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RHODESIA: A PERSONAL GLIMPSE OF THE SECURITY SITUATION⁺

One's immediate impression upon entering Rhodesia at Beitbridge is that here stands a country clearly engaged in an intense guerilla war where the psychological factor, most notably morale, has become the central and dominant feature. Contrary to popular press reporting, white morale (both military and civilian) has not verged on collapse; nor does one encounter discussion at any social level about an imminent mass exodus from the country. That certainly may yet occur, but not now, nor in the very short-term future. Rather, the thinking would appear to centre around the "wait and see" attitude until after the elections - if and when they take place - and particularly after 31 December this year. Certainly, across the nation both black and white evince perfectly natural and understandable apprehension over possible future developments then, and many whites have wisely decided to visit friends or relatives outside Rhodesia during that period, while considerable numbers of those necessarily resident in Rhodesia during the critical phase will "stay at home with the family and maintain a quiet Christmas and New Year spirit".

Obviously emigration has increased since it became apparent that the war was not winding down, which was one of the primary objectives of the Transitional Government. 10 908 Rhodesians left permanently in 1977 and the figure may well double by the end of 1978. But emigration is not the crucial problem. The fact of the matter (which is openly, and, one feels, frankly discussed by both black and white) is that sanctions must be lifted soon. I encountered optimism in many quarters over the American motion which passed through Congress on 11 August 1978 regarding the lifting of sanctions after 31 December 1978, conditional on the installation of a government in Rhodesia based on free elections. However, the U.S. President will determine whether or not this has been accomplished, and President Carter has already demonstrated that his African policy is guided by a belief that the views of radical African states are of prime importance. Unless sanctions are lifted, the economy will gradually be strangled, in no small way due to the erosion of Rhodesia's sanctions-busting "third party" nations, such as Switzerland, which have up until now been willing to serve as go-betweens for the beleaguered country.

Although the tourism industry is still surviving, this has dropped to where it is largely restricted to airborne visitors, for foreign cars touring Rhodesia are simply no longer seen, and even air traffic may become a target. Sipping drinks on the spectacular esplanade of the Victoria Falls Hotel of an evening, one cannot help pondering what German, French and American tourists must make of the young soldiers who drift in for dancing, drinking and singing, still clad in their camouflage gear and toting automatic carbines. Tourism therefore continues, although at a markedly lower level.

⁺ This brief report follows a private visit to Rhodesia by Mr. McClure from 9 to 16 August, 1978.

The war is prevalent everywhere and most notably at Victoria Falls, due to the fact that one lives within the protective confines of a vast minefield, from which the various elite Rhodesian army units, such as the Grey's Scouts, sally forth on COIN (counter-insurgency) operations by day and night. Driving throughout Rhodesia one passes from one BSAP roadblock to the next, encountering occasional military vehicles, but very little civilian traffic, and most of that comprises farmers moving at incredibly high speed. Rhodesia is a fast driver's paradise! But the seriousness of the war cannot be ignored and in the worst operational areas - those of the South-East, North-East and Victoria Falls area - abandoned shops, villages and decaying buildings testify to the growing intensity of the campaign, as one hurtles along the roads. It seems as though virtually all whites in Rhodesia, including teenagers, travel armed, and movement after 3.30 p.m. in the most troublesome areas is strongly discouraged, as terrorist attacks are extremely difficult for the security forces to follow up after that time, and by the following morning the perpetrators are miles away.

