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Background Briefing No. 17 B

The Director of Programmes of the Institute, Mr Michael Spicer, was present in Lusaka during the talks on Namibian independence from 11-13 May, and the following background briefing is based on interviews conducted there by him.

THE LUSAKA TALKS AND PROSPECTS FOR NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE

BACKGROUND

For many, the talks between delegations representing the Multi-Party Conference of SWA/Namibia, the Administrator General of SWA/Namibia, SWAPO and sympathetic allies and observers from SWA/Namibia, and the Zambian Government, held in Lusaka between 11 and 13 May, came as a surprise.

Yet their genesis was clearly foreshadowed in 1983 and early 1984. The offer by South Africa to disengage its troops from Southern Angola made in a letter by UN Ambassador Kurt van Sclirnding to the UN Secretary General on 15 December stemmed from paradoxical conclusions drawn by the South African government. South Africa's more aggressive Southern African policy, often misleadingly styled "destabilisation", had by the closing months of 1983 produced tangible results in Pretoria's eyes. Black Southern African neighbouring states, hitherto conceived as important elements in the "total onslaught", through their political hostility to South Africa and assistance to SWAPO and the ANC, had proved to be paper tigers when confronted by the combined forces of South African military and economic strength, natural disasters, and wrong-headed social and economic policies.

Yet in Namibia and Angola, the real limits to South African strength had been revealed only too clearly: the mounting cost of a continued South African presence in Namibia and Southern Angola was increasingly untenable given the growing domestic demands made on a none too healthy economy; and the firm line drawn by the Soviet Union in a direct diplomatic démarche to South Africa in New York in November, following on large arms shipments of sophisticated weaponry made to Luanda in September, together with the pitched battle fought by the SADF with Cuban and FAPLA forces during Operation Askari in December, highlighted the vulnerabilities of the SADF and the risk of escalation in the conflict.

Though two earlier meetings with Angolan representatives had taken place on the Cape Verde Islands in December 1982 and February 1983, the decision by the South African Government to seek a settlement with Angola grew partly out of the external confidence and unacceptable risks involved in a continuation of the conflict, referred to above. But it was also the product in part of success at the November constitutional referendum, and in part of the role of the United States and Portugal as mediators encouraging the inclination to negotiate which was emerging on all sides.

The new approach to the Namibian question and to security in the Western part of Southern Africa as a whole was confirmed in the Prime Minister's No Confidence Debate speech on 31 January. Enumerating the high cost of establishing "a situation conducive to the self-determination of the people of Namibia" (over R1 bn per annum excluding guarantees of loans), Mr Botha said that such aid could not continue indefinitely.

Having exhausted the possibilities of preventing SWAPO aggression through the UN, he continued, South Africa had sought to resolve the problem in direct talks with the MPLA government in Luanda. To that end the Prime Minister announced the decision of the government to begin withdrawing South African troops from Southern Angola. The Prime Minister looked to the possibility of bilateral talks with the governments of Angola and the United States, to ensure the achievement of a climate of increased security in the area, which in turn would ultimately lead to a ceasefire in Namibia.

Mr Botha added that having thus created a security framework, South Africa was now impressing on the people of SWA/Namibia the urgent need to create a viable political solution to the problem of the Territory's future. Accordingly he had informed the Multi-Party Conference (the major alliance of Namibian internal parties) on 26 January that the interests of South Africa had to come before those of SWA/Namibia and that South Africa was no longer prepared to bear the financial burden of the Territory alone. He concluded :

I believe that the leaders of South West Africa who came to see me are now under no illusion about my Government's determination to resolve this matter one way or another as soon as possible.

The now more urgent approach to the SWA/Namibia question through negotiations with Angola was taken further when the talks between Angola, South Africa and the United States, which the Prime Minister had envisaged, took place in Lusaka on 16 February. The result was the Lusaka Agreement which created the Joint Monitoring Commission of South African and Angolan troops as the mechanism for monitoring the South African troop disengagement and ensuring that neither SWAPO nor UNITA took advantage of the process to further their respective causes.

Though the process of disengagement has been slower than expected and beset by problems, many originating from the deliberate exclusion of SWAPO and UNITA from the agreement, the two governments have displayed the necessary political will to keep up the momentum.

But after the disengagement, what was to be the way forward? The Prime Minister had confirmed, during the UN Secretary General's visit to South Africa in August 1983, that all outstanding obstacles to the implementation of UN Resolution 435 had been resolved, with the exception

of the continuing presence of the Cuban troops in Angola. He referred to this as "a threat not only to the future independence of South West Africa, but to the stability of all the region".

