MEMO

May 28, 1974

TO: Executive Board, National Committee
FROM: George M. Houser
RE: Portugal's coup, African colonies (and ACOA)

I write this memorandum hoping it will be helpful in the discussion of the meaning of the coup in Portugal at our next Board meeting. The military coup which took place on April 25 was an event of major importance. No one really foresaw it, at least in the way it happened, and with its particular political content. Most observers acquainted with the Portuguese scene were of the opinion that a coup would come from the military right-wing. This coup, which was left of center, was unforeseen. Its most immediate effect is felt, of course, in Portugal. But it also has had a significant effect in the Portuguese colonies in Africa. Further, it affects Europe, and the U.S. Finally, we must consider its implications for the work of ACOA.

Questions thrust themselves upon us: Is the political direction of the coup established? Is the regime stable? Will the right of independence for the African colonies of Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola be recognized? Is our work against Portuguese colonialism coming to an end?

In spite of the fact that the situation is still in flux and there are new developments every day, we must give immediate consideration to what we can see now as we plan our own program for the future.

I would like to establish two points at the outset: First, the coup in Portugal was triggered by the struggle for independence in Africa. The liberation struggle in Africa has had the direct effect of liberating Portugal from a military dictatorship. Second, the importance of the work of ACOA is by no means diminished, even in the Portuguese areas of Africa.

Let me summarize the events which have taken place and try to put them in some kind of perspective. I should say that what I write here is based on many discussions over the last several days with liberation movement representatives, with delegates and secretariat people at the U.N., with governmental representatives and others in Washington, with one of our own Executive Board members who just returned from several weeks in Africa and in Portugal, and with individual Portuguese contacts, plus wide reading of papers and specialized periodicals.

Background to the Coup

Portuguese presence in Africa goes back over 500 years. Out of this evolved a colonial structure which was probably unequalled for its exploitative quality, characterized principally by the contract labor system. Portuguese rule became totalitarian with the military dictatorship in 1926 and tightened even further when Salazar became Premier in 1932. Although there had been tribal wars against Portuguese exploitation going back a century or more, the modern African nationalist struggle for freedom developed in the
late 1950s. The armed struggle against Portuguese exploitation and for African independence began 13 years ago in Angola and spread rapidly to Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. These struggles for freedom steadily gained ground, as we know from our close association with events during the life of ACOA.

The cost of these wars to Portugal was tremendous. They took up to 50% of Portugal's budget, and Portugal is the poorest country in Europe. The toll in life was great also. Increasingly, the people of Portugal became disenchanted with these wars. In a few years, more than a million Portuguese citizens (about 1/10 of the population) left for France and other European countries where there were better economic opportunities. Furthermore, more than 100,000 young men of draft age left the country and thousands in the armed forces deserted rather than go to Africa to fight.

In January 1974, General Antonio de Spinola returned to Portugal from Africa, one of the few military heroes made by the colonial wars. For five years he had been the head of both the government and the military in Guinea-Bissau. His dashing style and courage had won respect among the troops in his command as well as the people of Portugal. He was given his country's highest military honor. Nonetheless, his reputation as a democrat is at best dubious. He fought for Franco in Spain and was a Hitler sympathizer.

On February 22, shortly after his return home to the position as Deputy Chief of Staff, he published a book, Portugal And The Future. In it, he wrote that there could be no military solution to Portugal's wars in Africa; there must be a political solution. He advocated an undefined federation joining Portugal with the Portuguese territories in Africa on an equal basis.

The response to the book in Portugal was overwhelming. The first edition of 50,000 copies was sold out in hours. Probably the opinions expressed in the book were not new in Portugal. But the fact that the words were written by a military hero who had just come back from Africa produced the excited response. An important additional fact is that in the military dictatorship in Portugal, virtually no one could have gotten away with such expression contrary to the set policy of the government. The result, in the case of General Spinola, and that of General Francisco da Costa Gomes, Chief of Staff of the armed forces who agreed with Spinola, was their dismissal from their positions on March 14.

The Coup

General Spinola did not engineer the coup. For more than a year, a group of young officers in the Portuguese armed forces, as few as a dozen, had been meeting to discuss their grievances. They called themselves the Coordinating Committee of the Revolutionary Plan. They ranged from 30 to 35 in age. Many had served in Africa. They have kept their anonymity throughout. By September 1973 they had organized a network of officers, of the rank of captain or major, sympathetic to the aim of overthrowing the Caetano regime. A conference was held with approximately 200 persons to form the Movement of the Armed Forces. Plans were laid carefully for the coup. The actual timing
of the coup probably was dictated by the public response to Spinola's book, and then the removal of Spinola and Gomes from their army positions for refusing to pledge allegiance to the Caetano regime and its aims. Considerable publicity was given to a premature mutiny of about 200 officers and men on March 16 who moved on Lison as if to take over the capital but, when intercepted by a tank unit, turned back. Only a few arrests occurred. I have been told that this was a planned ruse by the Movement of the Armed Forces to lead the Caetano government into the mistaken belief that an expected coup attempt had failed and thus relax their guard.

