

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER ON  
THE SITUATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, AT  
THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF STATE  
CONFERENCE, IN SINGAPORE ON 20TH  
JANUARY, 1971

The subject which we are now discussing is undoubtedly one of crucial importance to the Commonwealth and, I venture to say, to the World. There are, of course, many other subjects which affect us very directly and significantly. But the area of Southern Africa is one of special interest to the Commonwealth.

Looking back at the affairs of Southern Africa over the past decade, a sense of gloom and bitterness is almost inescapable. I recall the early years of the sixties when one could discern a ray of hope. There was South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth. There were the resolutions of the Security Council in 1963 and 1964. Zambia became independent, as Tanzania was a few years earlier. There was hope that Southern Rhodesia too would soon be able to take her place as an independent state in the Commonwealth. There was expectation that the judgement of the International Court of Justice on the South West Africa case would soon lead that country along the path of self-determination and independence.

All that seems so long ago now. What has happened since? The debates at the United Nations take on an air of unreality. South Africa grows even stronger. Southern Rhodesia unilaterally declared its independence with the stated intention of maintaining White Power and, in the face of half-hearted measures, continues to flourish until she is today no less than a South Africa in miniature. The expected judgement from the International Court failed to materialise on a technicality decided by the casting vote of its President. South Africa today is in illegal occupation of South West Africa in open defiance of a United Nations decision. South Africa intervenes directly on the side of the Smith Regime against the liberation movement in Southern Rhodesia. South Africa actively supports and encourages Portugal in her colonial wars in Angola and Mozambique. With the very powerful forces at her disposal, South Africa seeks to intimidate independent African countries on her borders.

Thus, Mr Chairman, in the span of half a decade, the hopeful trends of the early sixties have been reversed. It is true that no single event is ever completely decisive. But a series of events accumulate to produce a certain trend, a certain result. The trend in Southern Africa gives rise to the gravest foreboding. By the inadequate response of the international community to the problems of Southern Africa in the last decade, they have been allowed to deteriorate into proportions which are now almost beyond our capacity to solve.

It is in this context that I have considered the proposed sales of arms by Britain to South Africa. On the face of it, such a sale may seem an isolated and a limited decision. But it must be seen as part of the total picture. What tendency does it represent? Where would it lead to? What are the consequences of that policy?

Let me first of all set out in brief some of these considerations which have led my Government to oppose any such sale.

Our view is that British fears about the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean can best be met by improving and consolidating her ties with independent African countries. The British proposal therefore is counter-productive in that it has precisely the effect of arousing the anger and bitterness of African countries and, therefore, provides perfect ground in which the feared penetration of the area by the Soviet Union and China could breed. We are doubtful of the military relevance of such arms as an effective counter to any increasing Soviet influence. Indeed we are aware that the proposed sale has come to assume a "symbolic" character. South Africa requires them from Britain rather than from other countries precisely for the symbolic value they have of giving her internally a certain measure of respectability.

Our policy on South Africa is based on the conviction that a change of heart by the South African authorities is only possible when they are convinced of their isolation, particularly from their Western friends. Events have shown that contacts with South Africa have done nothing to make her ameliorate, let alone abandon her policies. The proposed sale of arms would encourage the South African authorities to believe that, in the final analysis, they can still count on the assistance of their friends and thus further encourage them in their present intransigence. Our policy on South Africa is also based on giving assistance and encouragement to the liberation movement. The corollary of this is that

we are opposed to anything which would discourage or demoralise them. The proposed sale would have that effect and could in turn give rise to a more extremist leadership within the movement.

There is also the undeniable fact that such sale is contrary to General Assembly Resolution 1761 and in particular, contrary to Security Council Resolutions 181, 191 and 282. We are concerned at the erosion in the authority and prestige of the United Nations—indeed this is a matter which must be of concern to all countries. Our view, which we share with other members of the United Nations, is that the distinction between arms for external use and arms for internal repression is an unreal one. Studies have shown that the South African army and air force had used the equipment with which they have been provided against the opponents of apartheid. Furthermore, with her external defence secured, the South African authorities can turn even more relentlessly to internal repression.

Looking at the sale of arms to South Africa as a response to Soviet influence in the Indian Ocean area, one cannot help but be concerned that this can be only a small step away from supporting the existing regime in South Africa in other ways because of the fear that a change in the status quo would lead to greater communist influence in the area. It would be most unfortunate and extremely dangerous if Western interests are identified with keeping apartheid in power and Soviet and Communist interests are identified with the liberation movement.

Finally, Mr Chairman, in the Commonwealth context, we are very concerned about the effect on the Commonwealth of any such sale. We believe the Commonwealth to be a valuable institution which should be strengthened in every way possible. At the very least, nothing should be done to weaken it.

Having said all that I am naturally conscious that the points that I have made are always subject to further debate. I am aware of the different analyses and estimates of the nature of any Soviet threat, of the military value of the weapons to be supplied, and of the possibility of distinction between weapons for external and internal use. I am also aware of the reservations already made at United Nations on the various Security Council Resolutions. We can talk about these matters at length but let us not lose our way in the labyrinth of arguments.

The essential point I want to make to all those who have dealings with South Africa is that we shall not be drawn further into relations with South Africa; we should not be involved in an open-ended relationship with South Africa on defence matters; we should not bring the ideological war to South Africa; we should not let South Africa form part of Western defence in that area of the world with all the possibilities of diplomatic black-mail in the years ahead. The consequences of such policies are dangerous and ominous.

Let me in parenthesis make a passing reference to the assertion which is sometimes made that contacts and relations with the South African authorities could somehow over the years lead to the amelioration of apartheid. There is clearly no evidence to justify such a hope. In fact, all the evidence is to the contrary.

Mr Chairman, South Africa is not threatened, and obviously does not feel threatened, by African states. But she is seeking insurance for the future. She is, in short, seeking to involve the West in her defence and hence in the defence of her system. The British sale of arms can, therefore, be a small but ominous beginning. If such arms are necessary for the protection of Western interests in the area, would not further sales be necessary in the future for precisely the same purpose? And if such sales are not to be denied now, why should they be denied later? Where do we go from here? Surely the road leads straight towards the identification of Western interests with the apartheid regime and the identification of Communist interests, Russian and Chinese, with the liberation movements. This is precisely what South Africa wants.

Mr Chairman, it is well known that Malaysia's relations with the United Kingdom are close and cordial. She has stood by us in times of great danger and for this we are always grateful. It is, therefore, as a friend that I speak. I do not presume to advise, I only speak, as a friend should straight from the heart. Britain knows as Malaysia does, as indeed we all do, that apartheid is a doctrine of unmitigated evil, that it is being implemented with cruel ruthlessness, that it is designed to preserve the privileged position of a White minority. I know that Britain finds this doctrine abhorrent, as much as we all do. But this abhorrence and this concern must be manifested in concrete action and policies. Otherwise, it will only give the opportunity to those who

are ill-willed those who are bent on spreading discord and suspicion, those who are seeking to advance their own ends—it will only give them the opportunity to spread the malicious accusation that considerations of race and colour will lead certain White nations, in the final analysis, to stand on the side of the apartheid regime. We must give the lie to these accusations. We cannot merely stand as witnesses on the side-lines to the unutterable tragedy of apartheid. We must do what we can to combat it. At the very least, we must not do anything which can assist it. That is the spirit in which I make my appeal to the British Government.