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THE APARTHEID CRISIS AND THE ARMED FORCES

Strategic Dimensions of the Crisis

The political and economic crisis afflicting the apartheid regime has greatly affected the regime's security and its apparatus of repression. There are also specific problems facing the apartheid armed forces which, while they cannot yet be characterised as a crisis, have long-term implications for the regime's security and present the liberation movement with new challenges and opportunities.

The regime's security crisis may be summarised in strategic terms in the following areas:

Internationally, Pretoria has failed to secure reliable military allies, although it has achieved close co-operation on some levels with Israel, Chile and Taiwan. It has failed to integrate itself with the Western powers or Nato and, although it can draw on some degree of strategic support from these powers, the relationship is increasingly problematic.

Regionally, Pretoria is in retreat. In the past 15 years, Pretoria has lost all its major regional allies and 'buffers'. Its destabilisation campaign has caused massive suffering and disruption in Southern Africa, but the regime has largely failed to capitalise on this politically. While it is attempting, with some degree of success, to expand its trade and political influence, no durable 'Pax Pretoria' as envisaged in various guises by the regime over the past decade is in sight. The SADF's retreat from Angola and Namibia is a major, albeit qualified, victory for the forces of liberation.

Internally, the regime's security strategy is increasingly fragmented and incoherent, and the pressures are beginning to tell on its armed forces. The Botha regime's 'total strategy' has been severely tested by the 1984-86 uprising and subsequent resistance. The effort to criminalise resistance through the legal methods set out in the Rabie Commission Report of 1978, and which resulted in the Internal Security Act of 1982, proved inadequate and the regime was forced to resort to the State of Emergency. This unbridled repression undermined the regime's attempts to stabilise its rule through political 'reform' and denuded the financial base needed for socio-economic projects aimed at 'pacifying' black urban areas.

The Botha regime's National Management System, with its Joint Management Centres, remains in place as the co-ordinating instrument of the 'total strategy', but the implementation of its long-term strategy has failed. The Mass Democratic Movement has not been crushed and significant sectors of the oppressed have not been co-opted. Furthermore, as recent events have shown, the bantustans are unstable and potentially a major threat to Pretoria.

The De Klerk regime is trying to stem the economic and political disintegration and seeking to divide the liberation forces by holding

out the prospect of 'negotiations' and 'reforms'. But this strategy increases the space open to the MDM and can lead to further divisions in the ruling group. A reversion to more naked repression, always a likelihood as the threat to the regime mounts, and given the uncertain control of the regime over its armed forces, will intensify the economic crisis and further isolate Pretoria. Botha's generals saw themselves as 'buying time' through repression, and war against neighbouring countries, so that the apartheid state could stabilise itself through 'reform'. As a result of the sustained challenge to the liberation movement and the resistance of the Frontline States, especially Angola, that time has now run out.

It is in this context that we can examine the cracks appearing in the apartheid armed forces which we will need to exploit in order to advance the struggle further.

The Police

The police still bear the brunt of front-line suppression of resistance. Their effectiveness has been greatly dented in the past five years, although through brutal repression and with SADF assistance they managed partially to regain control over black urban areas after 1986. However, they did so at a cost:

- By all accounts, the police are demoralised. There is a shortage of white manpower and a high turnover. Pay is bad, hours are long and they took a severe battering in 1984-86. Most white police, except perhaps in the top ranks, are believed to be CP supporters.

- Black police have been ostracised and attacked by their communities. Their morale is low and their loyalty increasingly strained - as the recent case of Lt Rockman has shown.

- The Security Branch intelligence network in black urban areas was all but destroyed in many areas in 1984-86 through attacks on agents and collaborators. It is not clear to what extent this has been reconstructed.

- Municipal Police and Special Constables (kitskonstabels) - set up in a hurried attempt to boost police manpower and restore control of the townships - have proved unreliable and at times counter-productive. The brutal and undisciplined behaviour of kitskonstabels has often inflamed rather than quelled resistance, and the Municipal Police have been unable to prevent the collapse of Black Local Authorities. In both units there have been serious mutinies over pay and conditions.

Partly in response to the failure of its policing methods, and in order to deflect criticisms of police violence, the regime has co-opted and sponsored vigilante forces which emerged through narrow interest groups and authorised 'unofficial' police action such as assassinations. This strategy has had some success - e.g. Crossroads and

Pietermaritzburg areas - but in other areas it has been successfully neutralised by political work.

The regime is currently engaged in a programme aimed at increasing the size of the regular police force from the current approximately 60 000 to 100 000 and expanding the auxiliary forces (chiefly kitskonstabels). It is also likely to try and expand its vigilante and 'unofficial' operations, and for wider political reasons the De Klerk regime would like to make more extensive use of the legal apparatus, e.g. by obtaining court orders banning marches, by restricting people, etc. However, the legal apparatus itself - the courts and prisons - have also been pressed to breaking point by the upsurge of resistance.

Military Forces

The SADF remains potentially the most powerful army in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a capacity to deploy over half-a-million men and wage mobile warfare with thousands of armoured vehicles (although full mobilisation would cripple the economy and have unpredictable political effects). It remains a relatively efficient and

effective force, with an apparently cohesive command structure, but it has also been stretched by the crisis and faces particular problems of its own. notably conscription and the arms embargo. In particular, deployment in the townships has led to political/morale pressures while the combat limits of the SADF were shown clearly in its humiliating defeat in Angola in 1988.