The point is that the coup was master-minded and carried out by a movement within the armed forces. The young officers who accomplished it wanted to bring the wars in Africa to an end and wanted to overthrow the right-wing military government of Caetano. Spinola agreed to head a junta to maintain governmental authority until a civilian government could be formed. Amazingly, the coup was almost bloodless. The news media have given international attention to the enthusiastic response of the Portuguese people.

In Portugal itself, things have moved very rapidly since the coup. The hated secret police has been dismantled and many agents imprisoned. Premier Caetano and President Thomoz were exiled to Madeiera and then Brazil. Political prisoners in Portugal were released. Higher echelon generals and officers of the old regime, including General Kaulza de Arriaga, former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in Mozambique, have been deactivated.

Along with the military junta, whose authority rested on the leadership of the young officers who engineered the coup, there is a Provisional Government with a cabinet of 15 members, which includes three socialists and two communists. This Provisional government is to serve until elections are held in a year.

With democratic reforms promised by the new regime, a multitude of political parties have been formed. Restraints from the secret police having been withdrawn, workers have had the opportunity to demand changes in their working conditions for the first time in decades. Thousands have gone on strike, including referees for the Sunday soccer matches and large sections of the textile and shipping industries.

We must ask two kinds of questions about the coup:

1) What will be the extent of the changes inaugurated by the coup? Can the government maintain stability? Will organization of national life break down?

2) Who really holds the power in Portugal - the Provisional government, or the military men who engineered the coup? They don't necessarily agree on a policy for the African colonies.

Effect In Africa

One announced aim of the coup was to end the colonial wars in Africa. This is not easy to accomplish. Every one of the liberation movements issued statements giving restrained welcome to the coup. FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) said it "will doubtless be a step forward towards the establishment of democracy in Portugal". The MPLA (People's Movement for the
Liberation of Angola) statement saw "this change as a political factor which could lead to a more just position." All the movements made equally clear that any negotiations with Portugal must be on the basis of self-determination and independence. The PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) statement said that any solution to the problem with Portugal must be based on a new relationship which calls for "recognition of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau and of the right of our people in the Cape Verde Islands to self-determination and independence."

It was not precisely clear what the new regime in Portugal was ready to do. General Francis da Costa Gomes, the reinstated Chief of Staff, went on what was called a "fact-finding trip" to Angola and Mozambique early in May. He appealed to the liberation movements to lay down their arms and to become legitimate political parties. He said contacts would be made with the movements soon and he proposed negotiations. However, he did not offer anything concrete to the movements. After carrying on the struggle for independence for ten years or more, what incentive did they have for laying down their arms? Furthermore, in Mozambique, Gomes accompanied this offer of a cease-fire with a threat that the junta would intensify the war if the offer was refused. If FRELIMO rejects the offer "the majority of the parties (in Portugal) will surely be of the opinion that the fight must go on," he said. Yet, all of the liberation movements have indicated they were prepared to enter into negotiations. This was not new policy for them for they had always said this. The PAIGC declared "it is ready to begin negotiations with or without a cease-fire in Guinea-Bissau."

Ten days after General Gomes was in Mozambique, the Minister for Interterritorial Coordination (responsible for the African colonies), Dr. Antonio Almeida Santos, was there and talked differently. According to the New York Times (May 22) he said he expected Mozambique to become independent within the year. Which statement represents Portuguese policy?

Negotiations with the PAIGC began in London on May 25. No doubt they will also begin with movements in Angola and Mozambique soon. But the position the Portuguese government will take is not clear. Will independence be negotiated? Only this is acceptable to the movements. FRELIMO said "The Mozambican people are an entity quite distinct from the Portuguese people, and they have their own political, cultural and social personality which can only be realized through the independence of Mozambique." The statement went on to say: "FRELIMO also reaffirms that the definition of a Mozambican has nothing to do with skin color or racial, ethnic, religious or any other origin."

The Portuguese government has taken some steps towards making a new approach possible in the African colonies. Military leaders in Angola were replaced. The Governors-General of Angola and Mozambique were dismissed. The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces in Mozambique expressed support for the junta's policies and remained. Hundreds, but not all, of political prisoners were released from prison.

What does the future look like?

Several things can be said:
1) Guinea-Bissau: Portugal is likely, in time, to recognize the Republic of Guinea-Bissau. However, in all probability, it will not link the Cape Verde Islands to this. Therefore, the PAIGC struggle will continue on the Islands. There are probably no more than 3,000 Portuguese settlers in Guinea-Bissau and no significant economic projects upon which Portugal is dependent.

2) Angola: The problem will be much more complicated. About 10% of the population is Portuguese (some 500,000 people). They share control of the economy with Portugal and foreign economic interests. Angola is the wealthiest territory dominated by Portugal, with 6 million tons of crude oil produced annually, 7 million tons of iron ore, 2.2 million carats of mostly gem diamonds, a significant coffee production and export, and a developing fishing and cattle industry. General Gomes indicated he thought some way could be worked out for Portugal to maintain a relationship with Angola. The three liberation movements fighting in Angola, MPLA, FNLA, (National Front for Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) demand independence.

