

Soviets want link with SA, says professor

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The Soviet Union has no evil designs on South Africa, and would like to see a negotiated settlement here regardless of the economic system which might be adopted, the director of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIA), Professor John Barratt, said in an interview.

Professor Barratt has just returned from a nine-day visit to the Soviet Union where he and his wife were guests of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee.

He visited Moscow and Leningrad, held discussions with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the central committee of the Communist Party, and addressed the Africa Institute, the Institute of World Economic and International Relations, the Institute of African Studies, the University of Moscow's Centre for African and Asian Studies, and the Institute for North American Affairs.

Professor Barratt also held meetings with authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church, the ANC representative in Moscow "and other various individuals".

The Soviets, he said, emphasised the need for negotiations here between the Government, the African National Congress (ANC) and all other political parties, "but they think the ANC is the main party".

Professor Barratt said the Soviets were keenly aware of the economic potential of the southern African region, and that its full realisation depended to a great extent on an economically strong, apartheid-free South Africa.

"There is a great deal of interest in South Africa's future because many Soviet academics and government officials recognise the great economic potential in southern Africa once apartheid is gone, and they believe South Africa's healthy economy

The Soviet Union, which would like to see a negotiated settlement in South Africa, is also keen to have diplomatic and economic relations with an apartheid-free South Africa, according to the director of the South African Institute of International Affairs, Professor John Barratt, who recently visited the Soviet Union. KAIZER NYATSUMBA spoke to him.



Professor John Barratt ...
"The Soviets do not adopt a superior attitude."

will play an important role in developing that potential."

The Soviets, Professor Barratt said, were not "dogmatic or ideological" when they spoke about the southern African region, and they did not want to prescribe to South Africans what they should do to solve their problems.

"It was very refreshing to talk to people who wanted to share our problems rather than dictate to us. They were very conscious of their own problems and did not adopt a superior attitude like many people in the West.

"There was also no demand that a non-racial, democratic South Africa should be socialist, although it was clear that many of them hope that it will become socialist in the end."

Professor Barratt said the State President Mr F W de Klerk had created great expectations in the Soviet

Union, and the Soviets were waiting eagerly to see how he would go about dismantling apartheid.

The Soviets "seemed pleased with the change of leadership" from Mr P W Botha to Mr de Klerk, but there was still scepticism about whether Mr de Klerk would actually transform words into action.

He said the release from prison of ANC stalwart Mr Walter Sisulu and seven other leaders would "definitely have an impact in Moscow".

The director said although the Soviets were generally very well-informed on southern Africa, the region was not a high priority for them. Instead, they were preoccupied with domestic problems.

Although there was "a very healthy debate" in the Soviet Union about the future of southern Africa, the Kremlin's policy towards the region had not changed. For the moment bilateral diplomatic relations with South Africa were out of the question, and the Soviet Union would "continue to apply sanctions and support the ANC".

Contrary to popular belief, said Professor Barratt, the Soviets were exerting no pressure on the ANC to renounce violence in favour of negotiations, since they argued that the ball was in the Government's court and the Government had to create conditions conducive to negotiations.

"The Soviets, however,

have made it clear they would welcome a negotiated settlement in South Africa."

Professor Barratt said his impression was that the Soviet Union's economic problems were immense and the conditions were worsening. The Kremlin would therefore not have resources to "over-commit itself to operations anywhere in the world".

Glasnost, President Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of openness, had irreversibly caught on in the Soviet Union, and Professor Barratt was impressed by "the degree of the freedom of discussions and the open way in which people discuss their country and their problems".

This new mood of openness was reflected in the media, with the Soviet TV handling domestic political debates "in a much more frank manner than the SABC".

Perestroika, however, was not as popular because of "the immense financial difficulties". The economic restructuring, said Professor Barratt, was not, as the Western media liked to imply, an acknowledgement of the failure of socialism, but a rejection of the domination of the state of every aspect of an individual's life.

He said there was "overwhelming support" for President Gorbachev among academics and intellectuals, even though some workers were opposed to his reformist policies.

"Mr Gorbachev's position is quite secure; he has strong support around him.

"Even then, I do not believe that if Mr Gorbachev were to be succeeded by someone else they would go back on the old system.

"I believe that the Soviets have gone too far (with glasnost) now," he said.