However, it was not clear whether Cuban withdrawal was an absolute precondition for a SWA/Namibian settlement, or merely an obstacle in its path. During March and April 1984, a number of statements by governmental sources have seemed to leave open the possibility that under certain conditions the Cuban troops might cease to present such an obstacle. On 27 April, for example, the Prime Minister himself told Parliament :

The people of South West Africa cannot wait indefinitely for a breakthrough on the Cuban question ... If the political parties, including SWAPO, can come to some agreement on the future of the country, South Africa will not stand in the way.

According to such a scenario, the basic principles of South African policy towards Namibia referred to by the Prime Minister in January could be satisfied if SWAPO were to abandon its military struggle and, as a political party rather than a "liberation movement", join with the MPC in deliberations. Then, after a period of negotiation or even coalition government, an independence election could be held which would essentially proceed along the lines mapped out in Resolution 435, except that the interim period might have led to agreement on a draft constitution and the monitoring force would be comprised of Southern African troops (probably based on the JMC). This would reduce the role of the UN which, through General Assembly recognition of SWAPO as "the sole and legitimate representative of the peoples of Namibia", had long been judged by Pretoria as conferring an undue advantage on SWAPO. Such a policy would also be very much in line with the increasing emphasis in South Africa's regional policy on the principle of regional solutions for regional problems. On a personal level it would take account of the Prime Minister's antipathy to Resolution 435, clearly an important consideration, and would also be easier to "sell" to the white electorate in South Africa.

Nevertheless, some questions remained unanswered. Would South Africa be prepared to give up its assistance to UNITA as part of a peace package with Angola, leaving the civil war to be dealt with as an issue of Angolan domestic concern? The mid-March call by Foreign Minister Pik Botha for a regional Conference of all the parties in the Namibian/Angolan question including UNITA, reflected the often stated position that Namibian independence would only take place in an overall environment of stability, an integral part of which would be a reconciliation between UNITA and the MPLA. Such a development would preclude the need for the continued presence of Cuban troops in Angola. The direct emphasis was therefore less on the Cuban troops whose presence is perceived as being the product of instability in Angola, than on the perceived cause, the civil war between the MPLA and UNITA.

However, it soon became clear that Angolan stabilisation could not at that early stage be confronted directly together with the Namibian issue, but would have to be dealt with step by step as co-operation over disengagement of South African troops improved mutual confidence and trust between South Africa and Angola.

The immediate thrust of South African policy on Namibia was therefore to finally neutralise SWAPO's military arm and force SWAPO to the negotiating table with the MPC by removing its military bases through peace negotiations with Angola. Much of the preparatory work for the Lusaka Conference took place during a series of discussions held in Lusaka over the Joint Monitoring Commission, a variety of South African officials consulting with SWAPO, the Angolan representatives and President Kaunda. The Zambian President had already played a significant role in the unfolding regional peace movement.

THE LUSAKA TALKS

In the event, SWAPO's contracting military base and firm pressure from Angola, desperate to resolve at least the South African aspect of the complex conflict raging in Southern Angola, provided the direct impetus to propel SWAPO to the Lusaka talks.

If SWAPO was the reluctant bride at the talks, insisting on its formal position of dealing with South Africa alone and solely with the intention of achieving a ceasefire and immediate implementation of Resolution 435, the Multi-Party Conference was the eager groom, for whom an invitation to the talks by President Kaunda represented an important milestone in the recognition of the internal parties with legitimacy equal to that of SWAPO.

However, the MPC's strength had already eroded somewhat from the quite favourable position it enjoyed early in the year. SWAPO had responded to South Africa's refusal to deal with her by seeking to undermine the MPC. First, Justus Garoeb withdrew the Damara Council which has majority support amongst the Damara People (a significant voting bloc, since they represent close to ten percent of the Namibian population) from the MPC, and announced an alliance with SWAPO. Then in April, long standing discontent in SWANU over its participation in the MPC emerged openly. After discussions with SWAPO officials in Botswana and Zambia, Norah Chase, one of the acutest intellects in Namibia, and Gerson Vell, former President of SWANU, challenged Moses Katjiuongua, the current President, accusing him of abandoning SWANU's principles and allowing the movement to be co-opted by Pretoria through its participation in the MPC.

Finally, the MPC failed to attract important smaller parties and key intellectuals like Otille and Kenneth Abrahams who had stood aside from the formation of the Alliance.

Thus it was at Lusaka that the MPC found itself faced by a SWAPO delegation comprising former elements of its own alliance and several other sympathetic groups. Some whites were included in this last category, including Advocate Anton Lubowski (who has subsequently announced his membership of SWAPO amidst a drive for white members of the movement), and members of the Interessengemeinschaft, the group representing wealthy German-speaking Namibian interests. The overall size and complexion of the SWAPO delegation was indicative of the growing political strength of the movement, and its diversity.

