

The Freedom Park honours South Africa's Cuban comrades

'...We in the liberation movement in Africa are indeed grateful to the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba, and in particular to compañero Fidel Castro, for concrete material assistance, political and diplomatic support. We wish to pay special tribute to the Cuban Armed Forces who travelled thousands and thousands of kilometres to come to Africa to assist in a practical way those of us who are still languishing in the chains of colonialism, imperialism and foreign domination in this region of southern Africa.' (Sam Nujoma, 1988)¹

On the eve of the 15th commemoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and South Africa, The Freedom Park wishes to honour the selfless contribution and the immense sacrifices of a nation that chose to come to our aid in our time of need.

Cuba's involvement in Africa is a remarkable tale of selflessness, unconditional support and the invaluable contributions to the cause of freedom, justice and development which spans more than four decades and has involved 450,000 men and women.² 380,000 of these were combatants and the remaining 70,000 were civilian aid workers that included doctors, nurses and medical technicians.³

Patron-in-Chief of The Freedom Park, Dr Nelson R Mandela expressed this gratitude as follows in his address to the Cuba Solidarity Conference:

"Cubans came to our region as doctors, teachers, soldiers, agricultural experts, but never as colonisers. They have shared the same trenches with us in the struggle against colonialism, underdevelopment, and Apartheid. Hundreds of Cubans have given their lives, literally, in a struggle that was, first and foremost, not theirs but ours. As Southern Africans we salute them. We vow never to forget this unparalleled example of selfless internationalism" (Nelson R Mandela, 1995)⁴.

¹ S Nujoma, 'We are grateful', Excerpts from a Cuban television documentary, "Response to the South African escalation", in D, Deutschmann (ed), *Changing the History of Africa: Angola and Namibia* (Melbourne, Ocean Press, 1989), p xiii.

² Fidel Castro Ruz, 'Speech to the Mass Rally at Mandela Park, Kingston, Jamaica', 30 July 1998, p 9; and Jorge Risquet Valdés, *Two Centuries of Solidarity: the Deep Roots of Cuba's Internationalism*, in <http://www.tricontinental.cubaweb.cu/revista>, (site was visited on 18 October 2006).

³ Risquet, *Two Centuries of Solidarity*, Part XI.

⁴ N Mandela, 'Internationalism Contributed to Victory', Address to Cuba Solidarity Conference, Johannesburg, 6-8 October 1995, in *The Militant*, Volume 59, No 39, 23 October 1995.

Cuba's active solidarity with Africa and its people was a result of a principled stand that its leadership and people had taken against colonialism and imperialism. Its interventions were motivated by unwavering commitment to the advancement of revolutionary struggles for socialism, justice and development. This stemmed from Cuba's own experiences of assaults on its sovereignty and territorial integrity by the imperialists and their desperate bid to muzzle the progressive political formations around the world.⁵

The Freedom Park is an icon of humanity and freedom – not only for South Africans, but also internationally. The Park tells the story of a nation and its people subjected to the most brutal forms of infringement and abuse of basic human rights and thus provides a voice to the often untold history of South Africa and its people. More importantly, the Park weaves a tale of inspiration. It provides proof of what we can achieve as a nation and shows what we are capable of. It acts as a signpost to the South African future.

Mindful of our past and the manner in which it shapes our present and future, we believe it imperative to remember and honour those who came to our aid during our time of need. On Monday, 04 September 2006, The Freedom Park hosted a ceremony during which a journal containing the names of 2,107 Cuban soldiers who died in Southern Africa fighting for freedom and humanity. The names of these Cuban heroes and heroines are also inscribed alongside their South African comrades who died during the various conflicts in South Africa's history on the Wall of Names in honour of their contribution to the establishment of democracy and liberation in our country. This serves as a testimony to their valor and bravery.

The Wall of Names is situated in Sikhumbuto, The Freedom Park's major memorial element. It is a breathtaking 697m physical structure, inscribed with the names of those who paid the ultimate price during eight conflicts that shaped what South Africa is today. These are Pre-Colonial Wars, Genocide, Slavery, Wars of Resistance, The South African War, the First World War, the Second World War and the Liberation Struggle. The names of the Cuban heroes and heroines have been inscribed under the Liberation Struggle.

⁵ The United States invaded Cuba with the hope of overthrowing Castro's government in April 1961 in what is now known as the 'Bay of Pigs'. Fidel Castro Ruz, 'Speech to May Day Rally at Revolution Square in Cuba', 01 May 2003, in *Monthly Review*, May 2003; Also see Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (London, Arrow, 1978), pp 232-234; and T Halpern Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993), p 301.

The Wall can accommodate 136,000 names with additional information, such as biographical details will soon be available on touch screens. To date, 75 000 names have been verified for inscription.

These Cubans have played a vital part in the history of South Africa. It is therefore fitting that their legacy be recognised and that they are given an honorary place in the history of our country.