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South Africa: Destabilizing the Region

"South Africa has a different strategy of destabilization for each of the independent black-ruled states of southern Africa."

— Witness Mangwende, Zimbabwe's Foreign Minister

By Jennifer Davis, Director, American Committee on Africa

Until ten years ago, South Africa's white supremacist government felt safely tucked away at the bottom of the continent, behind a buffer of equally oppressive states, determined to maintain white minority or colonial rule. To the west and east were the Portuguese colonies, Angola and Mozambique, with Ian Smith's Rhodesia striding the center.

For South Africa, the arrangement was ideal. Its well-developed economy could dominate the region. The railway lines that serviced many of the countries in the region ran to South African ports; South African manufactured goods dominated regional markets; hundreds of thousands of cheap migratory workers were drawn into South Africa's mines and farms.

Even when the 1960's brought intensified resistance to minority rule, and men and women were finally driven to

armed struggle to achieve their freedom throughout southern Africa, South Africa was cushioned by its geography. The South African government could avoid fighting any major battles at home.

The collapse of the Portuguese empire and the achievement of independence by Angola and Mozambique in 1975 cracked South Africa's protective shield, and the last remnants were shattered when Robert Mugabe became the first Prime Minister of an independent Zimbabwe in 1980.

South Africa was faced by a new reality. It was bordered by several states which had themselves achieved independence by armed struggle, and could be expected to adopt a sympathetic if not openly supportive attitude to the South African liberation struggle. Further, the existence of these states inspired black South Africans, already displaying rising militancy, with the belief that victory was possible (eg. Soweto, 1976).

Several of the new states, Angola and Mozambique in particular, were pledged to building non-racial socialist societies, thus posing a double challenge to South Africa's fundamental structure. And by 1980, the nine independent countries of southern Africa were moving to form a regional grouping, excluding South Africa, which became the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference (SADCC). Here was a very real threat to continued South African domination of the regional economy.

Fundamentally, South African policy planners have two closely linked concerns:



- 1) to maintain apartheid in South Africa and control of Namibia; this means destroying liberation forces such as the ANC and SWAPO internally and intimidating neighboring states from offering their external support,
- 2) to protect and expand the wealthy private enterprise economy from which the minority continues to draw its privileges; this means finding new markets close by, but controlling their development so as to ensure dependency and guarantee that no competition is encouraged.

For a time South Africa seemed convinced that it could neutralize neighboring countries by drawing them into a "Constellation of States" with promises of economic and technical assistance. But South Africa's naked desire to act as the controlling regional "super-power" has made it impossible to construct such a Constellation on a voluntary basis.

Efforts to Secure Control

South Africa uses a complex combination of direct and indirect military intervention, and economic and political manipulation in its effort to secure its control of southern Africa.

Military Attacks

Angola

The largest military attacks have been mounted against Angola. By the end of 1982, total damage inflicted on Angola, a country of some seven million people, was estimated at \$10 billion. South Africa now seeks to justify this wholesale aggression by arguing that Angola is providing a rear base for the South West Africa Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) in its struggle to end the Pretoria regime's illegal occupation of Namibia. It also points to the presence of Cuban troops in Angola as proof of the "Soviet menace" by which it claims to be threatened.

South Africa first invaded Angola, with a 6000 man force in August 1975, in an effort to prevent the MPLA national liberation movement from coming to power as the first independent

government after the defeat of Portuguese colonial rule. That invasion had the backing of then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the CIA, but it was eventually checked with the aid of Cuban troops sent in response to the young government's desperate call for international assistance.

It returned to the attack with raids into Angola in 1977. In 1981 and again in 1982, it launched major invasions, involving up to 20,000 troops. South Africa now maintains a permanent army of occupation in southern Angola, having killed thousands of Angolans, displaced many more, and destroyed roads, villages, factories, food supplies, hospitals, and schools.

Not only has South Africa sent its own troops, and mercenaries into Angola, but it has also given extensive support to a para-military, anti-government group in Angola, the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Also supplied at various times by the CIA, UNITA has played a continual role of banditry and harassment, increasing pressures being exerted on the Luanda government.

Aggression by Surrogate Forces of South Africa

Campaigns of sabotage and terrorism are a major feature of South African aggression. Apart from UNITA, the Pretoria government has sponsored several surrogate forces, portraying them as dissident nationalist movements. Such groups have been very active in Mozambique, Lesotho and Zimbabwe, where economic targets including roads, railways, electricity, oil and water supplies have been frequently attacked and damaged.

Mozambique

There have been open commando raids, some aimed at economic installations like the harbor and oil storage tanks at Beira in Mozambique, and some in which African National Congress (ANC) members were ostensibly the targets, though not the only people killed.