The response of the MPC was to insist on parity in size of delegation with SWAPO and the expulsion of the dissident SWANU group from the SWAPO delegation and the Conference. But having won that battle, and once all the parties had agreed on the necessity for independence based on Resolution 435, the MPC was unable to capitalise on its position and in

fact showed distinct signs of strain when faced by the need to present a united front on issues of substance.

The divisions within the alliance which prevented the MPC from articulating a coherent and agreed negotiating strategy seem to have been as follows : Moses Katjilungua the key nationalist who gave the MPC credibility, Andreas Shipanga of the small SWAPO-D party and Dawid Bezuidenhout of the Labour Party were willing, once the MPC had been recognised as a necessary party to the independence process, to accept the UN settlement plan, i.e. a ceasefire followed by immediate implementation of Resolution 435.

However, the representatives of the majority of whites, Eben van Zyl of the National Party and Dirk Mudge of the Republican Party, and conservative elements such as Hans Diergaardt of the Rheeboth Basters, were more hostile to Sam Nujoma and SWAPO on a personal and policy level. They insisted that the Cuban troops and the question of UN impartiality represented obstacles in the way of adoption of the UN plan. Reportedly, they wished to separate the ceasefire from the 435 process so that these issues could be addressed whilst a process of national reconciliation took place in advance of independence. They claimed that they would have to consult their electorate before making any change to their position on these questions.

This angered President Kaunda who took a strong line, shared by SWAPO, that either the MPC should come with a clear and shared mandate to such talks, or should give up their claim to be a serious party to the negotiations and let South Africa negotiate for them.

Dr van Niekerk's remarks, at a Press Conference on the Thursday before the talks opened, clarified South Africa's intended role. He said that he was in Lusaka to see if the MPC and SWAPO could come to an agreement, which would then be "considered" by the South African Government. Most observers took this to mean that the Administrator General did not have full negotiating power and would have to refer any agreement to Pretoria. The Administrator General added that the conference should be open for negotiation, not necessarily centring on Resolution 435.

Though there was advantage in allowing the Administrator General to act as contact point with SWAPO, obviating the need for direct contact by Pretoria and encouraging the appearance of the people of Namibia deciding their destiny themselves, Foreign Minister Pik Botha would almost certainly have been present if the expectation was of a substantive agreement being achieved at the talks. In the event Dr van Niekerk was content to adopt a low profile as co-chairman of the talks.

On Sunday 13 May, after impasse had been avoided on several occasions mainly through the determined leadership of President Kaunda, a draft Lusaka Declaration on independence for Namibia based on the opening presentations made by the respective parties, was presented by him. The essence of the document was an immediate ceasefire and implementation of 435, which was not in conflict with the contents of the opening MPC presentation made by Katjilungua.

SWAPO made certain amendments to the Declaration, seemingly of a fairly minor nature, but the MPC rejected this document and submitted an alternative which spoke of the need for national reconciliation (i.e. a separate ceasefire and cooling off period) and was unclear on the question

of Cuban troops, regarding them as extraneous to Resolution 435 but nevertheless an obstacle to its implementation. This was too much for SWAPO to accept, especially since Soviet diplomats present during the talks seem likely to have been cautioning SWAPO against making any concessions.

Both the Administrator General and President Kaunda put an optimistic gloss on the talks. Dr van Niekerk expressed satisfaction at the incorporation of the MPC into the talks, and Pretoria must privately have been pleased that the MPC was able, largely through the offices of President Kaunda, to proceed on an African tour visiting Togo, Gabon and the Ivory Coast to explain their position and hopefully to enhance their status.

For his part, President Kaunda spoke of doors being kept open and the usefulness of having defined more clearly points of agreement and disagreement, and looked to another round of talks in weeks rather than months. Privately Zambian officials conceded that the legacy of mistrust and suspicion between the parties had been too much to overcome in one meeting, especially since not enough "pre-cooking" had been done.

To the observer, however, it seems somewhat naïve to assert that a deal was almost clinched at Lusaka. Some progress was indeed made, but distance between the parties in terms of personal trust and policy substance remained large. It is especially difficult to conceive of SWAPO, pressed as it is, accepting the open-ended type of scenario implied by a government of national unity and a period of reconciliation, particularly if that period is as long as two years, as has been suggested by South African and MPC sources. Nor is it easy to accept that the Frontline States, and the International community taking their cue from them, will countenance such a delay - the desire for independence in the short term seems too strong for that.

