Southern Africa: Oliver Tambo's View

Defeat or victory? And for whom? These are the questions southern Africa is asking after the signing of agreements between the apartheid state and its neighbours. Oliver Tambo, President of the African National Congress, gave AFRICASIA his opinion in Paris.

By Colm Foy

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Following the signing of the agreement between South Africa and Mozambique, the African National Congress (ANC) has found itself increasingly under pressure, both from the apartheid regime itself and from governments formerly tolerant of an ANC presence in their countries. The most serious effect has been the harassment of the ANC in Swaziland after that country revealed that it, too, had signed a non-aggression pact with Pretoria. But it is Mozambique which has attracted most attention internationally, both for its expulsion of most ANC members and its publicly expressed opinion that its deal with South Africa represented a victory for the Frelimo-Party government and for peace in the region.

Oliver Tambo takes a different view, both as far as Mozambique is concerned and the others who have signed similar agreements: "Now that these agreements have been signed," he says, "the security of these countries will be taken over by South Africa." He thinks that the South Africans never intended to honour the commitment they made at Nkomati to curtail the activities of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) terrorists in Mozambique. "They never admitted that they were behind the MNR," he observes, "so their bona fides were questionable in the first place. If their good faith was questionable, then there was no guarantee that they would honour the terms of the agreement. We never thought they would and they haven't. The agreement is clear in that it calls upon Pretoria to stop the activities of the MNR. It shows in our view that in having this non-aggression pact, the South African government had regard to its own interests, not those of the other party to the agreement, and if it's a question of South Africa's own interests then South Africa's sense of obligation to the terms of the agreement will also be governed by what South Africa perceives to be in its own interests."

He denies that the problem with Pretoria's observance of their side of the bargain is that there is some kind of a split in the ranks of the ruling South African clique. From an historical point of view it has always been South Africa's intention to destabilize socialist Mozambique, and this has not changed with the signing of the accord at Nkomati, believes the ANC leader. The MNR aggression "was an act by the apartheid state and it was up to the apartheid state to stop it if they wanted to. If it continued and is continuing, it's because the apartheid state has not taken a decision to stop it. I don't think it can be blamed on individuals, I don't think we can say that Botha (South Africa's Prime Minister) is not really responsible. When Botha signs an agreement, he is not engaging in an individual exercise, he does so as the leader of a government. As a government they have taken a decision and everybody, presumably, will be governed by what the government says—i.e. Botha cannot be saying that he cannot rule his country."

'Absurd Pressure'

Indeed, in the eyes of the veteran leader, the Nkomati accord is only a part of a much wider strategy aimed at getting all the states in the region to sign similar "non-aggression pacts." "They are bullying Lesotho into signing one," he says, "and they have just produced one they signed with Swaziland. Some two or three years ago they signed non-aggression pacts with the bantustan so-called 'independent states.' They have been clamouring for the signature of these pacts all the time and whenever they were signed, the South Africans have claimed a victory." Oliver Tambo and the ANC do not believe that Nkomati was the result of internal economic pressures inside South Africa due to the cost and disruption caused by the destabilization and South African-inspired wars in the region.

"The ANC is interested in what South Africa is doing and why it is doing it," says the ANC leader, "We are quite clear about why the regime has been demanding these non-aggression pacts . . . To take a case in point: what economic benefit can they get from a non-aggression pact signed with Botswana, signed against Botswana's will? What economic benefit is there in Lesotho's signing a non-aggression pact? . . . They are placing absurd pressure on Botswana to sign. They have told the Botswana government that they have the capacity of sending bandits against Botswana and therefore to prevent that from happening the Botswana government should sign a non-aggression pact with them. This is absurd." So, far from using the pacts to resolve economic problems caused by the wars, Pretoria is even ready to start new wars with the express intention

of achieving such pacts. For the ANC, the reasoning is clear: "We know what benefit there is for South Africa in these deals. They give Pretoria the right to police the region by converting these countries into extensions of their own security system. That's why they are insisting: it's part of the battle for the survival of the apartheid regime."

The case seems to be well made out for the agreements concluded by South Africa's neighbours, but does the same logic apply to the cease-fire agreement signed with Angola in Lusaka? President Tambo suddenly looks tired and grave at the question, agreeing that this comparison has been made forcibly in the West and particularly in the American media, which he denounces for not condemning the South African invasion of Angola in the first place. That invasion, however, was not the success the South Africans had been hoping for and anticipating. "South Africa failed to conquer Angola as it had wanted to," says the president. "Instead they had to agree to withdraw, although they have since dishonoured that agreement." The cease-fire signed in Lusaka "is an achievement of the Angolan people who have resisted throughout the invasion. And the Angolans indicated, which is very important, that they see the Lusaka agreement as not just covering South African withdrawal but also the setting in motion of a process for bringing about freedom and independence for Namibia. Of course, independence for Namibia has been stalled like the withdrawal of South African troops."

