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FM CAPE TOWN 031210Z JUN 85
TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELEGRAM NUMBER 195 OF 3 JUNE
INFO PRIORITY LUANDA, WASHINGTON, NEW YORK

MY TELNO 188: CABINDA INCIDENT

SUMMARY

1. WORST CASUALTY OF THE RAID SO FAR APPEARS TO BE ITS EFFECT ON RELATIONS BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES. IN AN ATTEMPT TO SALVAGE SOMETHING FROM THE INCIDENT THE AMERICANS ARE PRESSING FOR A POSITIVE SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER PRESENTED EARLIER BY CROCKER TO BOTH SOUTH AFRICANS AND ANGOLANS.

DETAIL

2. CONSEQUENCES OF THE INTERCEPTED SADF MISSION NEAR CABINDA ARE STILL BEING DIGESTED HERE. BUT THE BALANCE SHEET IS A DEPRESSING ONE:

(A) THE GOVERNMENT HAVE HAD AN UNCOMFORTABLE TIME EXPLAINING WHY SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIERS WERE OPERATING IN NORTHERN ANGOLA. THEY HAVE BEEN STRONGLY CRITICISED BY THE OPPOSITION THOUGH THE WORST OF THE DOMESTIC STORM MAY BE OVER.

(B) OBVIOUSLY THEY HAVE INFURIATED THE ANGOLANS AND HAVE COMPLICATED THE US-LED NEGOTIATIONS.

(C) THEY HAVE PROBABLY UNSETTLED OTHER NEIGHBOURS WHO WILL BE WONDERING IF THE SOUTH AFRICANS ARE UP TO SIMILAR TRICKS ELSEWHERE.

(D) THEY HAVE GIVEN THE NON-ALIGNED A HANDLE WITH WHICH TO CALL FOR MEASURES AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA AT THE UNITED NATIONS.

(E) ABOVE ALL THEY HAVE BADLY UPSET THE US ADMINISTRATION AND ADDED NEW IMPETUS TO THE DISINVESTMENT CAMPAIGN IN THE UNITED STATES.

3. ON THE DOMESTIC FRONT, THE OPPOSITION'S MAIN THRUST HAS BEEN TO ACCUSE THE GOVERNMENT OF MISLEADING PARLIAMENT AND OF UNDERMINING THE GOVERNMENT'S OWN CREDIBILITY BY HAVING TO ADMIT TO A MILITARY OPERATION IN NORTHERN ANGOLA AFTER INSISTING THAT THE SADF HAD WITHDRAWN FROM ANGOLA. NEVERTHELESS MOST SUPPORTERS OF THE GOVERNMENT SEEM PREPARED TO ACCEPT THE STORY (EVIDENCE FROM THE CAPTURED SOUTH AFRICAN SOLDIER NOT WITHSTANDING) THAT THE RAIDING PARTY WAS SENT ON A RECONNAISSANCE AGAINST ANC/SWAPO CAMPS WHICH ARE WIDELY REGARDED HERE AS LEGITIMATE TARGETS. THERE IS A TENDENCY IN ANY CASE FOR OPINION TO RALLY BEHIND THE GOVERNMENT WHEN QUESTIONS OF NATIONAL SECURITY ARE AT ISSUE.

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4. IN REALITY THE RAID MUST BE CONSIDERED AT BEST A MIS-CALCULATION, AT WORST A CYNICAL ATTEMPT TO DESTABILISE THE ANGOLAN REGIME. AS SUCH IT MAY BE A RELIC OF EARLIER SOUTH AFRICAN POLICIES. IT PROMPTS QUESTIONS ABOUT EARLIER INCIDENTS CLAIMED BY UNITA INCLUDING THE MID JULY 1984 OIL PIPELINE EXPLOSION IN CABINDA AND THE LIMPET MINE ATTACK IN LUANDA HARBOUR IN LATE JULY. THE SADF HAVE THE CAPABILITY FOR SUCH LONG-RANGE OPERATIONS. NOBODY IS PRETENDING THAT THE CABINDA RAID WAS MOUNTED WITHOUT FULL POLITICAL CLEARANCE. THE AIM MAY HAVE BEEN TO TRY TO FORCE THE MPLA TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE WITH UNITA BUT AN ATTACK ON A GULF INSTALLATION, IF THAT WAS WHAT WAS PLANNED, THREATENED US AS WELL AS ANGOLAN INTERESTS. FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO HAVE FAILED TO ALLOW ADEQUATELY FOR THE DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES OF IT GOING WRONG CAN ONLY BE REGARDED AS MISJUDGEMENT AND AN UNCOVENANTED BONUS FOR THEIR CRITICS.

