

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Nothing you ever wanted to know about Lesotho, part one of five'

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Dear Peter:

It has been pretty rough around here lately.
Lots of turbulence and chaos in southern Africa. A lot of
stone throwing. Not in the metaphorical sense, mind you. Nope.
That's not what I mean.
They were real stones.
They hit my windshield.

All this violence to my car took place in Lesotho. You know
the place. A tiny mountainous land, encircled by South Africa,
possessing a spectacular beauty. They call it the "kingdom in the
sky." It's said to be a friendly place, but I can say otherwise.

I'd be driving, chugging up a mountain pass in first gear
and rounding the corner of a hairpin turn. And there they'd be, a
group of them, holding stones. The diminutive Basotho (the plural
for Lesotho people) stood in the road, blocking the lane,
offering me chunks of quartz for sale with outstretched hands. If
a car had a hem, like a robe, they would have clutched at it.

I'd shake my head "no." That's when a volley of softball-
sized rocks would hit the car. I was a sitting duck. I got dents.

Such attacks were intensely confusing to me. Maybe this kind
of thing happens to all the tourists in Lesotho. Maybe most
people ignore it. But I'm not most people. I'm an ICWA fellow.

Only a person with guts could talk to the locals and find
out what was up. Only a person who cared. I cared. I had dents.

The most perplexing thing is that the vicious roadside
vandals all appeared to be under 14 years of age. That's right:
kids. And there was a lot of emotion let fly in those tense
encounters, judging from the way they slung their rocks so hard.

I want to acknowledge ICWA Fellow Tom Goltz as a role model for the style of writing at the
beginning of this particular essay. The reports he wrote about his detective work in the Turkic nations of the
former USSR made fascinating reading. But please note that there really aren't four other parts to my essay.

Casey Kelso is an ICWA fellow studying the societies of southern
Africa with an emphasis on food-production systems and crime solving.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to
enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed
by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

I wasn't alone in being shocked by the malevolence of these children, whose contemporaries in southern Africa now seem mild.

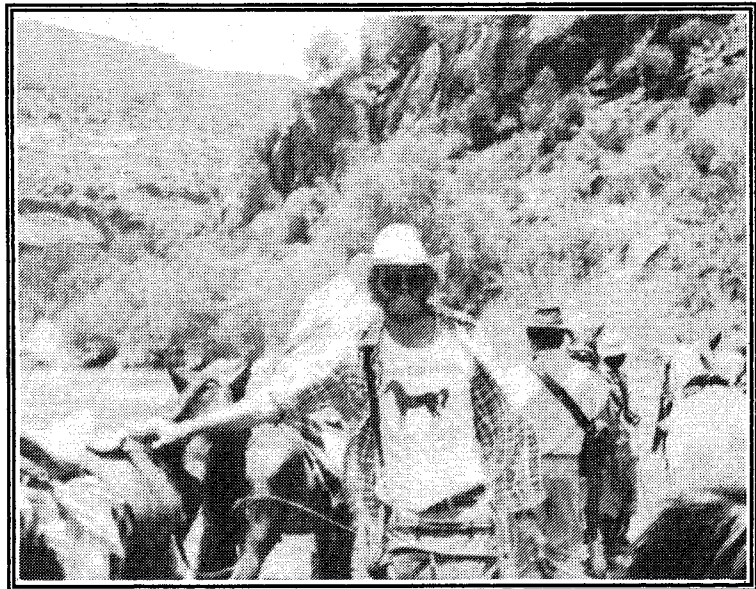
At a rural lodge in the foothills of the Maluti mountains, on Christmas Day, some Danish friends decided to attend early morning services at a small stone church in the village. My wife Bobbie Jo and I slept in. It's our way of celebrating holidays.

By mid-morning, two women returning on foot didn't turn up.
By then, we began to organize a search for Anna and Irene.
By mid-day, the two Danes finally appeared looking upset.

They had been mugged by a group of 12-year-olds armed with stones held in cocked arms. Anna surrendered a comb and Irene, some coins. These were adults, yet badly frightened by children.