This was a situation very different from the one which brought about the Nkomati accord. Nkomati, says the president, "was about the ANC and the MNR. It is untruthful on what Mozambique was doing for the ANC and what South Africa was doing for the MNR. South Africa had a whole military structure which made the MNR part of the South African army. Mozambique had no such thing." At this point, Oliver Tambo showed us a document which detailed the connections between the South African Defence Force and the MNR. It gave clear evidence of the complete integration of the terrorist organization into South Africa's equally terrorist military forces.

"MNR was suppled, equipped, trained at camps, provided with transport and crossed the South African border into Mozambique." The ANC never crossed this frontier, never once. It was never supplied with any weapons by Mozambique. Mozambique didn't train ANC cadres, didn't transport them, didn't do anything—none of the things South Africa did for the MNR. The MNR was given a broadcasting station in South Africa, the ANC had none in Mozambique—and the ANC never launched any actions in South Africa from Mozambique." Thus, the two situations simply were not analogous. "Yet, the Nkomati agreement presents Mozambique as having assisted the ANC to the same extent as South Africa supported the MNR. It is in the terms of that agreement that so many ANC members had to leave Mozambique and this does not seem to have been the same with SWAPO in Angola under the terms of the Lusaka agreement."

While it has always been true that the ANC has never used Mozambique's territory for military training or infiltration of militants back into South Africa, the Nkomati agreement and the similar deals worked out by South Africa with neighbouring states must have had an effect. For young people forced to flee the repression of apartheid, Mozambique in particular had been seen as an attractive refuge. With the new situation, surely there had been new difficulties? President Tambo responds with characteristic optimism. "We have always had this problem," he assures us. "It's never been easy for countries sharing borders with South Africa to give us base facilities, for instance, or even to participate in our movement through their territory, and we didn't ask this of them. As far as the ANC is concerned, we have always recognized the weakness of these countries and therefore we have based ourselves on what could be done within South Africa and have placed very little weight on the neighbouring countries. We've welcomed the assistance they have given us, but we have always considered that this will naturally be of a very limited nature. We don't think, however, that they can escape being adversely affected, militarily, economically, by the growing struggle inside South Africa—I believe they are ready for that, but it is not something we can do anything about. As a matter of fact, we have sometimes restricted our activities in the interests of the neighbouring states, wanting to make sure that we didn't give Pretoria an excuse to attack them.

A Temporary Setback

"This development—the signing of these agreements—merely adds to the problem, but it is not new. Our people, even the young ones, understand the problem because they are part of the solution and we are all confident that it will be overcome. In any case, all this takes place, this closure of borders, or attempts to do so, when we are already inside the country, when we have used what facilities there were to build a presence within South Africa and to build a political force inside the country. So we are not weakened by this and don't see it as any different, just a temporary setback." Oliver Tambo is acutely aware of his movement's historical difficulties in finding outside bases and the fact that this has forced the ANC to find different ways of carrying on the struggle. "We have solved a lot of problems from the fact that we could not use, say, Mozambique the way Frelimo used Tanzania, we could not use Zimbabwe as ZANU or ZAPU used Mozambique and Zambia, and so on. We have had a peculiar problem and now we've learned how to deal with that."

So the ANC is not going to be discouraged by the new developments operating in favour of the apartheid regime in southern Africa and has every hope of uplifting and extending its struggle. In spite of the difficulties, South Africa's youth has continued to flee the country in search of the ANC banner. They have been accepted gladly into the movement's ranks and many rapidly move up to take important positions in ANC offices abroad. The president stresses, however, that those who remain behind are also important for the wider struggle to liberate their country. "If such people stay," he says, "there is a cause for struggle there at home. But we are not saying that they should stay or go, because our basic position is that the struggle must continue and it has got to continue and reliance must be placed on what we are going to do within the country instead of proceeding with the erroneous assumption that neighbouring countries are going to do a whole lot of things which they may not be able to do. In other words, the effect of placing reliance on ourselves which has characterized our strategies and our activities is merely being emphasized by the recent developments." Thus, the ANC will continue to draw on its ever-refilling reservoir of young recruits to replenish its ranks both inside and outside South Africa.

On the wider international plane, Oliver Tambo is convinced that the recent European tour by South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha has not adversely affected his movement. Pointing out that, with the single exception of Portugal, Botha was received almost in secret by European leaders and that the only significant concession he might have won—the closing of ANC offices in Europe—was denied.

In southern Africa itself, the combination of the European diplomatic offensive and the non-aggression pacts has alerted the countries grouped in the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) to the danger of renewed economic pressure on the member countries. At the time President Tambo spoke to us in Paris, he had just returned from the SADCC meeting held in Gaborone (Botswana). He had found their resolve as firm as ever. "They are aware of the South African attempts to incorporate their economies into the South African economy . . . but they stressed and asserted their determination to build SADCC in spite of South Africa's efforts . . . therefore they will attend to all the attempts by the friends of the South African regime to undermine the growth of the SADCC. We in the ANC support that spirit." ▲▲▲