

Taking the warnings seriously

The defence component of Prime Minister P W Botha's constellation of states is coming into focus with unexpected rapidity. So much so that some people are finding the terms of South Africa's commitment to southern African security — always clear enough but looking rather more forbidding now that they are assuming reality — somewhat alarming.

In one of the more moderate reactions in this category, a Johannesburg newspaper has editorialised against the country appearing "to be precipitating an armed free-for-all"

Developments in the past fortnight include:

- A note from Foreign Minister Pik Botha to the Mozambique government, implying South Africa's right to conduct hot-pursuit operations into that country.

- An assessment by military experts of the conditions on which South Africa will intervene militarily in Rhodesia — first, if a massacre of whites begins and they are prevented from leaving the country, and second, if foreign troops interfere in the post-election situation.

- The arrival of UN military commander General Prem Chand in SWA/Namibia at a time when Swapo has intensified its terrorist offensive to the extent that the security forces' kill rate is running at over 80 a month.

- Agreement between South Africa and the three independent black homelands on a common defence posture for southern Africa.

Don McHenry, America's UN ambassador who spent some time in South Africa while the Western initiative on SWA/Namibia was at its peak, used to tell a derisory story at cocktail parties about Pretoria's negotiating strategy. Pik Botha, he explained, would create a great fuss and threaten the most dire retaliatory measures when faced with any demands, only to subside eventually in acceptance and even public explanation of their eminent reasonableness.

McHenry's point was that South Africa should not be taken too seriously. Presumably that was his government's reaction last year when Prime Minister Botha warned that South Africa would not tolerate a situation of chaos in Rhodesia. And when Pik Botha said troops would cross borders in retaliatory action. And when the prime minister repeated in Parliament this month that if South Africa were forced to the wall "we will hit out in a way that will have results in southern Africa that not even the West can foresee"

Now it seems that those statements were meant seriously. All that has happened, apart from the psychological readjustment for the McHenrys, is that the developments against which the SA government warned have now precipitated the beginnings of the response of which it gave clear notice.

In its own interests and in defence of the southern African communities to which it has given security guarantees, South Africa is reacting as it said it would, to the war talk of Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and evidence of a Cuban and Frelimo troop build-up in northern Mozambique; the infiltration of Angolan-trained terrorists and Soviet arms from Mozambique; and Swapo's efforts to establish a Western-recognised "military presence" in SWA/Namibia by attacking homesteads more than 50 km south of the proposed demilitarised zone.

The new developments signify a clear escalation in the military dimension of the southern African conflict. South Africa has already claimed the right, established in practice in SWA/Namibia, to conduct hot-pursuit operations on behalf of a neighbouring territory.

As a mandate territory — the legal justification for the very presence of SA troops there, although the United Nations has suspended the mandate — SWA/Namibia is in a separate category. A military operation in Rhodesia, especially if not requested by the post-election government, could be justified only on humanitarian grounds. That it appears to be under serious consideration shows the measure of the Government's concern over the growth of the Soviet-backed subversive pressures in the sub-continent.

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