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Brief Report No. 30

NAMIBIA AND THE SANCTIONS CONTROVERSY

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The Foreign Minister's important visit to Europe - primarily to discuss South West Africa/Namibia with the British Government, but also to meet the French and Belgian Foreign Ministers and for a "private" meeting in Paris with Dr. Henry Kissinger - has culminated on his return to South Africa on 17 November with dramatic statements about the threat of sanctions. Both the Foreign Minister himself and the Prime Minister, as well as at least two other Ministers, have spoken out in a period of two days on the "inevitability" of new sanctions to be imposed by Western states, on South Africa's ability to overcome them and even retaliate, and on the negative effects they would have on neighbour states and on blacks locally. Whether intentionally or not, the controversy aroused by these statements has served to obscure the realities of the continuing negotiations on Namibia, including the "growing consensus" (in the Prime Minister's words) on plans for an all-party conference. The public, largely kept in the dark about recent diplomatic moves, has now been further confused and disturbed by statements implying that these negotiations will in the end be pointless, because sanctions will come in any case.

In looking behind this apparent obsession (hopefully temporary and similar to that in late 1977 and early 1978) with the question of sanctions, it can be observed that the search for an internationally acceptable solution to the SWA/Namibia dispute has focused attention on two pertinent, related issues: First, South Africa's insistence that it would not be coerced into a SWA/Namibia settlement which might lead to a Marxist (i.e. SWAPO) regime being imposed on the people of the Territory; and, second, South Africa's assertion that it would adhere to this position even at the risk of inviting international sanctions against the Republic. These views are typically expressed in the familiar statement that, if South Africa were faced with a choice between "stability" on the one hand, and international recognition for a future Namibian government on the other, it would have no hesitation in selecting the former.

However, these views seem to be based on a number of assumptions which are open to question.

The first set of assumptions appears to be that a SWAPO government will undoubtedly be Marxist, will allow Russian influence and Cuban soldiers into the Territory, will thus pose a dire threat to South Africa and furthermore will foment instability in Southern Africa generally. In response, it should be pointed out that to brand SWAPO as a monolithic out-and-out Marxist organization is not to take cognizance of the various shades of opinion within

SWAPO, and of its essentially nationalist origins and aims - even if these have now become compromised as a result of growing dependence on the Soviet Union for weapons. Also, to attach a simple Marxist label to SWAPO does seem to confer perhaps undeserved recognition and indeed respectability on the role of communist bloc countries in the so-called liberation of SWA/Namibia.

A further point to make is that, even if a future SWAPO government, or elements therein, were Marxist-inclined, that does not at all preclude the possibility of peaceful - albeit strained - co-existence with South Africa. South Africa's relations with Mozambique and also Zimbabwe bear this out. By constantly labelling SWAPO as Marxist and painting the darkest possible picture of the consequences of a SWAPO government, South Africa is running the risk of painting itself into a corner as far as future relations between the Republic and a SWAPO-ruled Namibia are concerned.

It should also be borne in mind that such South African arguments are unlikely to impress those Western powers which are actively engaged in the search for a Namibian settlement. Rather than ceaselessly voicing its objections to and fears of SWAPO (which actually serves to build up SWAPO's image in many quarters), the Government might consider giving more positive emphasis to its declared preparedness to seek a modus vivendi with whatever government the people of SWA/Namibia choose in free and fair elections. True, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has recently said that South Africa would accept the verdict of the ballot box, but this positive statement is still far outweighed by the mass of earlier negative pronouncements. Clearly, it cannot be expected of the Government to welcome the prospect of a SWAPO government in Namibia, but what it could do is to take a more neutral public stance on its political preferences, while still firmly adhering to its insistence on the involvement of all parties in the negotiating process and on U.N. impartiality in free and fair elections.

The second set of assumptions concerns directly the current question of whether international sanctions will be imposed against South Africa, because of its stand on a SWA/Namibia settlement. Previously, it appeared that South Africa was trying to avoid the imposition of sanctions, the assumption then probably being that by at least keeping the door open to a U.N.-sponsored independence settlement in SWA/Namibia, South Africa would be able to count on the Western Powers to oppose sanctions. However, the most recent statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs that sanctions will inevitably be enforced against South Africa, does seem to indicate a shift in the Republic's position from the avoidance approach to the acceptance of sanctions as an unavoidable factor in South Africa's international relations. What is more, the Foreign Minister's and Prime Minister's statements give the impression that South Africa is not only ready for sanctions, but implicitly that the country in some ways even would welcome the challenge of sanctions. (If incorrect, these impressions should be corrected.)

Such views could be based on a number of assumptions. In making it clear that South Africa is not afraid of sanctions, that it would ride them out, and moreover retaliate against states imposing them, the calculation may be that Western powers particularly would then be deterred from agreeing to sanctions. Also, in taking this position, it may be hoped to demonstrate that South Africa will not be coerced through sanctions into agreeing to an unpalatable settlement in SWA/Namibia. Put in simple terms, the assumption may be that, by taking a tough stand on sanctions, the Government can call the international community's bluff. This, in turn, may be based on the assumption

that sanctions threats are simply sabre-rattling or, alternatively, that sanctions, if imposed, would be limited in scope and relatively painless in effect.

