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ZIMBABWE: THE INTERNAL SECURITY DIMENSION AND HARARE-GABORONE RELATIONS

A number of recent developments have highlighted the difficulties of early Zimbabwean post-independence, concomitantly revealing a fracture in the seemingly cordial relations between Botswana and Zimbabwe.

THE ZIMBABWE DIMENSION

Zimbabwe sought to embody the attributes of a model post-independent Black African state, with sincere efforts made towards national reconciliation. This was demonstrated by the inclusion of ZAPU members in the coalition government, and the early successful integration of ZIPRA and ZANLA guerrilla units in a national army.

However, hopes for domestic tranquility diminished primarily as a result of three factors: the creation of the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, the discovery of arms caches in Matabeleland and increased government rhetoric calling for a one-party state.

In 1982, the stalled ZANU-ZAPU unity talks, the banning and seizure of assets belonging to Joshua Nkomo and other ZAPU members, Nkomo's dismissal (along with three senior members of the cabinet), and the detention of Lt.-Gen. Lookout Masuku and Mr. Dumiso Dabengwa, contributed to the desertion of several hundred ZIPRA members from the national army. Violent incidents in Matabeleland increased and intensified as the year progressed.

On June 24, the homes of the Prime Minister, Mr. Robert Mugabe, and another Cabinet Minister were attacked in Harare, and in the second half of that year, the national security situation deteriorated rapidly, especially in Matabeleland.

In August, an attempted reconciliation between Mugabe and Nkomo proved fruitless, while the number of army deserters reached 4 300, and Nkomo's calls for a halt in dissident activities went unheeded. This lack of response was seen as a reflection of his flagging control, but also demonstrated that some of the lawlessness was criminally, rather than politically, inspired. Nkomo's counter-claims were that the atrocities were committed by government troops posing as dissidents, but this may be open to question. However, what cannot be denied is the ruthless fashion in which the Fifth Brigade began "mopping up" in Matabeleland after mid-January 1983 in the course of which one thousand people were reported to have died.

Nkomo levelled accusations of "banditry, rape and looting" against the Brigade and was subsequently detained for a short period in February 1983. Finally, on 8 March he fled via Botswana to London. His return to Zimbabwe in August was coolly received, but his absence had eased the tension in Matabeleland. During his absence, the Fifth Brigade was replaced by the introduction of a more integrated unit of the national army.

Mugabe is believed to have succeeded in destroying the ZAPU infrastructure with this military violence, and the resulting problems for Nkomo are immense. He now encounters a split in his demoralised party and faces the decision as to whether to go ahead with unity talks or to continue as an opposition party.

THE BOTSWANA DIMENSION

Botswana is unique in having achieved independence without the aid of a nationalist movement. The country's stable political history is due in part to the strong bonds among Botswana's eight national groupings and the weakness of opposition parties. However, much credit is due to the late President, Sir Seretse Khama, whose political astuteness and leadership capabilities were a strong force for unity.

In July 1980, Dr. Quett Masire, former Vice-President and Finance Minister, succeeded Khama. Although an extremely competent technocrat and administrator, the new leader appears not to have the same breadth of political base as his predecessor and is also a member of the minority Bangwaketse tribe.

During his Presidency, it is unlikely that Masire will have an easy passage. Some serious problems are : inadequate rural development; increasing tribal rivalries (particularly over the geographic distribution of mineral wealth); and the prominence in government and the civil service of significant numbers of landless Bakalanga. Moreover, there appears to be dissatisfaction with the dependence on expatriates to staff the civil service. Other problems facing the government's development strategy are : a youthful and increasingly militant population whose education has heightened expectations; declining economic growth; a critical drought; a widening income distribution gap; a shortage of non-skilled jobs and exacerbated rural-urban tensions.

Faced with these domestic realities, Botswana and Zimbabwe have a history of border uneasiness. As white-ruled Rhodesia, Botswana's north-eastern neighbour imposed a curfew on the border in August 1975. Tension continued to escalate and reached a peak following the failure of the Geneva Conference in 1976. A series of "hot-pursuit" raids were conducted by the Smith government into Botswana and armed clashes took place. In response to this, the Botswana Defence Force, consisting of 300 members, was created in 1977. (See Brief Report No. 40).

Zimbabwean independence promised to end border hostilities and the two countries were bound together in the SADCC scheme which has, as a founding principle, a weakening of the dependence of the Frontline States on South Africa.

