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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

THE MASERU RAID

A new era of South African militarism

September 9, 1983

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Dear Peter,

Helicopter-borne South African commandos attacked Maseru in early December 1982. The assault on the capital of the independent black nation of Lesotho was claimed to have been a pre-emptive strike against African National Congress (ANC) guerrillas planning sabotage in South Africa. By its own admission the South African Defense Force (SADF) was unable to kill three key ANC leaders during the raid, and the SADF's display of only a handful of captured rifles and grenades strongly suggests the raid's purpose was primarily assassination.

In keeping with the tradition of not criticizing the military, none of the South African papers discussed the raid as an assassination attempt. However, because it was unquestionably an action organized to kill several important people for political motives, it easily fulfilled the requirements for such a label.

Neither the government-dominated press nor the South African Defense Force are well known for

accurately reporting South Africa's military ventures. However, to assume that they are incapable of doing so is to be guilty of grossly underestimating the intelligence and creativity of the men in control of these organizations. It is precisely this unwillingness to acknowledge publicly certain fine distinctions that is enabling the South African Government to operate with an increasingly free hand against its opponents and enemies—real or presumed.

In the past few years, almost all dissident activities against South Africa have been labeled by that government as the work of terrorists. In South West Africa/Namibia, the military wing of SWAPO that has been waging an insurgent war for seventeen years fights in its own uniform and under its own flag. SWAPO has public spokesmen outside the country and has declared itself at war with those who oppose majority rule in Namibia. Nonetheless, it is termed a "communist terrorist" organization by South Africa.

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In this case the propaganda needs of the South African Government can be understood; they have to try to convince the locals and outside world the guerrillas are more undesirable than they are in South West Africa/ Namibia. They must also justify the presence there of a South African territorial force. Yet in the Republic of South Africa this unwillingness to distinguish between mere protest activity, sabotage, and terrorism is a carefully calculated tool now being used to justify virtually any activities of the SADF—no matter how extreme. All dissident black South Africans and the neighboring states providing refuge have suddenly become very vulnerable.

Of the so-called Front-line independent states bordering South Africa, Botswana has the most benign attitude towards its white supremacist neighbor, and the majority of Botswana's indigenous people, the Tswana's, live in South Africa. Yet last year the Botswana homes of several South African exiles were bombed, followed by a spate of refugee snatchings in which black political exiles were kidnapped from Botswana. South African Security Police were implicated in the abductions.

The defense force of Botswana is miniscule, but the cavalier attitude South Africa shows towards Botswana's sovereignty both on the ground and in the air has compelled Botswana to purchase Soviet-made anti-aircraft missiles.

Mozambique currently suffers severe economic problems. Its economic and political stability are being further disrupted by the highly successful sabotage of

the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR). This politically amorphous organization is thought to have considerable matériel support from South Africa. On top of this, General Magnus Malan, the South African Minister of Defense stated that should Mozambique move anti-aircraft missiles to the area near its border with South Africa, the SADF would not hesitate to strike preemptively into Mozambique to remove them. He used the Israeli confrontation with Syria over anti-aircraft missiles in the Bekaa Valley as an analogy, implying that South Africa has a need for or right to air superiority over southern Mozambique. (It appears they are pursuing that goal already. On a recent trip to the Kruger Game reserve this observer was six kilometers from the South African border with Mozambique. Even further east, which is to say on or inside the Mozambican border I heard a number of jets flying at low level over the bush. While information about SADF border activities is for the most part considered restricted information and unwise to ask for, a park ranger confirmed there is a South African airbase right in the park near the border.)

A successful Mozambican National Resistance sabotage attack in Mozambique coincidentally had a direct effect on Zimbabwe's fuel and rail links to the Indian Ocean. The southwestern area of Zimbabwe that borders South Africa and Botswana has seen considerable strife in the past nine months as bandits and disenchanting former guerrillas loyal to Joshua Nkomo have openly begun to defy the Mugabe government. Nkomo has repeatedly denied any knowledge of or control over these rebels.

Unconfirmed reports detail how

ex-Rhodesian soldiers and even refugees crossing the border into South Africa are being trained, armed, and sent back into Zimbabwe to destabilize the country through sabotage and random armed aggression. The aim of such covert action if reports of it are true would be to push Mugabe into open hostility with South Africa. This would give the South Africans a pretext to carry out overt military activities against Zimbabwe instead of limiting themselves to secret activity and a hostile domestic newspaper campaign.

This manipulation of neighbor states into an aggressive posture is the cornerstone of South Africa's new and questionable policy of confrontation. The South African raid on Maseru marks a noticeable acceleration of that policy.

A foreign diplomat suggested a disconcerting possibility in a discussion in Johannesburg. He was asked why the South Africans would be so heavy-handed in trying to wipe out a handful of guerrillas. Did they not realize this was bound to force the ANC to retaliate with genuine terrorism, that is, to start killing innocent civilians? He responded that perhaps it is a mistake to assume the South Africans do not want the ANC to move from sabotage to terrorism.

The hypothesis gains validity when considered in light of South Africa's apparent overall strategy toward black opponents. While South Africa refers to almost all organized black opposition within the country as terrorist activity, it is well aware the outside world looks a labor strike with more tolerance than a bomb attack. For this reason it is possible that the

South African Government wants to have enough actual terrorist activity in the country to justify almost any action it might conceive of against the ANC here or abroad. (Until the Pretoria bomb blast in May this plan presented little risk to white South Africans. Up to that point the ANC had a regrettable tendency to kill mostly blacks when it chose to direct violence against individuals instead of installations. Their aim has clearly improved, though it is a pity that to have attacked at all gives the appearance of having played right into Pretoria's hands)

The whole scenario makes being an inhabitant of one of the neighboring states dangerous, and being a member of the ANC living in a neighboring state increasingly fatal. However, another aspect of the Maseru raid presents even more disturbing possibilities for black South Africans residing within the Republic.