Relevant questions raised in regard to the very recent developments are: Did the British, French and Belgian Governments threaten that sanctions would be imposed, unless South Africa accepted the U.N. plan for Namibia? If so, was this discussed with Dr. Kissinger and did he reassure Foreign Minister Pik Botha on the U.S. position and encourage him (or otherwise) to take a tough stand? Only the parties directly involved know the answers, but all previous indications have been that the Western states and South Africa have been on common ground in their desire to avoid sanctions. In their own interests the Western states do not want to be involved in sanctions, and they have also stated that they do not believe the Namibian issue can be resolved through coercive measures of this kind. But there have also been fears expressed by Western spokesmen that, if no settlement is achieved, pressures will increase on them from the African states (including Nigeria) and in the U.N., which eventually they will not be able to continue to resist. That is the danger that must be taken seriously, and Western references to it may well be interpreted by the South African Government as threats.

There can be no doubt that Western powers would not be willing to impose general economic sanctions against South Africa. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of their eventually supporting selective sanctions. In their support for a mandatory arms embargo in 1977 a precedent was created. While selective sanctions may cause only limited and tolerable economic injury, it has to be borne in mind that selective measures could gradually snowball to cover an increasing number of areas.

The less tangible effects would perhaps be the most important. Selective sanctions would be bound to harm local and foreign business confidence, which could, in turn, have a detrimental effect on the Government's ambitious plans for promoting regional economic development. Economic relations with neighbour states would inevitably be negatively affected. The possible socio-political effects also need to be considered. Greater black unemployment caused by sanctions, together with the undoubted moral boost that sanctions would give to some elements in the black community, would have the potential of creating considerable domestic instability. This is unlikely to be conducive to political reform.

On an international political level, the imposition of further selective sanctions against South Africa (because of SWA/Namibia) may be welcomed in some quarters as a trial run for the eventual implementation of comprehensive economic sanctions over South Africa's domestic policies. Also, it is possible that sanctions imposed over SWA/Namibia may simply be "transferred", without lifting them, to a new political objective, viz. the Republic's domestic policies. It can also be added that some Western states may look upon South Africa's apparent acceptance of the "inevitability" of sanctions as something of a "suicide option", resulting from a loss of initiative and lack of innovation on the part of South African policy makers. There is little chance of South Africa impressing the West with a posture of hurt innocence. Thus, South Africa's actions may well have a negative effect on the Republic's already strained relations with the West.

These are among the considerations which have caused some South African and foreign businessmen to be alarmed by recent government statements on sanctions. While there is no doubt discussion between government and business interests about the means of dealing with sanctions, if imposed, there is perhaps also a need for more prior consultation with business leaders about

the impact on the economy, which political statements on these delicate matters can have.

The third and final assumption, apparently underlying South Africa's present position, is that there can be a simple choice between "stability", on the one hand, and international, U.N.-approved, recognition for a SWA/Namibia settlement on the other. Put differently, there seems to be a widely held assumption that stability could be maintained in SWA/Namibia, and in the region generally, in the absence of an internationally recognised settlement. In response, it has to be pointed out that until such time as an international settlement, which involves SWAPO, is reached, the guerrilla war will continue and possibly escalate, that SWAPO is bound to gain in international stature and that South Africa will be increasingly exposed to the danger of sanctions. Such circumstances are hardly conducive to stability.

In addition, the danger exists that the longer an international settlement is postponed, the narrower South Africa's options become. As the current idea of an all-party conference arose in order to help in meeting South African concerns (especially about international bias in favour of SWAPO), it is difficult to see what more the Western powers can now reasonably be expected to do, within the U.N. framework which they cannot reject, to accommodate South Africa. A delay may therefore not lead to a more, but rather a less, acceptable package for South Africa. Also, there are definite risks involved for South Africa, if it were only to agree to a settlement after sanctions had been imposed. South African agreement would then be attributed to sanctions, and this would serve as a major justification and indeed encouragement for extending and intensifying sanctions, to force the Republic to make concessions on its domestic policies, too.

It is by no means unreasonable for the South African Government to prefer the prospect of a non-SWAPO government in Windhoek, and no-one should be surprised that the Government seeks by various means to prevent SWAPO having an advantage over other parties in the negotiations and proposed elections. A SWAPO victory would be a serious political setback, and the economic and political consequences for Namibia could be very negative, to say the least. At the best, the future of Namibia would be highly uncertain. But these possible developments cannot be avoided simply by refusing to deal with SWAPO (except in military terms). There would seem to be a need to look at other political alternatives and especially to clarify longer-term South African objectives in the region and the means of achieving them. For instance, the stated aims of the Government to develop effective regional co-operation, would seem to dictate a willingness to deal with other African governments and movements themselves, rather than to rely only on outsiders and to hold the latter responsible for success or failure of negotiations. The Governments of the "frontline" states are realities, and so is SWAPO, with which it is in our interests to come to the best terms possible - although for Namibia this has to be within the U.N. framework (which has always been accepted by South Africa).

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that whatever the South African Government decides on a SWA/Namibia settlement carries real political risks, both internationally and domestically. Being responsible to its electorate, it is understandable that the Government is keenly aware of the domestic party political implications of its decisions on SWA/Namibia. Nevertheless, while not easy, the Government will be forced to weigh these kinds of risks against wider national and international considerations, including the risks involved in delays or the rejection of opportunities.

JAN SMUTS HOUSE,
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