The next day, we left on an overnight pony trek into the mountains. I had assumed that kids in the remote mountains would be more polite than village kids. I was wrong. Each tiny hamlet had an endless supply of youngsters demanding sweets or money. A light drizzle of rocks fell on us as we rode.

At the end of the second day on the bridle path, we all had become frazzled. Jørgen, a saintly older Dane who is a leading figure in



While on the pony trek, the author wore a cowboy hat, which had a wide brim that deflected stones.

Botswana's Christian Council, became red in the face after hours of adolescent hazing. "Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!" he screamed in frustration at the little thugs that crowded around, making his horse skittish. They fled. "I can't stand it when they say 'I love you' or 'Give me money' or 'Sweets!' Who taught them this?"

If this gentle, patient man lost his cool, it had to be bad.

My breaking point came later, when we stayed at a campground in Roma, outside Lesotho's capital of Maseru. An unruly mob of pre-teens would gather outside the gate leading to the main road. They liked to open it or close it as I drove through in the car, then poke their palms through the car windows for spare change.

On one occasion, amid the confusion, a wildly grinning child socked Bobbie Jo in the nose. Another time, a different little boy leaned close to look me in the eye. Then he spat a glob of mucus into my glasses. Hatred distorted his face into a mask.

I did not react very well.

I exploded.

I almost leapt from the car to teach the little kid a lesson.

Almost. Bobbie Jo restrained me. "If you end up smacking one of these kids, I won't be speaking to you. Do you understand?"

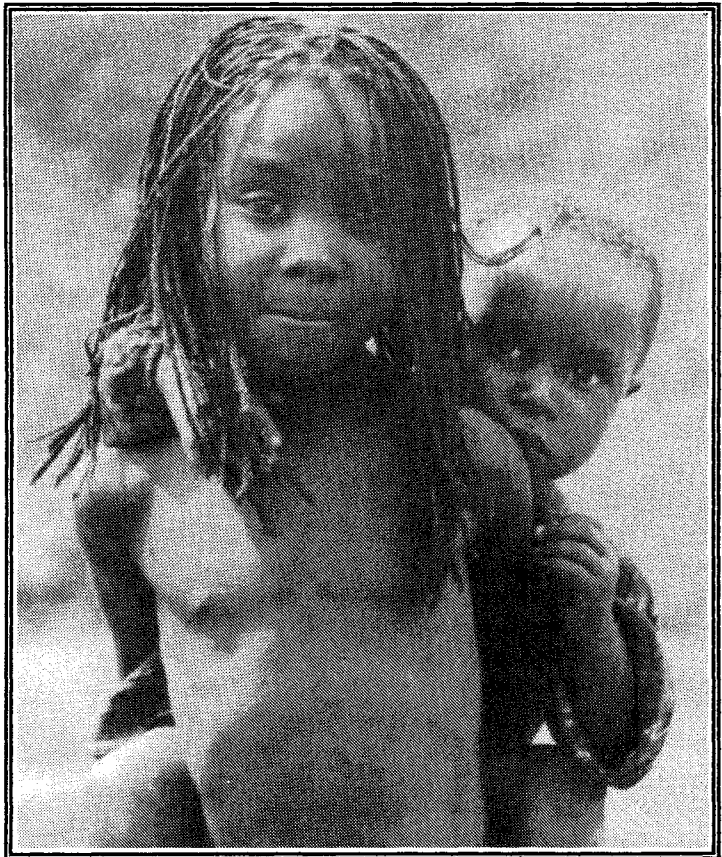
That's when it finally hit me. This was a damn peculiar.

Nowhere in southern Africa have I ever felt such hostility. I went from blinding rage to a more calm curiosity. I didn't take it so personally when I saw their behavior as a newsletter topic.

Poverty as an explanation for child violence

The tourist brochures published about Lesotho are filled with glowing praise for a people "known for their friendliness." The tourist brochures are plain wrong, in my opinion. Clad in the traditional plaid blankets and conical hats, many mountain folk do not give a white person the traditional greeting of **Khotso**, meaning "peace be with you." Older people at least have the dignity to pass without a word. Younger men, however, give a more recently established customary salutation: the empty hand of begging.

