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Military Intervention in Lesotho: Perspectives on Operation Boleas and Beyond

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On 22 September 1998, the early morning silence of Lesotho was shattered by the sounds of Operation Boleas when 600 South African soldiers moved in. Thus began the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) operation in an effort to deal with the deteriorating security situation in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho. Although it was said to be a combined military taskforce, consisting of the South African National Defense Force (SANDF) and the Botswana Defense Force (BDF), it was until after nightfall on 22 September that approximately 200 Botswana troops arrived in Maseru.

The operation primarily resulted from the dissatisfaction of the opposition parties who demanded that King Letsie III use his powers to dismantle the parliament, since they believed that it had been fraudulently elected.⁽¹⁾ In light of this, mutinous members of the Lesotho Defense Force (LDF) seized arms and ammunition and expelled or imprisoned their commanding officers. Government vehicles were hijacked, the broadcasting station was closed, and the Prime Minister and other ministers were virtually held hostage. The Lesotho police had lost control of the situation and, as far as the SANDF was concerned, there were fears that a military coup was being planned.⁽²⁾

The **mission** of the combined task force was, "...to intervene militarily in Lesotho to prevent any further anarchy and to create a stable environment for the restoration of law and order".⁽³⁾ The **battle concept** was described as, "[t]he deployment of forces in order to locate and identify destabilizes and destabilizer resources, to disarm and contain them and to strike where applicable with the necessary force to eliminate the threat".⁽⁴⁾ The **desired result** was

- to create a stable environment in Lesotho; and
- to restore law and order to enable negotiations to take place between the political parties in Lesotho.⁽⁵⁾

The South African government insisted that the military intervention did not constitute an invasion.⁽⁶⁾ The decision was based on and justified by the fact that SADC was directly approached by the Prime Minister of Lesotho, Pakalitha Mosisili, who requested intervention;⁽⁷⁾ that the intervention was based on agreements reached in SADC; that all attempts at peacefully resolving the dispute had failed; and that South Africa had intervened to protect certain South African interests such as the Katse Dam water scheme. It was furthermore stated that the Lesotho government was democratically elected (despite certain irregularities during the election process) and that it was increasingly required of South Africa to play a role in regional peacekeeping efforts.⁽⁸⁾ In addition, it was stated that the decision had notified ambitious elements in the military forces in the region that in no member state would the political aspirations of any military faction be tolerated, and that South Africa's commitment to this policy was also a commitment to development in the region.⁽⁹⁾

From a South African viewpoint, it was not just a simple and insignificant operation in a small neighboring state. It was a dramatic event and a milestone for the new South Africa - the first time that the post apartheid government ever deployed troops on foreign soil in a conflict situation. By doing so, it has changed its relationship with Lesotho and the region. Another important point is the fact that the operation was conducted in the full glare of the media.

The result of the operation was described in journalistic terms as "a loss of innocence" as it "announced the arrival of a very different South Africa; Big Brother is bashful no longer".⁽¹⁰⁾ Moreover, a heated debate had been heard eliciting a variety of viewpoints from reporters, analysts, and government spokespersons on the appropriateness of SADC's intervention in Lesotho. Hence, this paper is an attempt to shed some light on a number of issues featured in the public debate in South Africa on **Operation Boleas**. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to provide perspectives from a military viewpoint, with special reference to the South African forces that participated in the operation, as well as the context in which the operation took place.

Media reaction and government response

As far as media reports are concerned, the intervention operation in Lesotho became South Africa's school of hard knocks, especially in light of the higher than expected rate of casualties. Newspaper headlines referred to Operation Boleas as, "[t]he incursion that went wrong";⁽¹¹⁾ "[f]earful milestone for South Africa"⁽¹²⁾ and "SANDF blunder"⁽¹³⁾. Moreover, as arson and looting in Maseru resulted in several deaths, the effect of the operation was described as "[a] city ruined by bungled intervention"⁽¹⁴⁾ and "Lesotho tarnishes SA's peacemakers image."⁽¹⁵⁾ The following reports reflected and typified the general attitude of a large part of the media:

"Burning and smoldering buildings. Indiscriminate and unchecked arson and looting. At least 66 people killed. A once-thriving city practically destroyed. These were the costs of this week's SA-led 'peacekeeping' mission to Lesotho following almost two months of protests by opposition parties against the results of the mountain kingdom's May elections. During those weeks, the opposition loudly proclaims only five people were killed and 'not a single window was broken.' Anyone present in Lesotho this week would have found it difficult to argue with that point of view. The situation was rich in irony, however well intentioned and legally correct Tuesday's dawn incursion by 600 SA National Defense Force (SANDF) troops may have been. Its legal correctness is under dispute, as is the motive behind what is variously described as an 'invasion', 'incursion' or 'intervention', depending upon to whom one speaks" [\(16\)](#);

and

"Apartheid South Africa had a history of being cruel and arrogant towards this mountain kingdom that very few people outside South Africa ever heard of... They (our neighbors) maintain that the new South Africa is every bit as arrogant towards them as the old South Africa was... The real damage has been done at home. Mistakes that cost money can be explained away. Mistakes that send boys in body bags demand straight answers. We need some assurance that they will not happen again." [\(17\)](#)

The SANDF was likewise heavily criticized for what was perceived as severely underestimating its task against the mutinous LDF. One reporter portrayed the general outlook as follows:

"The SA forces were also dangerously understrength, more than likely because of poor intelligence about the level of resistance anticipated, and entered the country prepared for a best-case rather than a worst-case scenario. So instead of securing the capital and preserving peace and stability, as was the mission's intention, SANDF troops became tied up in a protracted battle with mutineers, giving opposition supporters the opportunity to plunder, loot and burn the city centre." [\(18\)](#);

another reporter presented the following view:

