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Uhuru Kenyatta's leaves for historic visit to Cuba

13/03/2018



President Uhuru Kenyatta heads to the Caribbean in a historic visit to the island of Cuba on Tuesday, seeking a helping hand for his healthcare policy in the Big Four Agenda.

The president will be visiting the region for the first time since he took office in 2013.

It will also be the first visit by a Kenyan head of state since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 2001.

State House said on Monday that the agenda of the trip will be boosting cooperation in health, sports and culture.

## OPPORTUNITY

“Cuba has a well-developed health sector which has achieved great milestones such as discovery of vaccines against lung cancer, and the eradication of malaria. Cuba is also home to a thriving pharmaceutical industry,” State House Spokesman Manoah Esipisu said.

“There is a great opportunity during the President's visit for the two nations to expand the MoU on implementation for the achievement of universal healthcare, an important deliverable in President Kenyatta’s Big Four agenda,” Mr Esipisu added, referring to an agreement signed between Kenya and Cuba last year.

## MODEL

Officials say the President sees Cuba as important in helping him achieve some of the Big Four issues, which include universal healthcare, adequate housing, manufacturing and food security.

Cuba, despite being under the communist leadership of Fidel Castro - who died in November 2016 - for five decades, has achieved what the World Health Organisation calls a model healthcare system.

Based on socialist tenets, Castro engineered a system based on accessibility and preventive medicine (vaccination) and regarded health as a basic human right.

## MORTALITY RATE

Health services are offered for free and include check-ups, surgery, medical dispensing and doctor visitations.

Under Fidel’s brother Raul, the World Bank reports that Cuba’s community health has remained intact, reporting an infant mortality rate of four in 1,000 live births and a life expectancy of 80.

Kenya’s infant mortality rate is 37 out of 1,000 live births while the life expectancy is 62.

## LOW SALARIES

In Cuba, one medical doctor can serve up to 150 patients, beyond the World Health Organisation standard ratio of one doctor per 300 people.

In Kenya, a doctor has to work harder because he stands for 16,000 patients.

A preparatory concept note for the President’s visit said Kenya could tap into Cuba’s pharmaceuticals as well as its medical missions.

## VECTOR CONTROL

“The President will explore how to build Kenyan capacity, increase the number of medical specialists in orthopaedic surgery, oncology, neurology, and trauma management; and collaborate in research on cancer and diabetes drugs, and eradication of malaria,” State House said on Monday.

“Cuba is interested in registering and selling its pharmaceutical products in the Kenyan market. It is also keen to cooperate in vector control.

President Kenyatta will encourage Cuba to set up a pharmaceutical plant in Kenya to serve the East and Central Africa regional market.”

## SANCTIONS

Cuba’s engagements with the outside world had been limited until 2016 when the US agreed to lift the sanctions it imposed on the country in the 1960s, and reopened its embassy in Havana.

President Barack Obama then made a historic visit to Havana. A few months later, Kenya announced it would open an embassy in Cuba.

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