

Speech by KZN Health MEC - Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo - on the occasion of congratulating KZN aspirant doctors departing to study medicine in Cuba.

14 September 2010

All protocol observed

We consider it appropriate that we start by thanking the Cuban Government and the Cuban people for a very warm and progressive relationship enjoyed by our two countries dating back to the struggle against apartheid and colonialism in the sub-region.

Personally, I consider myself fortunate that when the calling was made I was part of the forces that worked and appreciated Cuba's role in the struggle against apartheid. Literally, we partly owe our independence to Cuba considering hundreds of cadres from the South African Liberation Movement who were trained in Cuba. The heroic contribution and sacrifice in the war in Angola, the Cuban contribution to the liberation of Namibia as well as the crushing historical defeat of the apartheid army in Cuito Cuanavale will always remind us as South Africans that Cuba is a reliable ally at all times.

Today as we dispatch you to Cuba we want you to know that our historical ties with that country surpass all the imaginary boundaries created by the West that Cuba is bad. The importance of our relationship with that progressive country is summed up in the reality that upon his release from Robben Island in 1991 Nelson Mandela's first foreign trip was Cuba.

We are mentioning all this because we want you to remain good ambassadors for this country in Cuba. We also want you, as South African students from KwaZulu-Natal to fully participate in the freedom celebrations and other social

activities of that special country. Go there, study and work hard, enjoy yourselves and grow personally and collectively.

Know that as a Department we also highly appreciate the sacrifice that your parents have made by allowing you to go to a country they have no knowledge of. We also want them to know that almost all the first world countries, instead of assisting the developing world with skills, are the ones that poach the doctors and professional health care workers that we have. But what does Cuba do? They unreservedly give our aspirant doctors time, expertise and positive energy to learn in that country and be allowed to come back and practice here in South Africa, where they are needed most.

To all the parents present here we are saying your support during the period when your children were away will immensely contribute to their success. We thank you in anticipation for that responsibility.

Our Minister of Health, **Dr Aaron Motsoaledi** has full praise for this South Africa-Cuba Health Cooperation Agreement as emphasized during the Graduation Ceremony of the South African Medical Doctors trained in Cuba at the University of Cape Town in July 2010 where he said:

'Over the years, this programme has assisted in plugging the gap we have in terms of improving access to qualified health professionals in our system. Historically, the graduates from this partnership have and continue to serve in the most under-resourced parts of our health system - with admirable results in many cases.'

The Minister also praised the fact that candidates for the programme are drawn from under-privileged areas of our country, giving some of our young people an opportunity to realize their dream of practicing medicine.

As a country, through this programme we are gradually succeeding in addressing scarce medical skills. We are also able to make strides in the retention of medical doctors through bursary allocation and enforcing serving back at mother institutions

Most importantly we are able to get a mix of doctors that have a strong Primary Health Care based approach that emphasizes access, affordability of health care systems and health promotion.

On behalf of our Honourable Premier, Dr Zweli Mkhize and all the people of KwaZulu Natal we wish you, our students, success especially when recognizing that over the years, the pass rate has always been high. Know that the lecturers take time to explain and student support is impeccable. To date of 98 students coming from KwaZulu Natal, only 8 dropped out of the programme. The 2 failed, 3 committed crime and 3 fell ill.

As a word of advice, we want to strongly caution against the bad-mouthing of the Government of Cuba and its officials. Utilize your time there to enrich yourselves by positively learning different languages, different cultures and different customs.

Be informed that the level of crime in Cuba is very low and that there is visible informal police presence in that you may be arrested within minutes of committing crime or be deported.

Know that the Cubans have a high sense of identity. So should you do the same and you will loose nothing in return. The Cubans in general value respect, diligence, commitment, honesty and fighting for what you believe in. Learn and internalize their values and virtues.

Never lose sight of what you are sent there to do and attain especially when considering that entertainment is good as a way of distressing. Remember as you engage your studies, and having fun whilst you are that the KZN Department of Health is spending R101 400 per student per annum. That is a lot of money to just go into waste, even as one student does not make it. So get a grip of what you have set out to do in Cuba and cherish that privilege which others have only dreamed about without immediate success.

Do rely on other fellow South Africans and foreign students that you will find there. Openly discuss, engage and abstain from those things that endanger our participation in this progressive exercise, for instance:

- Alcohol abuse among our students
- Pregnancies and abortions
- Stealing and fraudulent practices as well as
- Getting involved in black market activities.

Lastly, I would like to thank our officials who are directly responsible for the smooth running of this Cuban Project. We know that the programme has not been without its challenges, some of which have cost us dearly.

All the departing students have to know that we deeply appreciate their commitment, dedication and diligence for those times when you will be away from your family and friends and familiar surroundings. Get there and continue to hold our flag high.

I would like again to echo what Minister Motsoaledi pointed out that this *'is a profession that puts to the test your individual values of respect, dignity, care, passion and compassion, that you are expected to uphold at all times in your careers.'*

Our country expects a lot from you as one of our stalwarts, former Minister of Health, the late Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang pointed out:

'Sending young people to Cuba was not only done so that they would acquire technical medical education. It was also done to provide for the transformation of health services in terms of values, attitudes and practices.'

NIHAMBE KAHLE BANTABAMI! FARE THEE WELL! WE LOVE YOU ONE AND ALL.

I THANK YOU!