**PRESENTATION BY THE AMBASSADOR OF CUBA TO SOUTH AFRICA, RODOLFO BENITEZ VERSON, AT THE MEETING OF THE FRIENDS OF CUBA SOCIETY (FOCUS) IN CAPE TOWN. 7 February 2018.**

1. **THE CUBAN EXPERIENCE IN BUILDING SOCIALISM**

Socialism has been demonized for many years around the world by the United States and its allies. As a result, it can be difficult to find an objective perspective on Cuba.

Cuba is probably one of the most misunderstood nations on Earth. Our achievements are largely ignored in the media. The propaganda against Cuba intentionally ignores the impact of the U.S. economic blockade.

Cuba is not perfect. Like anywhere we face problems and struggles. There are many things that have not been achieved yet in Cuba but there are also many achievements.

In our process, the unity of the Cuban people defending the socialist project has been a key element. In fact, we consider that the construction of unity is the most important task facing all true revolutions.

**How Has Socialism Benefited Cuba?**

How do we judge an economy? By the amount of money made by a minority of the population? By the number of luxury goods available or by the economy service to the people?

We are convinced that the distribution of resources within a country is more important than overall GNP when it comes to impacting the live of the people.

It's worth to explore how Cuba spends the very limited resources we have. Actions and facts speak louder than words. Let me mention just 7 examples:

1. Cuba provides free high quality health care for all its population and obtains results similar or better than those of the most developed nations.
2. Life expectancy rate for Cubans, that was 59 years before de Revolution is now 79.1 years, higher than in many rich countries.
3. Cuba has the highest number of doctors per capita in the world (1:155).
4. Our Health care system is based on preventive medicine rather than the more expensive and inefficient curative model. Therefore health care is provided in neighborhoods and not just in hospitals and clinics.
5. With an infant mortality rate of only 4.2 per thousand births, Cuba is the best performer on the Western Hemisphere and among the best in the world. According to the UN, if Latin America as a whole had the level of health care of Cuba, then 700 000 children would be saved every year.
6. The whole Cuban population receive totally free high quality education at all levels, from kindergarten through all college and university levels and this is guaranteed in the Cuban constitution. School uniforms and meals are also free.
7. Of the millions of children in the world who die annually from malnutrition, none of them is Cuban. According to the United Nations Fund for Children, Cuba is the only country in Latin America that does not have child malnutrition.
8. **UPDATING THE CUBAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL MODEL**

The Cuban people is currently involved in a process of updating the national economic and social model. The strategic goal of the updating is to ensure a sustainable socialism.

State Planning will be consolidated as a cornerstone in Cuba. The main production means will continue to be under control of the State. This is an essential point, because property relations are determinants of any socio-economic system, since they has an impact on the reproduction of social relations, class and ideology.

In the coming months, as a result of our electoral process, new leaders will be elected at different levels to represent our people. A new Parliament and a new President of the Council of State will be elected. Continuity is guaranteed.

The Cuban Revolution is and will remain a Revolution of the working class. We will continue defending working class from neo-liberalism and capitalism. The revolutionary society built under Commander Fidel Castro’s leadership remains solid.

1. **CUBA-US RELATIONS**

The imperialism will always try to neutralize those who stand on the side of national sovereignty. This is why the U.S Government labelled as terrorists, leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and many others.

Our decision to defend our national independence and to support the struggle of other countries, like South Africa, has come with a cost. United States hostility against the Cuban Revolution is in part a punishment for our solidarity with the liberation struggles of Africa and Latin America.

During more than a half century, successive U.S. administrations have pursued policies intended to isolate Cuba.

Since 1960 Cuba has suffered from a criminal and illegal economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the US government. It is the longest blockade ever recorded in history.

The blockade not only causes harm and deprivations to the Cuban people. It is also the main obstacle to our economic development. It is a flagrant violation of the human rights of all Cubans.

Let me give you just a few examples of what the blockade means in practical terms:

Cuba is the only country in the world to which U.S. citizens are prohibited from traveling as tourists.

A US ban on Cuban imports is fully in force.

With only very few exemptions, US exports to Cuba are prohibited.

US Investments in our country are not allowed.

Ships from any country carrying goods to Cuba are not allowed to touch US ports for a period of 180 days.

History will oblige the United States government to lift the blockade. And we have all the patience and endurance to wait for that moment to arrive. But we also need the support of the international community to work actively together to make it happen.

During the Barack Obama Administration some important steps were taken. Diplomatic relations were reestablished, Embassies were open in Havana and Washington

Obama signed a National Directive which recognized our country’s independence and sovereignty; recognized Cuba’s revolutionary government as a legitimate and equal interlocutor. The Directive also recognized the blockade as a failed policy that should be eliminated.

But last June President Donald Trump announced the new US policy towards Cuba.

The revised policy promotes the strengthening of the blockade and the hostility against Cuba. The new measures imposed by the US government mark a step back in bilateral relations.

But as Albert Einstein said, trying and trying, again and again, to do the same thing, expecting to get different results, makes no sense at all.