Poverty is the easiest explanation for the aggressiveness that I found even in the rural simplicity of the remote countryside.



Some Basotho children are adorable, with nutmeg-colored skin, high cheek-bones and almond-shaped eyes that give an oriental appearance. But watch out for their windup!

Lesotho is one of the world's poorest countries with a per capita income of US\$370. Its resources can be listed as people, water and scenery. Many families live in the huts scattered all over the mountains, scratching out their subsistence farming on rocky, barren soil. No one would voluntarily live so high up.

The dual pressure of the Zulu expansion from the east and the Boer trekkers from the west in the early 1800's forced local people onto the steep slopes that characterize two-thirds of Lesotho. During the past 150 years, over-utilization and misuse ravaged the land and created huge **dongas**, or erosion gullies.

In 1909, a Basotho ethnologist wrote an article for a scholarly journal, "Anthropos," about the maluti, or mountains.

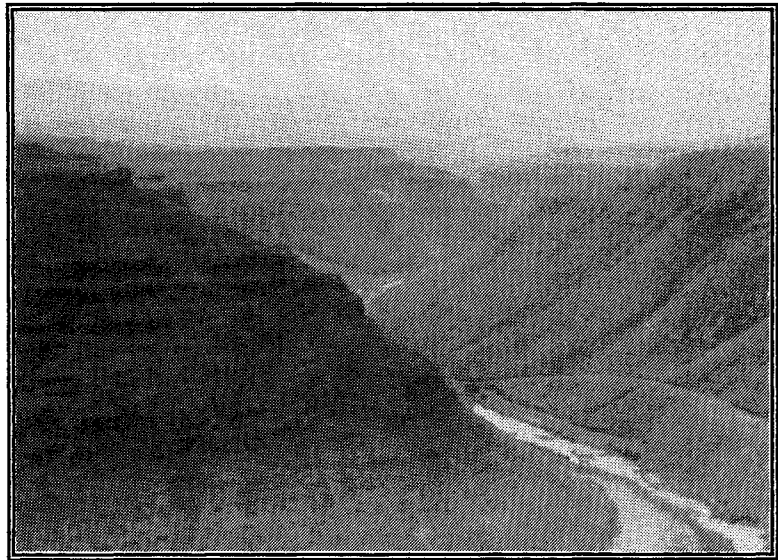
"Formerly these maluti were considered uninhabitable they being deemed too cold, frozen, and severe for the people, and particularly for the cultivation of crops. They were only intended as grazing pastures for horses, cattle, sheep, and goats. Even then this was only during the summer time, a time when shepherds could enjoy and pass away quite happily in their maluti transitory domicile, free from the disadvantages of the cold, both for themselves and their property. These dwellings were to be quitted and deserted when winter came, and flocks and herds taken back again to their respective kraals. The maluti would then remain alone and empty, but covered with deep lasting snow. However now-a-days, these are nearly everywhere inhabited by people. The soil is rich, and the land in the least capable of cultivation is tilled wherever the plough can go uninterrupted, though I regret to say, roughly and without care. Kraals and huts are erected nearly wherever an agreeable spot can be found."

A 1938 study estimated erosion and overgrazing had reduced pasture land at that time by roughly 50 percent, "a loss of some 375,000 acres of the finest natural pastures." By 1986, only 13 percent of Lesotho's land was considered arable. Three years later, just 9 percent remained. Now some estimate that Lesotho, about the size of Maryland, has a slim seven percent of its lands left for food cultivation. Typical soil losses are estimated at 250 tons of topsoil per acre per year, or a total of 40 million tons, or about 2 percent of the entire country's earth. At that pace, in three or four decades farming will be almost impossible.

