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THE PRIME MINISTER

21 May 1986

PRIME MINISTER'S
PERSONAL MESSAGE
SERIAL No T96/86

Dear Mr. President

Thank you for your letter of 19 May (which does not appear to take account of mine of 9 May). It arrived as I was on the point of writing to let you know of my vexation and indeed anger at the raids on 19 May by the South African Defence Forces on alleged ANC targets in Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

I find this action by the South African Government absolutely impossible to understand. The raid on Botswana is particularly inexplicable given that your own officials had only recently been holding discussions on security co-operation with their Botswanan counterparts and that a meeting of the Joint Commission had been proposed for 23 May. I have condemned the raids just as I condemn all cross-border violations in either direction.

I have looked in vain in your letter for any convincing justification of the attacks. They do not appear to have brought you any military advantage. Nor can I see what possible advantage to South Africa could outweigh the immense damage done to your international position and in particular to the Commonwealth initiative of which you make no mention but which I have supported so strongly, believing it to be in your interest. I frankly find this omission astonishing. I

was also puzzled by your statement that "terrorist forces remain adamant that they are not interested in a negotiating process", given that at the time of the raids the Commonwealth Group had just returned from Lusaka where they had been exploring this very point with the ANC.

You will know from our frank exchanges since the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Nassau last October how much importance I have attached to the success of the Commonwealth initiative. The Group's efforts have become the vehicle for the hopes of many within and outside South Africa who see it as a unique opportunity to help break the cycle of violence and promote a start on dialogue. With so much pinned on the Commonwealth Group by the Seven Summit leaders and by governments of the European Community, as well as by the Commonwealth itself, the reaction if the initiative founders as a result of South African policy will be that much harsher. I simply do not understand why the South African Government should have mounted such attacks while the Commonwealth Group were in Southern Africa trying to make progress towards achieving dialogue. Given the timing of the raids, it will inevitably be said that they were a deliberate attempt by your Government to torpedo an initiative which was developing too well. I myself find them hard to reconcile with the relationship of trust and confidence which I had thought we had established.

Even so, I believe we still need to consider whether the COMGEP process can be salvaged. I take it that you want it to succeed. It may still not be too late to get the process going again, though I know that there is much anger and resentment in the Group at the raids. I believe that the Group may yet respond to a genuine and unequivocal step forward on your part; but they will not allow themselves to become involved in a debate on semantics, which they will see as just an attempt to string them along. What is needed is an early and clear cut acceptance of their negotiating concept, together with specific indications of the way in which the South African Government intend to implement it.

No more than in the past do I underestimate the difficulties for you, nor the political problems you face with those who are adamantly opposed to change. But I urge you most strongly to consider what is at stake. We are at a watershed. Failure of the Commonwealth initiative would have the most serious consequences. It would hugely increase the already considerable international pressure for further measures against South Africa. You know what my attitude has been, but there is a limit to how far I am able to hold that position. It says a great deal for the Commonwealth Group that they nevertheless went ahead with their meeting with your Ministers despite the raids. It shows that they are genuinely anxious for a solution. On present form, the Group are likely to meet in early June to draft their report. Once that is done, I fear that the die will be cast. The way in which your Government responds in the next few days could be decisive. I cannot emphasise enough the deep anxiety which we all feel about South Africa's future if what I believe may be the last chance for a negotiated solution is rejected.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

The Honourable P. W. Botha, D.M.S.