfort at school or to counsel and discipline boys who commit acts of violence."

The report noted the general lack of effective processes for investigating complaints, disciplining offenders or ensuring adequate coordination between school authorities and police, prosecutors and social workers.

The report acknowledges that government has made significant efforts to address issues surrounding violence against women and girls, especially within the criminal justice system. It notes however that more government action is needed, particularly at the level of schools.

The education department said the report helped the department in its efforts to address sex and gender-based violence in schools by providing an 'outsider's view' on where the problems lie and offering clear recommendations on how these can be addressed.

In 1998 the Ministerial Gender Equity Task Team addressed sexual violence prevention in its report and made wide-ranging recommendations, including the need for focused attention on gender equity in the curriculum, the monitoring of all violence against girls and women in education institutions and ensuring that disciplinary procedures are not only in place but are being implemented with respect to both learners and educators.

Steps subsequently taken by the department included:

- Introducing sexual abuse prevention in the Life Skills Learning Area through analysing different kinds of relationships that exist between sexes and also evaluate these relationships. Learner are enabled to reflect on their behaviours, on those of others and to critically evaluate human rights, values and practices.
- Addressing the difficulty girls find in speaking out about sexual violence and abuse by launching the Creative Arts Initiative, which provides learners with a non-threatening forum to talk about what

they experience as barriers to learning and teaching. High on the list of learners' concerns has been the issue of violence against girls perpetrated by learners and teachers.

- Addressing abuse of learners by teachers through tightening disciplinary measures and sanctions against educators in November 2000. Government introduced an amendment to the Employment of Educators Act of 1998 so that a teacher found guilty of having a sexual relationship with a learner at their school, with or without the consent of such a learner, will be dismissed. A teacher dismissed on the basis of sexual abuse of a learner will be deregistered as a teacher.
- Developing a school-based module on Managing Sexual Harassment and Gender-based Violence, together with education district officials, teachers and schools in Gauteng, Free State and Mpumalanga. It consists of eight workshops to raise awareness about gender-based violence and provide institution-based policies and programmes to deal with it. In 2000/1 the department is taking this work into 18 districts and 2 700 schools and colleges in government's nodal points for integrated rural and urban development and renewal.

More recently the Department and the South African Police Service have completed a workbook on Signposts for Safe Schools, which will become a resource for actions to be taken by educators, district managers, principals, and school governing bodies as well as members of the community. It is intended to provide schools with strategies to address violence in schools focusing on improving the impact, authority and efficiency of school management and school services. The workbook will be distributed to all schools and police stations. and the Department of Education will organise training to accompany its distribution.

Eradicating sexual abuse in schools is not only the task of government. Parents, learners, teachers and community structures all need to become involved in the fight against this problem. Only then will the safety, dignity and right to education of all young women be adequately protected by our society.

RIGHTS OF THE ELDERLY

Restore the dignity of the mothers and fathers of the nation

THE SHOCKING STORIES of neglect and abuse which are detailed in the report released this week of the Ministerial Committee on Abuse, Neglect and Ill-treatment of Older persons should mobilise all sectors of society to prevent these abuses. Established by the Minister of Social Development Zola Skweyiya, the committee collected a large amount of evidence of the cruelty which many elderly people experience.

"Elderly people in South Africa, especially the poor and those living in rural areas, are crying out to the government for help. Some are neglected, ill-treated and even evicted by their families," the report said.

Speaking on the release of the report Minister Skweyiya said government had committed itself to urgently developing an implementation plan to address the specific immediate, short-term and medium-term recommendations made in the report. The plan will ensure elderly citizens receive sensitive and integrated services from a range of government departments.

"It is, however, imperative that all social partners - business, labour, faith-based organisations and civil society organisations in general - share the responsibility of ensuring that older people are acknowledged, supported and protected," Skweyiya said.

The committee found abuse and neglect of the elderly is common in residential homes, hospitals, within families, in communities and in pension queues and government offices. Social services for the elderly remain fragmented, poorly managed, racially divided and under-resourced.

Residential homes

Although the numbers of elderly people living in residential homes are relatively small, they are nevertheless extremely vulnerable. There are no uniform standards of cleanliness, accommodation, nutrition and staff ratios resulting in generally poor standards. Funding, planning and admission policies have not kept pace with changing needs. There is an absence of transformation and little guidance is given on making homes cultural sensitive, hospitable and non-racial.