To compound problems, the population is soaring at the rate of almost three percent a year. Almost 1.6 million people are now overcrowded into the "rooftop of Africa," so high-altitude pastures that were once used seasonally now host goats and sheep all year. Every winter, several herdsboys freeze to death up in

the mountains, where temperatures can plummet to -20°F overnight. In summer, terraced fields that once lay fallow are now continuously worked. And more people means less land for each new generation.

By the latest estimate, exactly half of Lesotho's population is under 20 years old. About 16 percent is under 5. That explains why I saw so many stone-throwing children.



Lesotho's steep mountain valleys, overgrazed by many flocks of sheep and goats, are easily eroded.

All the Basotho adults with whom I spoke, however, rejected poverty as an excuse for the menacing behavior of their young. Clearly, there are children who are suffering deprivation, they said. But this poverty could not be compared with Somalia or Sudan or Cambodia. The consensus of those who should know -- Basotho politicians, government functionaries, and workers with foreign aid missions -- is that very few people in Lesotho are starving or homeless, and that a vast majority have a roof over their heads and a source of income to buy the staple maize porridge and boiled cabbage. They suggested alternative, deeper lying explanations for the juvenile belligerence I experienced.

The "anti-Indian" riots

Nearly everyone pointed to a fairly recent incident when both children and adults went on a rampage of stone-throwing and worse. In May 1991, there were spontaneous anti-Asian riots when long-hidden tensions abruptly burst to the surface of society.

The riots began when a story spread in Maseru's crowded central market that a Basotho woman had been beaten to death by security guards for shoplifting at an Indian-run store. Versions of the rumor multiplied: the Indian man himself did the beating; that a Taiwanese Chinese shopkeeper, not an Indian, ordered the fatal beating; or that the shop was actually South African-owned.

Regardless of the garbled accuracy of the story, a mob quickly formed and began burning and looting the foreign-owned stores they came across. Word of the chaos spread and young people in neighboring towns quickly gathered up stones and

matches to assist in a Lesotho version of ethnic cleansing. The charred ruins of shops can still be seen almost two years later.

Ashley Thorn, the white proprietor of a two general stores in the town of Roma some 30 kilometers outside of Maseru, recalls that he closed up his shop fast before the crowd of university students and locals arrived. A canny employee saved the business by telling the rabble that a Basotho owned the stores. It was the truth. Ashley's grandfather, John Thomas Thorn, established the Roma trading post in 1903. But even as a third-generation Lesotho citizen who speaks fluent Sesotho, his white skin endangered him.

His wife, Jennifer, also remembers the riots well. She had picked up her children from school and detoured off the main roads to avoid the roving gangs. But when she drove her car through a settlement just a few kilometers from home, the boys stood waiting with their rocks. "They couldn't see I was white at first, because of the tinted windshield and the sun shining low from behind," she says. "But as I turned onto the tarmac, twenty or thirty youngsters began to howl and toss their stones. I've never been so frightened." One cobble smashed the car's back window, showering her children with glass shrapnel and cutting them badly. She drove on, knowing that their lives were at stake.

More than 35 people were killed before police and military troops quelled the rioting. Hundreds were randomly beaten by authorities and hundreds more arrested. House to house searches, however, revealed far less looting took place than expected. In retrospect, the prime goal of the frenzied uprising seemed to be destruction, not enrichment. That makes sense to Sehoai Santho.

"Understand that the Basotho are very militant people," he said. "We have a history of militancy. Our history explains us." Santho, a professor of political science at the University of Lesotho, points all the way back to late 19th century to illustrate the Basotho potential for "creative violence" (my words, not his) against aggression and injustice from outside.

A history of militancy

The first paramount chief of Lesotho, Moshoeshoe I, built the existing Lesotho nation out of refugees from the calamitous wars of the Zulu king Chaka. A brilliant man and a skillful diplomat, Moshoeshoe I ruled a large area by 1824 that extended from the mountains down into the grassy plains of what is now South Africa's Orange Free State. That was Lesotho's golden age.

After a series of wars with the expansionist Boers, Moshoeshoe I saw the balance of power swing against him and he sought British protection. In exchange, Moshoeshoe I ceded the country's most fertile areas west of the Mokhotlong or Caledon River. (The name varies according to the side of the river bank.)