Conspicuously, the security forces are encountering little difficulty in holding their own, although in the North-Eastern operational area, where infiltration is very heavy at the moment, the standard joke is, "Don't look for them, they'll find you". The ideal ratio of security forces to terrorists is 7:1, and in some parts of the country the ratio has dropped as low as 1:1, but these are admittedly exceptional. Indeed, so far, without a single exception reported by police or army, the terrorists have always come off second best in encounters with the security forces. Numbers of insurgents in the country are exceedingly difficult to estimate, largely due to the fact that they fluctuate, and a brief look at the SitReps (Situation Reports) in Combined Operations H.Q. immediately reveals that when the pressure is stepped up in one area, it correspondingly decreases in another. However, at any one time, one would "guesstimate" at the presence of 6 000 to 8 000 terrorists in the country as a whole, of whom about half shift in and out from across the borders with Zambia, Botswana and Mocambique, as the ebb and sway of the conflict dictates. The competence of the security forces is attested to by the affinity the terrorists demonstrate for hitting "soft" targets, most notably of late the missionaries such as those at the site of the Elim Mission, the greatly dispersed and isolated farms, the unprotected farmers and their wives frequently travelling alone without convoy escorts, and the unprotected busses serving the rural population.

In addition, East German and Soviet officers have now been reported to be operating in Rhodesia proper, indeed some within a twenty minute drive of Salisbury, and although information on this is undertandably scanty, it is also evident that Soviet Milyushin 8 helicopters have been ferrying men and material into the country, flying certainly from Zambia and conceivably from Mocambique. The actual numbers of Soviet and East German officers or their role is impossible to ascertain.

The security forces can definitely contain the situation as long as the economy can hold out, or until much larger Soviet and Cuban involvement occurs. On this latter point there is concern in some circles over the reported presence of several high ranking Soviet officers in Angola, among them Gubin, Karpov, Tchakanovitch, Tchuropov and Shredin, accompanied by East German paratroopers and sophisticated military hardware such as Mig-23 aircraft and armoured personnel carriers suitable in an airborne role. Whereas military build-ups of men and equipment in Mocambique are subject to Rhodesian

pre-emptive raids, along the lines of the latest "shopping" expedition into Mocambique, a concentration of forces, particularly airborne troops in Angola, provides a very different threat. Once again the crucial feature is morale, and if morale falls to a particularly low point during late 1978 and early 1979, then a major military thrust into Rhodesia cannot any longer be dismissed as only a remote possibility. In such an event South Africa may conceivably have to consider military intervention in one form or another, if only to evacuate the civilians or re-inforce the security forces. But such a decision would obviously have to be taken at the highest level in South Africa. It is interesting to note that, as far as the Rhodesians are concerned, while such an idea might have been unthinkable four years ago, today they merely shrug it off by pointing out that it would be better for South Africa to use Rhodesia as a battlefield, than wait for her own version of "Angola" 1975-76.

At the moment much depends on the ability of the Rhodesian Transitional Government to sell the internal settlement, and one of the highlights of the internal settlement must be the elections. However, such are the contemporary exigencies of the war that only 30 percent of the population has registered for voting, either due to intimidation or the combat circumstances across the country at large. If the election is to carry any international credibility, it must represent at the very least some 60 percent of the population, and therefore the Rhodesian authorities are making stringent efforts to deal with this problem.

In addition, as has already been pointed out, part of the internal agreement left it to the black members of the interim administration to de-escalate the war, an obligation with which they are experiencing considerable difficulty. Failure in this sphere could feature prominently in the white referendum on the agreement towards the end of the year. The Rhodesian Prime Minister is already on record as having said that a white rejection of the internal settlement will entail a complete re-appraisal of the entire situation. It is further complicated by the fact that he will withdraw from politics at the end of the year, although many in Rhodesia are inclined to the belief that he would only do so if the elections are carried through, and the outlook for the lifting of sanctions correspondingly improves.

For the moment, at any rate, while there is much speculation on the possibility of further talks between parties to the internal agreement and the Patriotic Front, particularly Joshua Nkomo, nobody seriously believes that Nkomo would consider returning to Rhodesia in any other capacity than overall leader, and that clearly is not practical for quite a while.

Perhaps the situation can best be summed up by a bumper sticker I noticed in Salisbury, which cryptically read, "Pray for Rhodesia" - although neither the country nor the people evince a mood of defeat.

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