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Author

Karunaratne, J.A.

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WHITE SOUTH AFRICA'S RESPONSE TO THREATS OF DISINVESTMENT

J.A. Karunaratne

White South Africans are almost unanimous in opposing sanctions against the country. This includes liberal, White opponents of the nationalist government such as M.P. Helen Suzman, who wants the West to apply moral rather than economic pressure, and Mr. Raymond Louw, editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* for ten years, who wants the West to "kill apartheid with kindness."

Within the Black community sanctions are opposed by those who work within the system and who hold moderate views, such as Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, head of the Kwazulu Bantustan, and Mrs. Lucy Mvubelo, Black deputy vice president of the right-wing Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). These spokespersons use the argument that disinvestment would cripple Black South Africans.

On the other hand, all the major, black political movements that have grown up in South Africa--the ANC, the PAC and the Black Peoples Convention--are united in calling for isolation of the country as a part of the struggle against apartheid. They have learned that white South Africans will concede nothing to the Black majority without being forced to do so.

The South African Government's response to increasing calls for sanctions is: (1) to get White South Africans economically and psychologically prepared to face increasing isolation; (2) to wage a massive anti-sanctions propaganda campaign abroad; (3) to seek new Third World allies, and (4) intensified politicizing to enforce calm in Black living areas so as to reassure nervous foreign interests that their money will be secure.

There is a very real fear of isolation and the crippling effects it could have on White control of the country; but the face that the government presents to the world, and to its own public, is one of arrogance and scepticism. "Threats of sanctions are all bluff," Vorster, the ex-prime minister, often said before the arms embargo was imposed. Within South Africa this stance is convincing. Despite many threats of boycotting, sanctions and disinvestment over the years, there has been little effective action.

The opponents of apartheid have never yet succeeded in persuading any large Western country, or even multinational cor-

porations with a significant stake in the country, to pull out. Furthermore, South Africa was used by many countries as a secret route for breaking sanctions against Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), and South Africa is well aware that there are many ways of trading under the table. Therefore, South Africans in general believe that the arms embargo is having very little real effect.

To boost racist confidence and preparedness, South African government spokespersons constantly give assurances that, if necessary, the republic will go it alone and will resist all outside pressures for change. "The world can do its damndest," said ex-Prime Minister Vorster some time ago and the present Prime Minister, Pik Botha, said at a university meeting, "Even if we have to eat porridge three times a day and go back to the land for our living, we will do it in order to survive sanctions."

The response to the demands of the Black majority has always been one of stubbornness and violence. It is this stubbornness that will drive White South Africans to full-scale war rather than give the vote to the African majority, and it is with this same stubbornness that they will try to resist outside pressures.

To prepare the public to resist the sanctions, the media constantly repeat arguments such as: sanctions could only cause disruptions in the short term; a total embargo would never materialize because it would be too politically and economically damaging to the West; the sanctions are hypocritical because South African Blacks enjoy a better standard of living than those elsewhere in Africa, and things will ease up once President Carter goes and Britain's Labour government falls.

The most common and crude argument is, of course, the communist threat. For example, an Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Transvader*, in discussing sanctions, refers to "a well-organized, world propaganda campaign against South Africa in which the Kremlin's masterly hand is clearly visible." This campaign, the newspaper continues, "is so successful that even the Carter administration of the United States, still in its infancy in terms of foreign policy, tries to hitch a ride."

When Polaroid pulled out of South Africa at the end of 1977, the media conducted a smear campaign against the corporation and branded its sanctions a public relations gimmick. It was pointed out that Polaroid was only losing one million dollars in sales out of total sales of one billion dollars and its gestures would probably reap rich rewards. The republic's *Sunday Times* reported that "Polaroid equipment is today being sold, with the acknowledgment and consent of the corporation, in one-party dictatorships where people are tortured and murdered by the state and all dissention is ruthlessly oppressed." Polaroid was thus

being hypocritical, said the *Sunday Times*.

Similarly, after editor Donald Woods fled the country in 1977 and began supporting sanctions against the South African White regime, his former journalist colleagues turned angrily against him. They termed his statements wild and extreme and suggested that he was being unwittingly used by South Africa's enemies. The press continues to paint a picture of him as a traitor and an opportunist who used the death of Steve Biko to further his own interests.