Lesotho nationals allege that the government of Chief Jonathan in Maseru not only looked the other way but possibly encouraged the South Africans to attack members of the ANC residing in Maseru. The reason may well have been that the ANC members were doing a bit too much consciousness-raising among the people of Lesotho, pointing out the inequities and corruption of the Jonathan regime as well as those of South Africa.

An aid-dependent state is what one might call Lesotho, and cultivating sources of foreign aid could be described as its chief export commodity. Creating reasons for international sympathy is certainly an ancillary industry. Given his country's constant

basic needs, Jonathan was probably hard-pressed not to tacitly approve of or at least not interfere with the raid. It presented him with the possibility of ridding Lesotho of individuals threatening to him while at the same time creating a new reason for international attention and aid.

The results have certainly not discouraged this theory. The physical damage to Maseru was limited to a handful of private residences. Most of the forty-two reported deaths were South African exiles and supposed ANC members. Only six to eight of the dead were reported to be innocent Lesotho nationals. The South African Defense Force claimed they were killed by mistake in the crossfire. (The ANC members could not have offered very much resistance, if you consider that most were killed while asleep in bed. Also, according to a white British expatriate working in Maseru, the Lesotho Defense Force's resistance consisted mostly of them running around in the entirely opposite end of town, firing their weapons into the air, and in general doing an unconvincing job of pretending to fight back.)

Several Lesotho nationals are killed each week in fighting between the government and the Lesotho Liberation Army. So, for the Jonathan regime the raid was an unexpected boon of sorts. The total number of Lesothans killed by the South Africans was not much greater than the average weekly death toll. In terms of the amount of international attention focused on Lesotho, condemnation

of South Africa, and potential foreign relief aid generated by the raid, the cost benefit of the Lesothans killed by the South Africans was very good.

Lesotho is an independent black-controlled nation. Yet eighty percent of its labor force works in South Africa, the majority of its electricity comes from South Africa, and it is also landlocked by the white-minority ruled state. Its independence is a measured one at best. Essentially, Lesotho is a dependent sub-state of South Africa. Its government obtained power by questionable means, and suspended most democratic institutions. (In the last election at the point when he appeared to be losing, Jonathan called off the election, declared the results null and void, and jailed the opposition.)

This situation presents the disturbing scenario of a black-ruled state, de jure independent, de facto dependent on South Africa, covertly assisting Pretoria in the unsavory removal of mutual threats. This set of circumstances becomes frightening when the following facts are considered at the same time: Pretoria is continuing in its attempt to remove forcibly the majority of South Africa's roughly 20 million blacks to isolated and largely impoverished so-called homelands. Four of these homelands (Bophuthatswana, Transkei, Ciskei and Venda) have accepted so-called independence and have black leaders who have developed strong ties with Pretoria. In these homelands and quasi-independent black states democratic institutions are, to put it lightly, in the development stage. South Africa is caught in its own

name-game, being the only country in the world that recognizes the independence of these homelands. It is acutely aware of the fallacy it has created, but it must stand by its own creations.

Pretoria does not want to undermine its own efforts to gain recognition for the homelands by obviously meddling with their political affairs. Yet leaving these areas entirely to themselves would create a security risk unacceptable to the South Africans. With the South African Security Branch unable to operate with complete freedom in the homelands, a situation exists that is of great concern to Pretoria.

However, the Maseru raid may now serve as a precedent for an entirely different approach to countering black insurgent movements.

South Africa massacred forty-two men, women, and children in an internationally recognized independent black state. The world was vocal in its criticism but took no concrete action to punish South Africa for its excess. If South Africa begins preemptive military operations against unrecognized quasi-independent black states within its borders, no outside power is likely to interfere. In the future Pretoria may choose to use overwhelming military force against any dissidents who fall into its increasingly large and ambiguously defined category of terrorists.

For a hypothetical situation where Pretoria might consider attacking a homeland, Bophuthatswana is a good choice. Bophuthatswana is the only independent homeland that has its own border with a foreign country, Botswana. The border area there includes large tracts of dense bush that could provide good

concealment for insurgents. (That border poses such a threat that the South African Border Police still do the patrolling there.) On both sides of the border the indigenous people are Tswanas with strong family and cultural ties to one another. In Bophuthatswana, Pretoria faces the combination of a homeland with a long, nearly indefensible border, a common people on both sides of that border, and South African laws that make it illegal for the South African Security Police to employ their tactics on the local population. Even if the black leader of Bophuthatswana was willing to aid Pretoria, his security police could not match the sophistication and effectiveness of the South African organization.

One other factor that contributes to the likelihood of this scenario being acted out in the not-too-distant future is the increasingly arrogant attitude of Pretoria. The government has begun to wear its pariah status like a new Spring fashion; a little self consciously, but everywhere. It does not seem to care very much anymore what the outside world thinks of it as long as business goes on as usual with the multinationals. One more verbal condemnation on the heap is of little concern to Pretoria. So, now when given the chance it appears to be shooting first and asking questions afterward.

Violence may escalate in South Africa in the coming years, but not necessarily because the blacks have become any more disenchanted and the ANC stronger. Bloodshed may increase because Pretoria has discovered via the Maseru raid a method by which it can kill large numbers of ANC members or sympathizers anywhere in southern Africa and justify it as an act of self defense.

Sincerely,