Social pensions

The conditions at pension pay-out points, where elderly people have to queue each month for sometimes the entire day, over-shadowed all other problems faced by the elderly in most provinces. The length of time in the queue, lack of shelter, seating, insufficient toilet facilities and lack of water at pay points is a problem across the country. Security at pay points is a particular concern to pensioners who are often robbed after collecting their pensions or targeted by money lenders and unscrupulous burial societies.

In most instances, the use of private contractors has not improved the efficiency of the system. The stoppage of pensions without warning and the non-payment of arrears when pensions are restored is a common experience for pensioners. Legitimate efforts by government to tackle fraud in the system has had devastating consequences for many pensioners who have inexplicably been removed from the system. This is particularly the case when a pensioner will have a number of dependent children or grandchildren.

Family and community care

The committee endorsed the policy that elderly people should be able to remain in the community as long as possible, but noted this had become increasingly difficult due to the absence of community services in most areas, inadequate housing and unaffordable service charges. The committee found many elderly people were being abused by their children and grandchildren, with reports of rape of elderly people increasing. Many elderly people living alone are dying from malnutrition and neglect.

Many complaints were raised about inadequate housing, high rent and rates bills and unaffordable charges for water and electricity. There is a distinct lack of health care at home and services for the elderly at clinics and hospitals are less than adequate.

The committee made a number of broad and detailed recommendations to government on policy, residential homes, social pensions and family and community care.

"The majority of elderly South Africans have had a life of struggle, deprived of proper education, denied decent health care, excluded by labour laws, harassed by pass laws and dispossessed of their land. They expected their lives would be transformed after apartheid. This transformation must now begin," the committee concluded.

NATIONAL VALUES

Social development must be accompanied by moral renewal

TWO REPORTS released this week, on the neglect of the elderly and abuse of girls at school, suggest a society facing a challenge of re-establishing social values almost as daunting as the challenges of poverty and economic development.

Both reports document shocking instances of violence, abuse and neglect against both the young and the old. In many instances the perpetrators are those entrusted with the care and safety of these people. Often the abuse is made possible by failures of the authorities and the systems they are expected to manage.

Both reports identify poverty and a lack of social infrastructure as central contributing factors to widespread problems. Underdevelopment remains at the core of many of the social problems that South Africa is currently facing.

The process of reconstruction and development - meeting people's basic needs, investing in social and economic infrastructure, transforming education and raising skills levels, promoting capital investment and job creation - must be accelerated if the country is going to be able to tackle the problems highlighted in the report.

But reconstruction and development may not be enough. It will certainly not occur soon enough for the many school girls who are sexually harassed and abused on a daily basis. It will change in the immediate term the neglect of elderly people by their families or communities.

These problems cannot be tackled without far reaching socio-economic change, but this needs to be accompanied by a moral regeneration which re-builds the positive social values that have been eroded by decades of oppression, state violence, poverty and social dislocation.

Since the establishment of a democratic South Africa, people on all sides have recognised the transformation of the nation is being inhibited because all is not well with the moral life of our society. Crime and corruption, hijacks and murder, abuse of women and children, racism and sexism, are all signs of a moral breakdown. Various attempts have been made to analyse the causes of this.

It is important therefore to support efforts underway to build a national moral regeneration movement to be established in every sector of South African society, working through existing organisations. Such a movement would need to seek a society:

- which puts people before profit,
- with respect for life and the rights of others,
- in which behaviour is aimed at the promotion of the common good,
- in which spiritual values are foundational,
- in which the elderly, children and women are treated with dignity and respect,
- in which no one takes advantage of the weak,
- which produces an accountable leadership.

This movement should be an assemblage of concerned citizens from government and civil society, seeking to reinvigorate morality in South Africa. The vision should be of a national community with a strong moral fibre, whose mission is to revive the spirit of ubuntu.

It should seek to attain the following objectives the acceptance and enactment of high value systems within our society, empowering people to make their own ethical decisions. It should embrace a common code of ethics and behaviour, while improving relations among the inhabitants of our land and building racial harmony

This movement needs to work for the eradication of corruption and unethical practices and establishing a crime free society. It should seek to build a responsible youth, sensitive and responsive to the challenges of leadership. Above all, it should develop a new patriotism grounded on a common commitment to a nation of free and equal citizens.

Such a programme of moral regeneration cannot replace the fundamental social and economic changes which are required to ensure a better life for all South Africans. Nor can it be reduced to a 'moral crusade' in which one section of society seeks to impose its values on another. It must be about the development of a set of shared values which transforms unequal power relations and engenders respect for the rights and dignity of all South Africans.