â€¢ The relationship between the military command and the political command is not without its tensions, as was seen during the Botha period when, for example, military commanders were often at loggerheads with the Department of Foreign Affairs and sabotaged government diplomatic initiatives. The 'securocrats' in the National Management System effectively took over the executive government from mid-1986 and it is unclear how their relationship to the De Klerk regime will develop or where the balance of power will lie. Although 'civilian' officials have been to some extent integrated with the National Management System, this relationship may become a source of conflict or lead to wild policy fluctuations.

â€¢ The SADF suffers some armaments shortages as a result of the arms embargo and is a considerable drain on the hard-pressed treasury as a result. Armscor, with a turnover of R3-billion in 1988, is now one of South Africa's largest companies, but very little of its production costs can be recouped - only a fraction of its weapons are sold to clients other than the apartheid regime. The regime is currently engaged in a massive rearmament programme using all the funds freed by the end of the war in Angola and Namibia - as well as additional funds (the 1989 Defence Budget increased by 17% to R9.94 billion; the allocation for arms alone is three times higher than the education budget).

The SADF's main priority is to restore its regional air superiority, the loss of which was a major factor behind its defeat in Angola. With Israeli assistance, it is diverting billions of rands into its Cava multi-role jet fighter project. It is also attempting to develop a portable anti-aircraft missile and is developing a helicopter gunship.

Other major projects are the construction of FRG-designed submarines and the development, with Israel, of a nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile. This, with the air defence projects, will provide a base for the regime's military/strategic dominance over the whole of Southern Africa. However, Cava will take at least ten years to put into production and needs massive financing and technology transfers, and it is unclear what stage of development the other projects have reached.

â€¢ The SADF relies on white male conscripts between the ages of 18 and 35 to fulfil most of its personnel needs. Although it saves the SADF money by lowering its wage bill, conscription drains the apartheid economy as a whole by repeatedly withdrawing from productive activity hundreds of thousands of mostly skilled personnel. There are thus some tensions between the business sector and the government over this issue and these could widen if the economy declines further. Conscription is also one of the main factors behind

the 'brain drain' - the emigration every year of thousands of young skilled whites.

â€¢ There is also growing political resistance to conscription, which intensified after the SADF was deployed in the townships in 1984. The banning of the End Conscription Campaign did not stop resistance, which is now snowballing in the context of the Defiance Campaign. Over 1 000 young conscripts have collectively stated in public that they will not serve in the SADF for political reasons.

The SADF thus faces both a crisis of legitimacy amongst a widening, although still small, section of its conscripts. There is also widespread conscription-avoidance for largely political reasons, and some units relying on part-time conscripts report attendance rates for 'camps' as low as one-fifth. This has not yet developed into a serious manpower crisis because of the superfluity of conscripts, but it undermines morale and could rapidly snowball.

â€¢ The morale of the white group is fragile. This was demonstrated clearly in Angola in 1988 when a relatively limited number of white deaths (estimated at 50 or more) and casualties (500 or more) led to serious questioning of the government's strategies, even in sections of the National Party. If white troop deaths escalate, a serious morale crisis, leading to further divisions, will develop rapidly.

â€¢ The SADF needs black troops for front-line combat work and to 'win hearts and minds'. For various reasons - including racism and discrimination and the excessive risks to which black troops are exposed, as well as their susceptibility to community/political pressure - their loyalty to the regime will progressively weaken as the crisis unfolds. Black troops in the SWA Territory Force mutinied in Angola in 1988 because they were being used as 'cannon fodder': the SADF dared not put more troops into the front-line because of the political fall-out from white casualties.

â€¢ The bantustan forces, essential to the regime's divide-and-rule political strategy as well as its rural 'counter-insurgency' programme, are showing themselves to be a weak link in apartheid's defences. The mutiny in Bophuthatswana in 1988, although quickly crushed, showed the potential for prising loose these military forces from their allegiance to Pretoria and turning them into allies of the liberation movement. Recent developments in Transkei and KaNgwane also demonstrate weakening central government control. Pretoria can act to reverse this process only at the cost of further alienating its bantustan clients and disrupting its carefully-laid strategic plans for the bantustans and rural areas.

Our Tasks

It is clear that in the context of an overall strategic and security crisis the regime's armed forces are beginning to crack under the pressure. Rearmament is contributing to the economic crisis; conscription is becoming a political threat; sections of black police and soldiers and the bantustan forces are wavering. The priorities arising out of these factors include:

â€¢ Strengthening and broadening the arms embargo and financial sanctions and halting technology transfers to prevent the regime rearming itself.

â€¢ Strengthening the defences of the Frontline States.

â€¢ Broadening the war resistance/anti-conscription movement.

â€¢ Working inside the enemy's forces, especially with black police and troops and the bantustan forces, to prise them loose from Pretoria and win them over to the liberation struggle.

â€¢ Deepening the crisis in the enemy's forces by intensifying the armed struggle within the context of our overall strategy.