0 20 40 60

Former border
Present day border

over 2000m
over 3000m

Orange Free State

Natal

Maseru

Leribe

Mafeking

Orange River

Mokoare River

Cape Province

Transvaal

Orange Free State

Natal

It's in keeping with a national character that children would pelt a car with foreign license plates, Santho said. The Basotho are normally peaceful but carry a streak of the warrior in them. Santho himself, a mild-mannered professor, grew animated in describing his countrymen's commanding reputation in the violence-ridden gold and diamond mines of South Africa.

"After high school, I worked for six months in the mines," he said. "We always said Zulus were chicken! In the compounds, people fear and respect Basotho. And we Basotho dominate the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in South Africa."

His off-the-cuff comment made me realize that most adult men in Lesotho -- even college professors -- have spent time outside of the country working in the South African mines. These missing men are the fathers of the young stone-throwers ambushing my car. Here was yet another clue in understanding my youthful attackers.

A Fatherless Generation

Statistics confirm that a "parenting gap" exists. In recent years, more than 100,000 men are absent while employed in South Africa. Three-quarters of them are married. And the average man spends 15 years of his working life away from Lesotho. Almost a third will spend even more time, up to 25 years, away from home.

No wonder the young children run amok, when they lack fathers to discipline them. And surely they know where Baba (Daddy) went: to work for white bosses in South Africa. One need not be a psychologist to see why kids resent passing tourists who represent to them a system that broke up their family. Now I saw a motive behind such onslaughts.

South Africa provides...

- o 30% of the jobs
- o 50% of the income
- o 96% of the visitors
- o 97% of the imports
- o 100% of the energy

...to Lesotho.

A recent change in the terms of the contracts for gold and diamond miners further contributes to a baby boom. Workers now toil for 11 days out of a fortnight, then take a long weekend off to visit their families. The new system gives migrant workers time to make a baby, but not enough time at home to raise them.

Make no mistake about it, however, the migrants will continue to work their lives away in South Africa. The income sent home by mine workers makes up about half of Lesotho's Gross National Product. Such wages are the main source of income for more than a third of all households. And few alternatives to mining exist. Half of the miners say they have no agricultural land in Lesotho to till if they wanted to farm instead of mine.

To describe the situation in plain and ugly terms, Lesotho is another South African homeland similar to Transkei, Ciskei, and other dumping grounds for workers who are injured, sick or old. It wasn't always like that. Once upon a time, at the turn of century, Lesotho became rich by exporting wheat to the migratory Griqua (cousins of Namibia's Bastards) and to South African mining camps. The nation itself paid money to bring the railroad to Maseru.

Around that time, South African mining companies grappled with a shortage of labor. They eventually found some detestable solutions. In South Africa, the 1913 Land Act dispossessed black South Africans of their lands and compelled men into the labor market. In Lesotho, the British administration used more subtle tactics. They imported cheap Australian wheat and thus undermined Lesotho's agriculture. A land tax also forced men to earn wages.

The migrant labor system has always been based on economic coercion. By keeping surrounding areas impoverished, South Africa assured itself a cheap supply of labor. Never has there been a more powerful system of worker control anywhere in the world. Men bound by long contracts are housed in single-sex hostels built like prisons, divided by ethnicity, tracked by computer records that make the blacklisting of union activists easy, and dumped back into Lesotho when disabled on the job. (About 7,000 mine workers return from the mines permanently injured each year.)

A small state dilemma: marginalization or absorption

When gold prices fall, as they have in recent years, miners are laid off and shockwaves buffet Lesotho's economy. Up to 10,000 are scheduled to lose their jobs this year. While the migrant labor system is vile, the country depends on it. The only way to end such exploitation is an economic and political integration into a new South Africa, when black majority rule is finally achieved. NUM officials, for example, envision scrapping the system and forcing companies to provide housing, schools and clinics for the miner's wives and rock-throwing children.