Cuba and the United States can cooperate and coexist in a civilized manner, respecting the profound differences between our governments.

We have reiterated our willingness to continue a respectful dialogue and to negotiate pending bilateral issues with the United States, but it has to be done on the basis of equality and full and absolute respect for our self-determination.

We will not make concessions in terms of our sovereignty and independence. Cuba will not negotiate its principles or accept preconditions, as it has never done throughout the history of the Revolution. As the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba establishes, we will never negotiate under pressure or threats.

The changes that may be necessary in Cuba will be independently decided only by the Cuban people. We will not ask anyone else for their permission.

1. **INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND SOLIDARITY**

Despite its economic limitations and difficulties, Cuba will never renounce its commitment to support and cooperate with those in greatest needs.

We are living in a complex and dangerous world, withgrowing threats to peace and international security, instability, proliferation of conflicts, increase in military spending.

This is a world in which the President of the superpower is not ashamed to label African nations as “*shithole countries”.*

Statistics could not be more eloquent.  No less than 800 million persons in the world suffer from chronic hunger. Every day 18 000 children die as a result of poverty. 780 million adults are illiterate. 325 million children do not attend school.

In this international context, the countries of the South must act together in solidarity. Alone, we will be swallowed by the strength of the powerful.

Cuban cooperation workers will continue to make their contribution around the world, including the 46 000 who are currently working in 61 countries of all continents, struggling for the better life and health of human beings.

Venezuela needs right now the support of all the progressive forces of the world. Venezuela is today a decisive battlefield where sovereignty, emancipation, integration and development in Latin America and Caribbean region is at stake.

We reiterate our firm support and solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution, in the face of the interventionist and unilateral actions that threaten the Government and people of Venezuela.

1. **CUBA, AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICA**

When South Africa and Cuba established diplomatic ties on the very day after democratic government was established in South Africa in 1994, we formalized bonds that run centuries deep.

Relations between Africa and Cuba are profound and historic. As a result of the cruel slavery trade, nearly one million 300 thousand Africans arrived in our island. After a complex process of transculturation, the Cuban nationality emerged. Cuba feels extremely proud of its African roots.

The President of Cuba Raul Castro Ruz, when attending the funeral ceremony of President Nelson Mandela in SOWETO, said: “*Cuba, that has African blood running through its veins, emerged as a nation in the struggle for independence and for the abolition of slavery. And later, enjoyed the privilege of fighting and building side by side with African nations*”. These realities are part of the essence of the Cuban nation.

There is an African saying according to which: “*The foot prints of the people that walked together can never be erased*”.

The deep and special relationship between Cuba and Africa was cemented by the blood of heroic Cuban soldiers who paid the supreme sacrifice for their belief in anti-imperialism, anti-apartheid, freedom and justice.

Cuba deployed for over 30 years close to half a million soldiers and officers in Africa, to support the struggles for national independence or against foreign aggression. More than 2 000 of them lost their lives.

We were not looking for gold, diamonds or oil in Africa. Addressing the South African parliament in 1998, Comrade Fidel Castro said about the Cuban soldiers in Africa:

*“From the African land in which they worked and fought voluntarily and selflessly, they only took back to Cuba the remains of their fallen comrades and the honor of having fulfilled their duty. That is why we know and value the human qualities of Africa much more than those that for centuries colonized and exploited this continent*”.

More than 29 000 Africans from 54 countries of this continent have graduated in Cuba, including more than 1 000 South African brothers and sisters that have been trained as doctors in our Island. Some 6,000 Cubans are collaborating today in Africa, around 400 of them in South Africa.

Cooperation between Cuba and South Africa has a direct impact on thousands of people of both countries.

It is a type of cooperation that has enemies, because it is not for the benefit of any transnational corporation. Therefore, together, we need to defend our cooperation.

We are very proud in Cuba of our relationship with South Africa, and to have your beautiful country as a friend. South Africa will always occupy a special space in our hearts.

We are committed to support your enormous efforts aimed at healing the deep wounds that have for centuries been opened.

We all know the saying that there’s nothing wrong with South Africa that can’t be repaired by all that’s right in South Africa.

It is important not to underestimate the relevance of your process for the all world, particularly for the countries of the South.

A successful South Africa after many terrible years of colonization and apartheid, will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes of a better future for all.

That´s why South Africa´s struggle is ours.

Let me conclude, dear Comrades, by expressing, once again, on behalf of the people and government of Cuba, our deep appreciation to each and every member of FOCUS for your firm and permanent support to the Cuban Revolution.

The people of Cuba will forever be thankful to you for your sustained demand to end the blockade that our country suffers, for your support in the struggle for the release of our Five Antiterrorist Cuban Heroes, for your solidarity with our legitimate claim for the devolution by the US of the Cuban territory illegally occupied by the Guantánamo Naval Base, just to mention a few examples.

We could never thank you enough for been always part of our fight for a better world.

We count on you. You can always count on Cuba.

Thank you.