THE OUTLOOK

Though SWAPO may feel it was "conned" into attending a meeting whose sole purpose was to force it to make concessions, the combination of factors and parties favouring further talks looks to be stronger than those who would urge SWAPO to resist. Since the talks of 13 May there has been an intensification of diplomatic activity. A high level Angolan delegation consulted with President Kaunda immediately on conclusion of the talks, whilst the SWAPO leadership travelled to Luanda to consult with the MPLA Government. From there Andimba (Hermann) Toivo Ja Toivo moved on to have talks with British Foreign Office representatives, meeting Minister of State Malcolm Rifkind on 21 May. The MPC on completion of its African tour divided, some continuing to Europe and some to Washington. The latter group have already had talks with Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, and have met Secretary of State, George Schultz. Crocker himself left soon afterwards on a trip through Africa designed to keep up momentum.

Significantly, as far as the issue of UN impartiality is concerned, UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar also met the MPC (and followed that with meetings with Crocker and Von Schirnding) at a time when the pro-SWAPO UN council for Namibia, the UN body charged with responsibility for the Territory, was meeting in Bangkok (of all places!). A further interesting development on the UN front, and a pointer to the regionalisation of the settlement process, is under Secretary General Brian Urquhart's statement

that Resolution 435 is not a holy cow and can be modified as long as a "meaningful" role for the UN is retained. Dr de Cuellar has since echoed the importance of the UN role being maintained.

On the South African side, Dr van Niekerk flew to Cape Town to brief the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister immediately after the talks. Within a week, Pk Botha, Defence Minister Magnus Malan and Dr van Niekerk were back in Lusaka. The purpose of the visit was to hold consultations with an Angolan delegation led by Interior Minister Kito Rodrigues on the Joint Monitoring Commission and its future, once disengagement was completed (then expected within the next few days). This together with the more or less concurrent exchange of Angolan and South African prisoners which took place at Ongiva in Southern Angola, was evidence that the mutual trust and confidence that had been built up during the disengagement process could allow the JMC to participate as part of a Southern African monitoring force in the run up to independence elections in Namibia; but there are evidently hardline elements in the MPLA who wish to limit co-operation with South Africa and therefore to disband the JMC.

Further reports of these latest talks and references by Pk Botha in his Press Conference statement to discussions on issues of "regional security" indicate that Pretoria feels that the time is now ripe to return to the question of domestic Angolan stabilisation. An issue that observers have long expected to emerge, the existence of five training camps for ANC insurgents in Angola, was apparently raised. This is consistent with a major plank of South Africa's regional policy, viz to persuade neighbouring states to deny bases to the ANC.

Mr Botha's warm references to President Kaunda again after the latest round of talks and his confirmation that he had briefed President Kaunda on their substance is further evidence that the Zambian President remains very much engaged in the negotiation process, with a determination to play a statesmanlike role in helping resolve Southern African problems. President Houphuet Boigny of the Ivory Coast, who has seen both the MPC and SWAPO leadership in recent mid-May, however, offered himself as an alternative mediator and host for the next round of talks. It is possible that there is a feeling in certain quarters in Africa that he would be more acceptable than President Kaunda, who might be suspected as being too soft on South Africa. Modifications to 435 would then be of an African, rather than Southern African, nature.

In fact, there is an interesting division in Front Line States which has relevance to the Namibian issue. Zimbabwe and Tanzania, which by and large remain outside the ambit of South Africa's regional diplomatic initiative, seem coolest towards the idea of encouraging concessions which might favour Pretoria's position. Conversely, Angola, Zambia and Mozambique, especially Zambia, which is disillusioned with the SADCC and Zimbabwe's role in it.

However, Angola remains an enigma. The opaque decision-making structure and process in Luanda give few clues as to intentions. Yet recent reports of UNITA successes against Cuban and FAPLA (MPLA) forces, of an impending intensification of UNITA's campaign of urban sabotage, of a broad MPLA counter-offensive, of a pitched battle between Cuban and FAPLA forces in Huambo, and of increasing tensions within the MPLA, even allowing for the uncertainty of sources, reveal an increasingly strained and fluid situation.

Is South Africa prepared to drop "linkage", i.e. the insistence so long maintained by South Africa and the United States on the withdrawal of the Cuban troops as a precondition to Namibian independence, in return for a unilateral cessation of hostilities by SWAPO and a regionalisation of Resolution 435? Will Pretoria and the MPC press for a "cooling off" period before an independence election anyway? Will SWAPO be both sufficiently pressured unilaterally and confident politically to contemplate making such concessions? What will be the response of the superpowers at a time of great mutual antagonism and during a US Presidential election year? It would be a brave man who predicted more than that time and major concessions on all sides will still be required to produce a settlement.

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