On the other hand, when Ford and BMW announced in January 1978 that they intended not only to remain in South Africa but also to increase their investments, they were hailed by every newspaper in the country with banner headlines such as "Thank you, Mr. Ford."

On the whole, White South Africans, who mostly do not look beyond their own media, have been convinced that calls for isolation come from a minority of radical extremes. This view is further supported by the wide publicity given to any foreign, right-wing journalists or economists--usually American--who oppose disinvestment. These are presented in South Africa as the reasoned voices of authoritative sources.

What the South African media almost never does, however, is to examine why the international community is threatening to isolate South Africa or to admit that the problem arises within the country and not in the Kremlin or elsewhere.

This morale boosting indicates that the government is fully expecting external pressures to increase and is rapidly trying to lessen dependence on the outside world for vital supplies. One weak spot in South Africa's defense system is oil. South Africa has no oil deposits of her own and is currently spending billions on exploring the offshore coast for possible oil deposits, getting industry to convert to coal fuel wherever possible, trying to boost production of oil from coal, stockpiling vast amounts of crude oil, etc. Iran was the major oil-exporting country to South Africa. The result of the recent changes in Iran would have been catastrophic except for the ability of the multi-national companies to draw on alternative sources.

Businessmen are urged to lessen their dependence on foreign goods and services and to prepare for an "economy of survival." Recently the chief of the South African Defense Force (SADF), addressing the Chamber of Congress, said that wherever possible, South Africa must become self-sufficient. "We must produce more and we must develop our technology further."

The most important weapon against South Africa was no longer the gun, he said, "but commerce and industry, boycotts and subversion." In its daily propaganda broadcasts, Radio South Africa tells its listeners that not only the state and big business, but also the workers and housewives, have to contribute to an economic survival plan. There are many more examples. The American ban on sales of computers to the SADF has already led to the growth of a homegrown computer industry, using Israeli components. And, of course, the government is holding discussions with Israel and other countries to determine how sanctions can be circumvented.

Inside the country, there is a lot of activity devoted to psychological and economic preparedness. Abroad, there is a massive campaign being waged on many fronts to convince the outside world that sanctions would be both futile and counter-productive. This campaign is well funded and takes many forms: full-page advertisements in national newspapers, such as the *London Times*, *The New York Times* and the *Guardian*, quoting views of persons such as Buthelezi and Oppenheimer; constant visits abroad by persons, such as heart surgeon Dr. Chris Barnard, M.P. Helen Suzman, Mrs. Lucy Mvubelo and cabinet ministers, who address gatherings on the negative effects that isolation will have on South Africa. There is also, of course, intensive lobbying at diplomatic levels.

Foreign individuals or representatives of groups abroad, who are thought to be influential and potentially sympathetic, are frequently invited to visit South Africa at government expense, to come and see for themselves. They are taken on carefully guided tours. Recently, Dr. Barnard was in Kenya and his invitation to Attorney General Charles Njonjo to visit South Africa and see for himself may yet be taken up.

The first line of argument of the South African government and its apologists is often that even if strict embargoes are imposed, they will not work. Afrikaner economists appear on TV and are faithfully reported on other South African media as making authoritative-sounding statements to the effect that sanctions could probably not be carried out. If they are imposed, said one economist, South Africa would just start new industries. The minister of finance, Senator Horwood, told the South African-Britain Trade Association that "the threat of sanctions and boycotts need not alarm us unusually. Common sense and economic facts make the isolation of South Africa impossible." The argument goes on to say that isolation will hurt the West politically more than it hurts South Africa. "Let us consider Britain's dilemma at first," said the government publication *South African Digest* recently, "the British Association of Industries has calculated that the trade boycott against South Africa would increase Britain's

unemployment figure by 70,000 and lose it an export market worth \$1 billion a year. It would also cripple the harbor town of Southampton and such consequences would be disastrous for Mr. Callaghan's Labour party government. As for President Carter of the U.S., his popularity is waning fast and he urgently needs a foreign policy success. He is well aware of the importance of Pretoria's cooperation in achieving settlements in Zimbabwe and in Namibia."

