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By María Josefina Arce

"The Cuban people occupy a special place in the hearts of the peoples of Africa," said Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid fighter and architect of reconciliation in South Africa, during his visit to our country in 1991.

For Cuba, it was a great honor to be among the first nations to be visited by the man who three years later would become the first Black president of South Africa, and who described the Cuban Revolution as a source of inspiration for all peace-loving peoples.

The historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, defined Mandela as an honest, modest man of enormous merit, and was united with him by a close and sincere friendship.

That close relationship was marked by mutual admiration and respect. Fidel knew and highlighted the South African revolutionary's steadfastness and unwavering resistance during the almost three decades he was imprisoned for fighting against the apartheid system.

For Madiba, as his people knew him, during those long years of imprisonment, the thought and example of the Cuban leader was an inexhaustible source of inspiration and a spur to not give up.

The great love for his people and the determination to achieve a dignified life for all united, without a doubt, these two men of universal stature who one day finally met in Havana and merged in a brotherly embrace.

Under Mandela's presidency and during Fidel's 1994 visit to Pretoria, the South African capital, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries, one of the first foreign policy actions of the African nation that was born free.

It was also another step in the consolidation of ties that had begun long before, during the difficult years of the struggle against the segregationist regime, in which Cuba's participation was essential.

And as Fidel and Mandela wanted, throughout all this time the two peoples have strengthened a broad and multisectoral cooperation relationship of mutual benefit.

Health, education, public works, science and information technology and communications, sports and environment are some of the areas in which successful collaboration agreements are being implemented today.

Not even the global health emergency caused by COVID 19 could prevent Havana and Pretoria from continuing to work to strengthen bilateral ties. In 2020, as part of a Business Forum, a Mutual Cooperation Agreement was signed between both Chambers of Commerce.

The agreement was described as another step in achieving the common goal of increasing, expanding and diversifying economic and trade relations between Cuba and South Africa.

Cubans also pay tribute to the South African leader every July 18, declared in 2009 by the UN General Assembly as Nelson Mandela International Day, to remember an exceptional man, a tireless fighter for peace and reconciliation in his country, a man who was able to put into practice his thought that: "The brave do not fear forgiveness, if it helps to foster peace".



## **Radio Habana Cuba**