Thomas Johnson reported in the New York Times that 25 political parties have mushroomed in Angola since April 25, virtually all Portuguese settler groups. And yet the probability of the whites moving toward unilaterally declared independence, as did the whites in Rhodesia, is unlikely. The army in Angola is 60% African, but its power comes from Portugal, not Angola.

3) Mozambique: The problem will not be easy in Mozambique either. There are about 200,000 Portuguese settlers. Many new parties have sprung up there too. FRELIMO is a very strong movement and has been growing stronger rapidly in the last two years. It will stand unequivocally for independence. Yet the presence of new political groups may give the Portuguese regime an excuse for negotiating for a lesser objective than independence.

Portugal may be pressed hard by South Africa and Rhodesia not to come to terms with FRELIMO. In the last year and a half, FRELIMO has been cooperating with ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) by aiding the Zimbabwe (Rhodesian) nationalists to enter the northeastern part of their country through Mozambique. FRELIMO has threatened one of Rhodesia's life-lines to the outside world - the Beira-Umtali-Salisbury railroad. Further, as the FRELIMO forces and political organization have moved rapidly toward the southern part of Mozambique, South Africa has become increasingly concerned. The port of Lourenco Marques is used extensively for South African shipping. The Johannesburg Star observed in February this year, "... suddenly South Africa is taking worried notice because the Transvaal is not much further south and the African National Congress guerrillas could also travel with FRELIMO." There are already South African troops in Rhodesia and FRELIMO says they have been in Mozambique for some time too. The Cabora Bassa dam in Mozambique is backed mainly by South African capital. Will South Africa let this go?

So the problems of negotiating independence in Angola and Mozambique are tremendous.

4) If stability cannot be maintained in Portugal, Portugal can hardly deal effectively with what happens in Africa.

5) There is a new situation in Africa no matter what happens, even if there should be a counter right-wing military coup in Portugal. The Portuguese army, dependent to a considerable degree on drafted African troops, and reluctant
young Portuguese, can hardly be expected to have a strong will to carry on an extended war in Africa.

6) The economic interests with large assets, especially in Angola, will not want to give up what they have and may help to create confusion.

What About the U.S.

The best impression I have (from talks in Washington and with others familiar with the Washington scene) is that the U.S. government was unprepared for what happened in Portugal. Last December, when Kissinger visited Lisbon, he said to the leaders of the reactionary regime, "I would like to say that as far as the U.S. is concerned, our journey together is not finished." But now it is not so clear what this relationship will be with a left-leaning government in Portugal. It is a fact that the negotiations for a continuation of American use of the Azores base, which had been in progress, are stalled.

The U.S. has never had any dealings with the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies. Our government can hardly have much influence either with the movements or with Portuguese efforts to achieve a cease-fire. The U.S. still persists in giving no sign of recognizing the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, in spite of the fact that over 80 countries have already done so. It is absolutely shocking to realize that in early May, when the Republic of Guinea-Bissau was seeking membership in the World Health Organization in Geneva, the U.S. was the only country in the world to vote against it. Even Portugal avoided the issue by absenting itself.

How will the Developments Affect ACOA?

Our organization is now twenty years old. We were set up for the purpose of supporting the struggle for freedom in Africa and to bring a voice toward this end in the U.S. Back in 1960, when so many countries in Africa became independent, some of our friends optimistically said that our work would be finished in five years. Of course, that was far from the case. Although the developments in Portugal give hope of a new era to come in southern Africa, it is by no means clear that a victory has been won even in the Portuguese colonies.

ACOA will have to relate to the following factors:

1) The Provisional Government of Portugal and the military junta do not have a definite policy of recognizing the right of the African countries to independence. The struggle will go on until independence has been achieved.

2) Economic interests and the white minority regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia will try to influence Portugal not to give in to the legitimate liberation movements in Angola and especially in Mozambique.

3) The liberation movements have been geared to a protracted conflict in which their nation-building activities were part and parcel of their armed struggle. They will continue to need all the help they can get both in support of their demand for independence and in their national reconstruction work. We have been able to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to education, medical and economic development projects, especially through The Africa Fund over the years. This must continue.
4) U.S. policy is at best equivocal. We must continue to work hard to influence this policy. For example, the U.S. must be pressed to recognize Guinea-Bissau and its membership in the U.N. And the U.S. must make clear to South Africa its opposition to its use of military force in Mozambique.

5) The dominant power in southern Africa is the Republic of South Africa. There the apartheid policy is fully entrenched. It influences what will happen in Rhodesia, in Namibia, and in Mozambique and Angola. The threat of a race conflict with wider international involvement is still a very real danger. We must continue to play a role in strengthening the forces of African independence and of opposing the spread of racism.

We hope that the time for ACOA to decide whether to close up shop will come in the future, but it is not here yet. The issues we have related to have not been solved. Some of the toughest battles still lie ahead.