However, in the southern African setting, Botswana continues to serve as a refuge for those fleeing from the conflicts in Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Thus, Botswana's proximity to Matabeleland determined the path of dissidents and civilians fleeing from the Fifth Brigade's operations, an ironic reminder of the pre-independence struggle.

The upheaval in Matabeleland has proved unsettling for the Botswana government and inevitably tension has increased between Harare and Gaborone, with important implications for the region, SADCC and the Frontline strategy.

Regional unity through SADCC and the Frontline grouping is fragile and the Zimbabwe-Botswana issue exacerbates other tensions. Of these, the Malawi-South African connection, Malawi-Mocambique hostility and numerous functional complications are the most serious.

Botswana's geographical position has dictated a familiar regional dichotomy - maintaining good relations with Pretoria, while at the same time identifying with the broader aims of the black Southern African cause. Botswana is tied to South Africa through the Southern African Customs Union and is a de facto member of the South African Rand Monetary Area, despite the creation in 1976 of an independent currency (the Pula) and a central bank. South Africa is also her main trading partner, contributing 85% of Botswana's imports (1980), and Botswanan labourers in South Africa contribute significant amounts of foreign exchange. For these and security reasons, Botswana has denied guerrillas the use of her territory for offensive purposes, but has allowed refugees exile status.

Zimbabwe, on the other hand, has been much more outspoken against South Africa, accusing Pretoria of supporting ZIPRA dissidents in Matabeleland and of undertaking other clandestine activities such as broadcasting anti-government and anti-ZANU propaganda (said to have started in March 1983) on "Radio Truth" - a station believed to be situated in the northern Transvaal.

AN ASSESSMENT

The foregoing dimensions form the backdrop against which recent Gaborone-Harare relations must be viewed.

Refugees from Matabeleland congregated mainly in the camp Dukwe (situated in northern Botswana). The number of refugees there were said to be between 3 300 and 4 000, and were entering at an estimated rate of 50 persons per day during the height of the Matabeleland unrest. A representative of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Botswana denied that Dukwe served as a dissident training base. Other sources lend substance to this denial by pointing out that a significant number of families have fled Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, refugees found with arms are arrested and charged. It is noteworthy that a growing number are reported to be applying for Botswanan citizenship. Nevertheless, the host country is taking no chances, isolating refugees in settlements lest they have a disrupting influence on the local population.

Nkomo's use of Botswana as a conduit to England and the refusal to extradite refugees to Zimbabwe led to a further decline in relations, as did Harare's attempts to repatriate refugees from Dukwe. This attempt met with a paltry fifty-one positive responses as no assurances of safe conduct were given.

In October, Zimbabwean troops were reportedly 50 km into Botswana's territory in pursuit of dissidents injured in Matabeleland during clashes with the Zimbabwean army. Other incursions were also reported. This Zimbabwean exercise was complicated by the presence in the area of the Kalanga tribe, which has a close ethnic affinity with the Ndebele, and which hampered search efforts.

From the web of claim and counter-claim it can be deduced that Botswana's territorial integrity has been violated, but that the state is determined to maintain its status as the "Switzerland" of Southern Africa and is loth to disrupt the united front presented by Black states within the region.

Furthermore, Botswana's apparent unwillingness to condemn Zimbabwe outright lends some substance to the rumour that the troop incursion of early October is suspected in some quarters as having been a clandestine South African operation aimed at undermining Botswana-Zimbabwe relations.

For her part, Botswana has long claimed that South African troops cross the border at will, "walking like Goliath across (the) country without (Botswana) being able to call them to order", (Sir Seretse Khama). Furthermore, the presence in Botswana of several hundred militant South African students and other refugees is viewed with considerable unease by South Africa.

Botswana and Zimbabwe held a meeting in Plumtree in October to discuss this issue, but, at present, the future of improved relations between the two states depends largely on the successful conclusion of the "on-off" unity talks between ZANU and ZAPU. The Zimbabwe state-controlled newspaper, The Herald, reported in early October that ZAPU demands had "torpedoed" negotiations. These demands included the insistence that Nkomo be appointed Deputy Prime Minister; that ZAPU members be given more posts in the Cabinet; the release of ZAPU detainees; a review of the national army structure; and, particularly, that Zimbabwean refugees in Botswana be allowed to return home without being molested.

Unless progress is made to unite disaffected sections of Zimbabwe's population, be these party leaders, soldiers or peasants, internal conflict is bound to present Botswana with a continuing refugee problem.

Jan Smuts House
December 1983