international policy
UPDATE
No.17, 1997

Tel: 011-339-2021 THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS Fax: 011-339-2154

ZAMBIA'S DIPLOMACY IN DISARRAY

Ian Taylor is a Lecturer
in the Department of Political Science, University of Stellenbosch

Zambian President Frederick Chiluba's intemperate response to President Mandela's opening speech at the SADC Heads of State meeting in Blantyre in September, once again showed a Head of State whose understanding of the reality of international affairs appears weak and poorly informed - in contrast to the statesman whom he attacked. Mandela's message was simple: SADC will no longer tolerate governments whose behaviour and posturing run counter to the principles and ideals of the regional body. That Chiluba should contemptuously dismiss the advice of the president of the country that stocks his country's shelves and from where most of Zambia's new investment comes from indicates that Zambia's current foreign policy is ill-informed and based on dangerous delusions of grandeur and exceptionalism that have the potential to bring disaster to the already impoverished central African state. All this is in stark contrast to the animation that greeted Chiluba's electoral victory in 1991.

Frederick Chiluba swept to power with a remarkable degree of goodwill from the international community. Winning 150 seats to Kaunda's 26, Chiluba was expected to make positive changes for the good of Zambia. In the field of foreign relations, although inexperienced, Chiluba was seen as a pragmatist who would alter Lusaka's relations - particularly with South Africa - to profit from the changes that were sweeping Southern Africa at the time. However, this has not happened. Though Chiluba has been commended for his commitment to the (necessary) economic liberalisation of the country, when it comes to foreign affairs and maintaining international benevolence, Zambia has under the Chiluba government tripped from one debacle to another. In the process, Lusaka has alienated many of the very people whose support it needs, in particular the international donors and South Africa -for all intents and purposes, the regional hegemon - who prop up Chiluba's tottering administration.

When one examines how Chiluba has antagonised virtually all of Zambia's important partners one can see a President who is either ignorant of the realities of diplomacy and international affairs, or who is being badly advised. A case in point is the late 1996 elections that saw Chiluba 'elected' in an exercise widely regarded as perhaps the most fraudulent and controversial in Zambia's history. When it became clear that Chiluba was determined to go ahead with his much-criticised plans to disenfranchise Kenneth Kaunda, former president and head of the opposition UNIP, Mandela saw fit to invite the Zambian President to Pretoria in an attempt to counsel Chiluba on the undemocratic nature and inadvisability of such a move. For his part, Chiluba first assured Mandela that he had a 'proposal' that would allow for Kaunda's participation and then, when safely home in Lusaka, promptly went back on his word. To add insult to injury, Chiluba then pointedly ignored Mandela's envoy who was sent on a last-minute attempt to make Chiluba see reason. Chiluba compounded this by loudly denouncing Zambia's 'noisy neighbours' for attempting to interfere in the 'elections'. It was of no surprise therefore that Chiluba's second term was met with disapproving silence from the international community.

Previously, donors had frozen US$100 million worth of aid in response to Chiluba's new constitution. Though Chiluba defiantly rejected such pressure, for a country in Zambia's current economic state, such action by the donors was potentially crippling: donors fund one-third of Lusaka's budget. Such a response from the President could only be described as foolhardy. Indeed, foolhardiness and provocation seem to be the hallmark of Zambia's conduct in its foreign affairs at present. Not only did Chiluba spurn Mandela's advice on the improper manner in which the November elections were conducted, but six months later Zambia was to become embroiled in a bizarre and damaging exchange of words with

Pretoria. This followed Zambian Vice-President Brigadier General Godfrey Miyanda's accusation against South African Defence Minister Joe Modise that he met Kaunda at a soccer match in June, allegedly to organise the supply of arms and mercenaries to the ex-president. Despite demands by Kaunda that the Chiluba government arrest him (Kaunda) and thus allow him to prove his innocence in court, Kaunda has to date remained a free man. This in itself is a fair indication of the veracity of the charges levelled at Kaunda and Modise, charges that Modise's office at the time dismissed as 'complete rubbish'.

Yet worse was to follow. Immediately prior to the SADC meeting, Zambia's maverick Foreign Minister, Lawrence Shimba, was involved in another pointless controversy when in early September he accused the British High Commissioner of deliberately sending 'negative reports' to London in a (presumed) conspiracy to undermine Zambia internationally. The Zambian press then watched in open amusement as Finance Minister, Ronald Penza, appealed to Britain to 'ignore' his own foreign minister. Whilst Lusaka's foreign affairs seem out of control, the finance ministry is widely perceived as being more in touch with reality. What therefore lies at the heart of Zambia's current diplomatic blundering?

It seems obvious that Frederick Chiluba is poorly served by his foreign policy advisers. Firstly, Lawrence Shimba simply isn't up to the job. He has managed to antagonise a whole host of potential allies. A case in point is the relationship with Tanzania, all but non-existent, despite their common interests. It is not even certain that Chiluba trusts his own minister. The President's recent visit to Singapore and Indonesia was conducted - incredibly - without the foreign minister but with the ubiquitous Minister for Presidential Affairs, Eric Silwamba. Silwamba has been widely criticised in the Zambian press as a meddling sycophant, attempting to muscle in on Zambian foreign policy formulation. It seems that Chiluba is poorly served by incompetent advisers and other surrounding elements, out of their depth in international affairs. The recent ramblings by the national chairman of Chiluba's ruling party that Pyongyang's Kim Kong Il is 'an illustrious genius who created the world's example of creation and construction' [sic] shows an almost Kafkaesque approach to international relations. If this is so, President Chiluba would be well advised to rein in (or ignore) such elements before his alienation from the international community - and South Africa in particular - becomes acute and damages the interests of the Republic of Zambia. The recent coup attempt illustrates that Chiluba is not as secure as perhaps thought. Any continuation of Zambia's current erratic foreign policy would only serve to undermine the President's position further.

The irony is that under Chiluba, Zambia has done much to open up its economy and attract foreign investment. It is no aberration that China has opened its first bank in Africa in Lusaka - an open endorsement of Chiluba's economic policies. Japan has recently commended Lusaka's reform programme as realistic and attractive to investors. The remedies seem simple and straightforward: it is to be hoped that Zambia's President has the resolution to put them in place.