Lesotho has no future as a sovereign nation. In the dark decades of full-blown apartheid, Lesotho was justified in clinging to its independence to avoid being completely absorbed into a racist state. When an African National Congress government takes over, however, the people of Lesotho would benefit from incorporation. Individuals would be free to find jobs, education and homes in South Africa, and leave underdeveloped Lesotho.

Yet what will happen to Lesotho when half its economically active population leaves to permanently settle in South Africa?

Whatever the costs of an exodus, Lesotho's future prospects are equally grim without a confederation. Foreign donors are scaling down their assistance to Lesotho and gearing up for the eventual reconstruction of South Africa. Given the unemployment problem a new South African government will face, the number of migrant workers must be reduced to open jobs for South Africans. Black majority rule will not change an economic reality. An "open door" policy in South Africa would result in a flood of unskilled labor from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia. Even an ANC regime will retain the repressive immigration and labor apparatus to deflect a human tide that could swamp South Africa's job market.

South Africa. South Africa. South Africa. The name crops up again and again when discussing Lesotho. The country's history and future are inextricably linked to South Africa, which is the one constant factor in Lesotho's politics. Whether you call it incorporation, confederation, or capitulation, Lesotho's prospective relationship with South Africa will be a major issue in March during the upcoming democratic elections, the second such free-and-fair balloting in the nation's 28-year history.

The opposition leader tipped to win those elections, 74-year-old Ntsu Mokhehle, has spent a lifetime jousting with South Africa as an outspoken opponent of apartheid. Mokhehle is from the same generation of early nationalists as Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela and Julius Nyerere. His career as the fiery leader of the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), which he founded in 1953, mirrors the bizarre twists in Lesotho politics. (See box, p.11.)

Can little kids be politicized?

Mokhehle and the top BCP officials proudly claim to be the party of the Lesotho youth, since they say they attract younger followers than the rival Basutoland National Party (BNP) or the stubbornly traditional, royalist Marematlou Freedom Party. "It's new water coming in to refresh old water," explained Selometsi Baholo, the BCP national treasurer. "Stagnant water begins to smell nasty, but new water is refreshing the whole place. So we accept new opinions through our party structure by collecting opinions from different villages all over Lesotho, unlike some parties that sit in an office alone and draft their manifestos."

Mokhehle let his fellow politicians, all decades younger than him, do the talking while he listened to their answers to my questions. But occasionally, like a crafty old carp waiting at the bottom of the pond for a fat minnow to swim past, he would stir. And on the question of young people, I had hooked him.

"We are pragmatic," he rumbled, taking the bait. "It is a terrible word. But with a process of change taking place, young people must be included, to take new directions." Had the radical Pan-Africanist mellowed with age? I asked, trying to tease out another answer. His lieutenants clamored. Then, much later when I had almost forgot the question, he spoke up again. "How long does French wine take?" he demanded. I looked at him, puzzled. "It has taken me 40 years to mellow up. How long does French wine take?"

Driving on the road leading through the town of Leribe into the mountains, I spotted a sea of red shirts swarming in a vast open pasture. I turned off onto a dirt track to get a better look. It was a Sunday afternoon political rally by the BCP, whose party colors are red, black and green. I parked and walked closer to the spectacle. People brandished umbrellas and flags and large knobkerries, the adopted party symbol, with unsettling energy.

South Africa began meddling in Lesotho right from the start. In the 1965 independence elections, South Africa gave money and thousands of sacks of corn meal to Mokhehle's just-formed rival, the BNP, to bribe voters because the BNP supported limited cooperation with the apartheid regime. The BNP alone was permitted into South Africa to campaign among the thousands of migrant Basotho workers in the mines. So the BNP won by a slim margin, surprising everyone.