Developing this line of reasoning, it is stated that effective sanctions will, in fact, seriously disrupt the world economy, doing more harm to the economies of the West than in South Africa itself. The South African media gave much prominence, some months ago, to statements by the American Secretary of State for African Affairs, Mr. Richard Moose, who, after supplying figures, said that "U.S. assets subject to South African control and expropriation outweigh South African assets subject to U.S. control and expropriation by more than \$4 billion. The hard fact, said Mr. Moose, "is that South Africa has more cards to play than we do in this area."

The most common argument aimed at Western governments is, of course, that the West needs South Africa for strategic reasons, as a bulwark against communist domination of the southern subcontinent and as a protector of the important Cape Sea Route. Governments are reminded that when the UN was debating the arms embargo against South Africa in 1977, the Egyptians decided not to permit a British nuclear submarine, the *Dreadnought*, to pass through the Suez Canal on its way to naval exercises in the Pacific. America is reminded that half of its oil imports come via the Cape Sea Route. Governments are also reminded that South Africa provides the great bulk of the Western world's strategic metals: 99 percent of its platinum, 84 percent of its chrome and manganese, 61 percent of its gold and 40 percent of its titanium (not to mention having one of the largest uranium mines in the world under its control).

A point made in almost every discussion of sanctions by South African sources is that South Africa's Black population will suffer more than South African Whites and neighboring Black states would suffer particularly. A propagandist of the South African regime put it this way, "The needy Blacks in South Africa will be cast into widespread misery. From this could come evil things and South Africa will be told that it and it alone is to be blamed."

The South African Information Service in Washington, D.C., which is fully engaged in the vigorous effort to counteract the disinvestment campaign, recently issued a report to American bankers, financiers and multi-nationals. The report contained

arguments which these organizations could use to answer those demanding disinvestment. It noted that South Africa deals regularly with twenty-three African countries and that several others were occasional customers; some 170,000 workers from Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland were employed in South Africa; these three and other nearby Black states were dependent on South Africa for their economic well being. Curbs on foreign investment, the report stated, would seriously harm the fragile economies of neighboring Black African states. More recently, South Africa has pointed to Zambia's opening of the route through Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) as proof of this argument.

In July 1979 the South African government widely distributed an article by the editor of the *Economist's Weekly Newsletter*, Robert Moss. Mr. Moss wrote that the shrinkage of the South African economy as a result of major disinvestment would almost cripple Mozambique which sends more than 100,000 migrant workers to the South African gold mines each year. If boycott campaigns succeed, he wrote, "hundreds of thousands of Blacks within South Africa would be condemned to rural under-employment in the homelands. Many Blacks now working in industry would lose their jobs."

Ex-Prime Minister Vorster, referring to threats of an oil embargo, said at a public meeting that "we have made provisions so that they cannot kill us. But if they come with that sort of boycott, it will kill Botswana, it will kill Lesotho and it will kill other African countries."

The favorite argument of English-speaking South African businessmen is that only in a healthy, expanding economy can reforms be brought about. One could see this reasoning in publications controlled by Harry Oppenheimer. An economist, Aubrey Dickman, wrote in an Anglo-American quarterly, *Optima*, last year that "a renewed growth phase virtually will dictate the removal of the remaining obstacles to full integration of Blacks into the free enterprise system." Another false argument in this vein is that foreign business in South Africa is a primary catalyst for liberalization of the apartheid system.

One of the weaker arguments presented in the international community is that more notice should be taken of reforms that the South African government has instituted, such as desegregation of parks, allowing multi-racial sporting events, allowing Blacks to do some skilled jobs and initiating moves to create a Black bourgeoisie.

In conclusion, then, it is apparent that South Africa fears moves such as constraints on investment and is putting a huge effort into trying to prevent such action from being taken against the country. South Africa believes, probably justifiably

so, that the West is uncertain and divided on the issue of isolation, and the South African government is trying to increase such division.

South Africa is presently engaged in an all-out effort to strip its 20 million Africans of their citizenship and there is no doubt that with continued investment, South Africa would continue to pursue its Bantustan policy, perfect its police control of the Black population and modernize its military machine.

The international community realizes that the emancipation of the majority of the population in South Africa is not an end in itself, but a gigantic step toward the achievement of basic human rights for all the peoples of the world.