

MEDIA RELEASE	COVID-19: PSA cautious about deployment of Cuban health professionals
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The Public Servants Association (PSA) has noted with concern the arrival in South Africa of more than 200 Cuban health workers, who have been deployed to assist with the COVID-19 pandemic, at hefty costs for taxpayers owing to the lack of human resource planning by the Department of Health.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to permanently employ healthcare workers, home-based providers, social workers, nurses, environmental health practitioners, early childhood development practitioners and other related health professionals in providing essential services for human survival and development. The pandemic clearly shows additional local human resource capacity for health-related professionals should be prioritised. At the same time, the Department of Basic Education plans to re-open schools on 6 May 2020 with a demand that home-based providers and community care health workers must be available for screening and data management of all 1.8 million learners and educators to avoid a health disaster.

The 200 Cuban medical doctors are set to cost the country hundreds of millions in Rand. In documents seen by the PSA, projected costs for a medical brigade of 187 Cuban personnel was R440 million. An even larger contingent of 217 persons arrived in South Africa on 26 April 2020, the publication revealed. This exorbitant amount of money spent on Cuban doctors cannot be justified whilst the Department of Health could not find funds to create posts for health professionals tasked with providing community services.

The Department also recently embarked on recruiting health professionals for immediate availability during the pandemic but even before the finalisation of this process, assistance was sought from abroad. Employing local people, including recently retired professionals, would have been a more economical solution. In December 2019, more than a hundred health workers handed a memorandum to the Limpopo Health MEC, demanding to be reinstated and absorbed in positions across the province. The contracts of a huge number of health professionals including medical doctors, pharmacists, and nurses were terminated by the Department of Health owing to budgetary constraints. These professionals joined the ranks of the unemployed. There is thus no evidence that the country is struggling to find manpower that necessitates foreign assistance. It is furthermore regrettable that the Department never engaged labour on the employment of Cuban doctors during COVID-19 meetings.

The PSA still believes that the country's vast numbers of unemployed healthcare workers should be given preference for employment before considering costly foreign assistance in the midst of limited financial resources that cannot even provide a meagre circumstantial allowance for COVID-19 frontline workers in acknowledgment of their commitment to serving the country during this difficult period.

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