In January 1981, South African commandos killed 13 members of the ANC. In May 1983, they returned in a bombing raid, destroying a jam factory and killing 6 people, only one of whom had

any ANC connections. In October, they returned yet again.

In December 1982, commandos crossed into Lesotho and attacked 12 separate "ANC targets" killing 42 people, 30 ANC refugees and 12 Lesotho citizens.

South Africa's primary weapon in its undercover war against Mozambique is a group called the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (MNR). No one but South Africa claims that this is a genuine indigenous movement. In fact, the MNR was created inside Rhodesia by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization after Mozambican independence in 1975 to provide information on and harass the Zimbabwean liberation movement ZANU which drew heavily on Mozambican solidarity as it entered the final years of struggle for independence.

When Zimbabwe did become independent, the MNR training camps were closed, and, according to *The Economist*, "the MNR directorate was flown south to Pretoria, lock, stock and radio station." The MNR operates as an irregular force, and according to the U.S. State Department, it receives the bulk of its support from South Africa. It is financed and armed by the South African army, given logistical support in the form of training, command and control equipment, helicopter transport and special operations. Its propaganda radio, Voice of Free Africa, broadcasts from South African soil. The MNR style of operation is very brutal. Stories told by survivors have a nightmare quality.

The savage mutilations have been too generalized to be explained as individual acts by one or other particularly sadistic bandit. Mutilation is a deliberate terrorist tactic, and an integral part of social destabilization — destabilization whose decision-making center is in Pretoria.

Economic Pressure Mozambique

Finally, South Africa has also used its economic dominance to exert heavy pressures. South Africa's ability to pressure Mozambique flows partly from the close economic links established during Portuguese rule. For example, the railway line linking the Transvaal to



Mozambican minister of culture, Graca Machel, mourning together with the families of the victims at the South African attack on Mozambique, May 23, 1983. (Photo: AIM)

the major port at Maputo carries some 17% of South Africa's overseas trade, earning important foreign exchange for Mozambique. Mozambique's railways and ports provide five countries in the region with their only alternative to routing imports and exports through South Africa. It is therefore, in South Africa's interest to maintain regional dependency on its own facilities by restricting the transport system in Mozambique.

There has been a deliberate effort to block the railway and the road to Zimbabwe, to sabotage the port of Beira, and to attack the Beira-Zimbabwe pipeline. Sidings at Beira contain the wreckage of locomotives, passenger carriages, and freight wagons. One passenger train was attacked by bazookas, and the carriages were then raked with machine-gun fire. Forty-six passengers, all civilians were murdered.

Zimbabwe

In 1981, when the Zimbabwean government was looking critically at

South African investment in Zimbabwe, South Africa unilaterally terminated a preferential trade agreement dating back to 1964. It also abruptly recalled some 80 railway trucks and diesel engines on long term loan to Zimbabwe Railways, trucks badly needed to transport the record maize harvest.

Some of the attacks in Mozambique have been aimed also at hurting Zimbabwe. In December last year, commandos landed at Beira and blew up most of its oil depot. The oil, destined for the newly re-opened pipeline to Zimbabwe amounted to 2½ months supply and was valued at \$12 million. Zimbabwe had only enough for two weeks stored locally. According to England's leading financial journal, *The Economist*, "The alternative rail route for oil... was conveniently sabotaged." This left South Africa with a grip on all of Zimbabwe's oil supplies, and South Africa suddenly announced long delays. The resulting chaos hit Zimbabwe over Christmas. Travel was impossible, cars were abandoned, factories closed, and power cuts became frequent.

U.S. Role in Destabilization

The U.S. is heavily implicated in South Africa's program of destabilization. The Reagan administration admits that there is a crisis in southern Africa, but refuses to acknowledge that South Africa is fundamentally responsible for the continued illegal occupation of Namibia and southern Angola, the inhuman apartheid system in South Africa itself, and the destabilization of the independent neighboring states. Instead, it allots equal responsibility to all states in the region for what it terms the intensifying "cycle of violence."

Thus, U.S. policy denies the legitimacy of Namibians fighting for their independence against illegal South Africa rule, or South Africans struggling against the unbearable yoke of apartheid. Instead of supporting these forces, the U.S. demands their surrender as a pre-condition for embarking on any attempt to end oppression and aggression.

South African officials have interpreted U.S. policy as an open license to kill, and the military has used this latitude to entrench its authority. In 1978, for example, South Africa attacked a SWAPO refugee camp at Kassinga, in southern Angola. Nine hundred women,

children, and men were massacred, but no sanctions were imposed on South Africa.

So long as it can range across southern Africa, destroying at will, with no fear of being called to account, South Africa will continue to destroy the lives,

the hopes, and the dreams of more than 60 million people living in the region. It is our task to ensure that the U.S. administration abandons its support for South Africa. ■

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