In elections held five years later, Mokhehle won. Before the final results could be announced over the radio, however, the BNP government cracked down. Mokhehle and other BCP candidates were arrested, some taken away in handcuffs from their victory parties. The BNP had been ready to hand over the reins to the BCP, but an anti-communist ex-British police officer who headed Lesotho's tiny police force persuaded the BNP ministers otherwise. "This is how we will stay in power," said the expatriate, waving his revolver. Hundreds of BCP stalwarts were killed. Today's BNP leader, Evaristus Retselisitsoe Sekhonyana, now asks for forgiveness from the BCP for past violence. "It's not out of a sense of guilt or shame, but without reconciliation there can be no peace," Sekhonyana explained at his palatial home that doubles as BNP party headquarters. But he quickly added: "But I understand why we did what we did."

Mokhehle led his party into exile in 1974 and founded the Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), a guerilla movement bent on destabilizing the illegal BNP regime. They set up bases in the South African homeland of Qwa Qwa. The unpopular government, meanwhile, tried to shore up its legitimacy by mouthing anti-apartheid sentiments and courting the Soviet Union. Western donors poured in aid money. The true regional might, South Africa, grew angry and assisted Mokhehle's army in stepping up attacks. The LLA allegedly led South African soldiers into Maseru in an infamous 1982 raid on the ANC that left 42 dead.

By 1986, Pretoria precipitated a military coup by sealing off Lesotho's borders and blocking all supplies of food, fuel and other essentials. Some knowledgeable insiders say the army toppled the BNP government because the ruling party had formed its own Youth Wing, trained them with Israeli and North Korean advisors, and armed the youngsters with guns. After a series of shootings, sources say, the military found they couldn't disarm the youth and felt threatened. Others maintain that the BNP's intransigence in negotiations with South Africa over a controversial dams project in the mountains sealed its fate. Army colonels don't dicker. Building dams, of course, will greatly benefit South Africa with cheap electricity and plentiful irrigation water.

Under intense international pressure, Lesotho's military rulers promised to restore civilian rule by 1992. South Africa brokered an agreement that saw Mokhehle return home with most of his guerilla army, although the fighters were not disarmed by the government or any other official body. Mokhehle admits that arms dumps exist, though he repudiates the hotheads in his party who have publicly vowed to "settle old scores" if they are voted into power.

About a hundred people sang and dance in a circle, while twice that number clapped and whistled from the sidelines. Old supporters and young teens all joined into the boisterous rally. After taking some photos and talking to people, I returned to the car to find a young guy leaning across my car door, eyeing me.

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked the man. I gave a long explanation of ICWA, the Institute newsletters, my life history and my future plans. As usual, a complicated explanation

convinces best. The man, a BCP guerrilla, relaxed and began to chat. He asked how I liked Lesotho. I paused. I didn't want to insult national honor. But I finally told him how I resented being a moving target. He was dumbfounded. "They really do that?" he asked. "It's the politics that makes them angry, but I thought they were too young to be so politically conscious."



The BCP draws its support from all ages.

Tensions in Lesotho have risen as elections have been repeatedly postponed; from May 1992 to July, to November, then to January 1993. Now elections are slated for March, almost a year overdue. Expatriates have noticed the level of violence has grown with each setback. A Danish aid worker who has finished his two-year contract promoting village gardening projects said he was thwarted by politically motivated sabotage. "Only people from one political party would participate in a garden project. And sooner or later, their party rivals put goats inside to destroy it."

Violence seems likely to erupt. Political animosities could spark more riots. The military men have proven themselves willing to seize power. The BCP admits it has hidden caches of weapons. The BNP Youth Wing used to carry guns, and although party leaders say the youth were disarmed, their arms stockpiles exist to be used if party members feel threatened. The American School in Maseru sent out a notice to parents advising them that the school would close down before the election day. And the **charge d'affaires** at the U.S. Embassy reportedly told a public gathering that prudent foreigners would send their families over the border three days before the polling. Yet the deputy chief of mission, Carl Hoffman, told me that I had it wrong. No one should worry. "That's farfetched," he said. "We don't foresee any violence necessitating evacuation. The Lesotho people are very friendly."

Hoffman is either a liar or he reads too many Lesotho travel brochures. I hope for his sake that when stones start rattling across his windshield in March, his wife restrains him from getting out of the car.

Sincerely,