

# South Africa's creeping brand of intervention

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Unknown  
? 19/8/52

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THE MURDER by parcel bomb in Mozambique of Ruth First, one of apartheid's most energetic opponents and a leading member of the African National Congress, is one more sign of South Africa's creeping intervention into every one of the black-ruled states on its borders. It comes ten days after the assassination of a Cabinet minister in Lesotho, and while a massive force of South African ground troops remains deep inside Southern Angola.

In Zimbabwe the evidence of links between South Africa and white members of Ian Smith's former security forces, who have either emigrated to the Republic or remain in office, has been mounting. In July 1981 Joe Gqabi, the ANC representative in Harare, was shot outside his suburban house. Shortly afterwards the police inspector who was allegedly investigating the case absconded to South Africa. Since then the Zimbabwean Prime Minister, Mr Mugabe, has accused Pretoria of master-minding a series of explosions at Inkoma barracks north of Salisbury.

The opportunity for South

African dirty tricks against its neighbours is immense. Young, weak, impoverished countries struggling up from the legacy of colonialism, in many cases still scarred by the war for independence, reliant for economic survival and transport on the imperial rail and road links which go through the Republic, are no match for the military and economic giant to the south. In each of them there are dissident groups available to be bought and manipulated by Pretoria. Internationally, South Africa has a relatively clear run. If the West has done little to restrain South Africa's repeated invasions of Angola (the biggest combined operation by South African forces since the Second World War, as Pretoria announced after "Operation Protea" last year), how much is it going to do when another lethal parcel is despatched to Maputo, Lusaka, or Gaborone?

The South African campaign of destabilisation has been increasing inexorably since the first bombing outside the country in Botswana in 1974, when Abraham Tiro, the former permanent secretary of the South African

Students' Organisation, was killed. No longer is it aimed at individual South African opponents of apartheid. Foreign politicians have also been targets. Nor is it confined to assassination. The attacks have increased in number, scale and frequency.

They have become more audacious and distant. The ANC office in London was bombed earlier this year. Last November the South Africans were involved in the attempted coup in the Seychelles, three thousand miles from South Africa. On the military side, South Africa has moved from hit-and-run raids across the border to large-scale invasions by conventional forces. Now, as in southern Angola and south-western Zambia, it seems set on the more or less permanent occupation of buffer zones.

In April the Botswana President Dr Quett Masire accused South Africa of trying to turn his country by repeated border violations into "another Lebanon." In Angola and Mozambique it is helping to arm and supply dissident groups who are sabotaging roads, railways, pipelines and bridges. In

Zimbabwe the time cannot be far distant, if it has not already arrived, when South Africa will be supporting rebels within Joshua Nkomo's minority ZAPU party.

South Africa's destabilisation campaign is only one facet in a strategy which is primarily designed to transform Southern Africa into an East-West battleground. In the first instance it is meant to warn its neighbours that South Africa is strong enough to go it alone in defending the economic and political status quo in the Republic. But Pretoria would much prefer to transform the West's de facto acquiescence in apartheid (shown by its consistent failure to take strong action against it) into a system of overt strategic guarantees.

Pretoria has already won the Reagan Administration's agreement to a change in the long-drawn-out Namibian negotiations. Instead of focussing on the details of a United Nations-supervised ceasefire and elections, they now centre on the search for a parallel withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and South African troops from Namibia. Such a deal

would put the United States on South Africa's side as guarantors against any re-introduction of Cuban forces, if UNITA, the Angolan dissident group which South Africa supports, were to step up its activities.

In Mozambique a similar South African strategy of deliberately provoking Soviet and Cuban involvement is at an earlier stage. Murders of ANC activists and the economic destabilisation of the country have several aims. One is to intimidate the Mozambican government from taking a militant anti-South African line, or force it to divert resources to internal defence. Another is to foment economic hardship and then political discontent with the hope of changing the regime. But if all that fails, there is the chance that the Government may be encouraged to call on Soviet assistance as the MPLA forces did in Angola in 1975. Then, as in Angola, Pretoria will turn to the West for the strategic help which it has long coveted.