5. MY US COLLEAGUE CONFIRMS THAT THE CABINDA INCIDENT WILL HAVE GIVEN FRESH IMPETUS TO THE DISINVESTMENT LOBBY IN WASHINGTON. IT WILL ALSO BE USED BY OPPONENTS OF CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT TO DISCREDIT THE ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY. IT WILL BE SEEN AS INDICATING THAT THE SOUTH AFRICANS ARE PREPARED TO TAKE THE LAW INTO THEIR OWN HANDS AND THAT THEY CANNOT BE TRUSTED. NICKEL SAID THAT SOUTH AFRICAN EXPLANATIONS WOULD NOT BE BELIEVED. THE RAID IMPLIED THAT THE SOUTH AFRICANS WERE STILL BACKING SAVIMBI TO WIN IN ANGOLA. IT COULD ALSO PUT MACHEL ON THE SPOT.

6. NICKEL TOLD ME THAT HE HAD SEEN PIK BOTHA THREE TIMES LAST WEEK FOLLOWING THE CABINDA INCIDENT TO REGISTER US REACTIONS IN THE STERNEST TERMS. HE IS SEEING HIM AGAIN TODAY IN PRETORIA. (WE GATHER FROM THE AMERICAN EMBASSY THAT THE SOUTH AFRICANS HAVE SO FAR STUCK TO THEIR STORY ABOUT AN OPERATION AGAINST THE ANC.) NICKEL HAS BEEN INSTRUCTED TO PRESS STRONGLY FOR A POSITIVE REPLY TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER PRESENTED BY CROCKER TO BOTH THE SOUTH AFRICANS AND THE ANGOLANS A FEW WEEKS AGO. HE WOULD MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THE ONLY WAY OF RECOVERING GROUND LOST BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN RAID WAS FOR THEM NOW TO HELP THE AMERICANS MAKE PROGRESS IN THEIR NEGOTIATIONS ON ANGOLA/NAMIBIA. THE IMPORTANCE FOR WASHINGTON OF A POSITIVE SOUTH AFRICAN MOVE COULD NOT BE OVER-EMPHASISED.

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17. LAST WEEK PIK BOTHA WAS REPORTED AS SAYING THAT THE LUANDA GOVERNMENT HAD INFORMED SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH US CHANNELS OF ITS INTENTION TO BREAK OFF NEGOTIATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA. ACCORDING TO THE US AMBASSADOR, THIS WAS A MISLEADING GLOSS ON A PRIVATE MESSAGE WHICH THE AMERICANS HAD INDEED PASSED ON FROM THE ANGOLANS. THE AMERICANS WERE CONCERNED THAT THIS MISINTERPRETATION MIGHT BE DELIBERATE. THE MESSAGE HAD SAID THAT THE ANGOLANS HAD STATED THAT THE CABINDA INCIDENT MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR THEM TO HAVE FURTHER DIRECT MEETINGS WITH THE SOUTH AFRICANS. BUT THEY WERE CERTAINLY NOT BREAKING OFF NEGOTIATIONS. ON THE CONTRARY, THE ANGOLANS WERE PERFECTLY WILLING FOR CROCKER TO CONTINUE IN HIS NEGOTIATING ROLE BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES. HENCE WASHINGTON'S RATHER DESPERATE ATTEMPT TO SCREW A HELPFUL MOVE OUT OF THE SOUTH AFRICANS IN ORDER TO SALVAGE SOMETHING FROM THE CABINDA MESS.

MOBERLY

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