SOUTH AFRICAN CRACKDOWN BRINGS U.S. POLICY SHIFT

The massive South African crackdown on black organizations and the United African call for a strong international response to it has forced the United States to agree to strengthen the arms embargo against South Africa. On the other hand, the Administration apparently intends to continue nuclear and economic collaboration, arguing that to go beyond forms of disengagement which are primarily symbolic would drive white South Africa into the "laager". Without strong public pressure for real disengagement, neither the Administration nor Congress is likely to go very far toward cutting U.S. economic support for apartheid.

At the United Nations

The African countries tried to get the west to agree to a mild form of economic disengagement which they had proposed in the spring and then shelved to allow the United States to pursue its diplomatic initiatives. When the west vetoed this proposal, the Africans negotiated for as strong an arms embargo as they could get. While the embargo was mostly symbolic, the Africans were pleased they moved the west as far as they did. The arms embargo marked the first time in U.N. history that a situation involving a member state had been declared a threat to the peace under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter.

What the U.S. Vetoed. The African resolutions which the U.S. and its allies vetoed on October 31st were compromise measures to begin with. They did not call for total economic sanctions, but rather:

1. a finding that the "policies and actions of the South African regime" are a threat to peace and international security and that action under Chapter VII should be considered;
2. an embargo on all arms sales, license arrangements for South African production of arms, and a ban on nuclear co-operation; and
3. a voluntary end to "investments in, loans to, or any export and import credit to the South African racist regime or companies registered in South Africa."

What the U.S. Agreed To. The arms embargo adopted November 4th was watered down from what the Africans wanted. The western countries finally voted for a permanent rather than a six-month embargo, but only after African compromises on other issues. The west would only agree that "the acquisition of arms by South Africa," and not the policies of that government themselves, constitute a threat to world peace. Such a narrow definition will help countries with large investments and trade with South Africa to stay off the "slippery slope" toward mandatory economic sanctions. The African call for an end to all nuclear co-operation and revocation of existing licensing agreements was reduced to symbolism in the final draft: a ban on co-operation only in the development of nuclear weapons, and a ban on future licenses but only a "review" of those currently in force.

The U.N. debate demonstrated the fundamental differences in approach toward South Africa between the U.S. and African countries. The American view was expressed by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his October 30th interview on "Face the Nation": "Our response sought to focus on the specific events of last week and try to correct them, rather than to go wholesale at the generic causes of the problem, which is the totality of the social and political structure." Administration officials stress in every speech on the subject that the U.S. will decrease co-operation when South Africa increases its repression, but will respond favorably if South Africa takes any small steps toward majority rule such as "dialogue" with black leaders. The U.S. also wants to avoid "undermining" South African help on Zimbabwe and Namibia.

On the other hand, the majority of African states have come to the conclusion that disengagement is the only viable option. The Vorster regime has amply demonstrated that it is tightening its police-state controls, and that outside urging to reform will not bring political and economic equality. As Tanzanian President Nyerere told a San Francisco audience in August:

"... the Western world has urged patience on the victims and tried to scold South Africa and Rhodesia into joining the twentieth century...
It is argued that increased South African prosperity prompted by foreign investment and trade will strain the restrictions of apartheid beyond the breaking point, while the example of more liberal societies will convince the whites of Southern Africa that they have nothing to fear from change. Policies based on these arguments have been followed since apartheid first became the official doctrine in 1948. They have clearly failed. And that failure was inevitable."

U.S. Unilateral Action
So far, U.S. unilateral response to the crackdown has been mostly diplomatic and symbolic: the U.S. recalled its Ambassador for two weeks of consultation immediately after the bannings and arrests. Last week it withdrew the naval attaché (although 4 military attaches remain in South Africa) and temporarily recalled the commercial attaché.

The U.N. debate pointed up some actions that the Administration will not take. It has decided to continue nuclear co-operation. Andy Young explained on the October 30th "Issues and Answers": "To cut things now would only encourage separate development of South Africa's own nuclear development. By maintaining some kind of relationship, we do have the possibility of influencing them to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty."

After the arms embargo vote, Young said the U.S. shouldn't take further unilateral steps at this time, but should "sit tight and see what happens." But some economic action may be under Administration consideration -- perhaps further restrictions on Export-Import Bank financing of trade. In the period after the Sharpeville massacre when the U.S. imposed its voluntary arms embargo, it also banned direct Ex-Im loans. Now the Congressional Black Caucus, several white Representatives, Senator Clark and even the New York Times are calling for an end to all Ex-Im financing. The Administration might want to get credit for announcing the change itself within the next few months, and avoid a possible confrontation with Congressional liberals when the Ex-Im Charter comes up for renewal next spring.

In the Congress
On October 31st the House of Representatives adopted the first resolution ever passed in either house of Congress against South Africa. While it was precedent-setting, it was also wholly symbolic. Cardiss Collins' H. Con. Res. 388, which was agreed to by 347 - 54, "strongly denounced" South Africa's crackdown and called on the President to take "effective measures" against South Africa to register deep concern about human rights violations there.

The only conservative argument against the resolution was that Congress used a "double standard", condemning white-ruled but not black-ruled Africa. But the conservatives did break ranks. Rep. Edwards of Oklahoma said, "I say to my conservative friends that we cannot condemn double standards if we hold them... Your complaints are right, but they do not excuse the Vorsters, the Krugers, the oppressors of South Africa." The sense of Congress resolution was also supported by Minority Leader John Rhodes and the vast majority of the delegations from North and South Carolina, Alabama and Tennessee. 34 of the 54 opponents were Republicans; 25 were southerners. Most Congressmen whom South Africa has courted opposed the resolution, including John Dent (D-Pa.), but Rep. Whitehurst (R-Va.) and Rep. Bowen (D-Miss.) supported it.

The Senate never voted on the Collins resolution. The Foreign Relations Committee unanimously adopted a weakened version insisted on by Republicans Clifford Case and Jacob Javits. They deleted the underlined phrase: "take effective measures against the Republic of South Africa in order to register... deep concern... about continued violations of human rights."

The House support for the Collins resolution was broad, but it remains to be seen how deep it will be, since the measure was completely symbolic. Its advocates hope to press through more meaningful measures next year (see enclosed summary of pending bills).

Whether these measures can be adopted will depend on the amount of persistent organized pressure that can be mounted now on the Congress and on the Administration to cut its important economic ties with South Africa. The South African crackdown provides us with a unique opportunity to push for steps that go beyond symbolism.

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