"Before entering, SA should have rattled more sabres and, if then decided that intervention was unavoidable, it should have gone in with enough force to keep casualties to a minimum and prevent the widespread rioting that has destroyed the Maseru city centre. Militarily, the operation was bungled due to poor intelligence about the likely level of resistance, inexperience and a lack of co-ordination with the Botswana forces which arrived a day late". [\(19\)](#)

It soon became clear that the media played a crucial role in interpreting news and events in respect of Operation Boleas. Predictably, government spokespersons quickly responded to the aforementioned reporting. In fact, the media establishment was challenged for its perceived inaccurate or biased reporting on the operation. Fink Haysom, legal advisor in the Office of the President, blamed the

media for its blindness "to the values and sacrifices behind the Lesotho intervention" as a result of an "unprofessional rush to fashionable and superficial judgement".⁽²⁰⁾ In addition, presidential spokesperson, Parks Mankahlana, publicly claimed the following:

"The candidness of our Government does not deserve to be rewarded with verbal abuse and disingenuous disregard for facts as we saw... Neither should it legitimize sloppy comment and lackadaisical appraisal of what we believe most South Africans regard to be serious national and international developments. Perceived executive errors do not give license to the prostitution of the truth or the manipulation of fears of an impending apocalypse or even conventional stereotypes about government on the African continent as understood by cynics and detractors of both our Government and everything that is African..."

"We all depend on them (the media) to know what is happening in the country and the world. There is therefore an obligation on the part of the media not only to report accurately, but to offer informed comment as well. True, the media has an entertainment role. But entertainment of the opponents of the Government cannot happen at the expense of decent comment."⁽²¹⁾

Mankahlana rightly concluded that many and varied voices had been heard on the appropriateness of the SADC's intervention in Lesotho. To this end, he stated that it was difficult to establish whether the mission could be regarded as successful or not.⁽²²⁾ This statement begs the following questions:

- Were the main political and military objectives of Operation Boleas accomplished?
- How did the combined task force and the SANDF in particular perform in the framework of challenges and perils normally associated with operations of this kind?
- Which factors were of special significance in the conducting and the outcome of the operation?

Some thoughts in this regard are sketched below.

Military aspects of the operation

From a military point of view, it would seem that, unlike many other previous multinational operations on African soil, the SANDF was not hampered by political uncertainty over the political and strategic objectives of the operation. It is quite clear that the intervention was intended to establish control over the South African-Lesotho border, to protect South African assets, and to stabilize Maseru in order to create a safe environment in which Lesotho's problems could be negotiated. Accordingly, the military planners of Operation Boleas were able to define a clear mission, a battle concept and a desired result for the operation.⁽²³⁾

At the same time, there appears to be substantial evidence that the decision to send troops to Lesotho marked a sea change by the South African government which, after failing to persuade the quarreling parties to sit down and talk to each other, suddenly called upon the SANDF to intervene in the

mountain kingdom.⁽²⁴⁾ This has left the SANDF without a proper contingency plan, especially in light of vagueness and uncertainty concerning the ambit of South Africa's foreign policy framework for peace enforcement. Moreover, SANDF units were not fully combat-ready, as time was too short for proper planning, preparing deployment drills and rehearsals by the units involved. In addition, stock-level planning for operational reserves was not properly done, resulting in a strain on supplies.

On the positive side, there is no substantial indication that Operation Boleas was really hampered by financial constraints in terms of its day-to-day requirements. Neither were the combined task forces troubled by serious or substantial difficulties as regards long-distance deployment, command-and-control arrangements, sound civil-military relations, linguistic problems and diverse military cultures, poor quality of the participating forces, and a lack of command functionaries with proper managerial skills. In fact, it can be stated the South African and Botswanan forces and their support systems rate amongst the best on African soil.

Yet, Operation Boleas did experience certain shortcomings and problems. It would especially seem that, probably as a result of intelligence reports on the situation in Lesotho, the SANDF's assessment was somewhat over-optimistic and resulted in a force too weak to handle the operational requirements and, especially, the level of resistance on the part of LDF elements.⁽²⁵⁾ However, this should not simply be made the scapegoat for the higher rate of casualties than had been expected since enforcement action is seldom "tidy" and the "fog of war" most often plays a role as regards operational difficulties encountered. In fact, the SANDF has admitted that the deployment phase was marked by a few tactical errors.⁽²⁶⁾

From a military viewpoint perhaps most difficult was the fact that the South African government was not in a position to convince the media of the merits of Operation Boleas. The media generally questioned the framework or ambit within which the decision to intervene in Lesotho was made and maintained that a military solution was too easily opted for. It was claimed that efforts by the South African government to find a negotiated political settlement were not exhausted and that the enforcement action did not reflect an approach that elevates persuasion, conciliation, and nonviolent coercion above the use of force. For a large part of the media, the operation resembled a military invasion and occupation of the Kingdom of Lesotho. These critical claims and viewpoints pertaining to the political handling of the operation seemed to have negatively influenced the media's general attitude towards the military or operational aspects of the operation - although some of the criticism cannot be slated as totally unjustified and unfounded. However, from later reports it does appear that a return to normality in Lesotho and progress in the party political negotiations (after months of instability) have eventually tempered the initial critical and negative reporting.

Over and above, one cannot disagree with the Chief of the SANDF, Gen Nyanda, that the military objectives defined in the mandate were accomplished,⁽²⁷⁾ despite the fact that certain tactical errors were made and the degree of armed resistance encountered was greater than had been anticipated. To this end, it would be fair to state from a clinically military viewpoint that Operation Boleas had been successfully conducted, as it did succeed in stabilizing the security situation in Lesotho and safeguarded South Africa's interests in that country. However, from a political perspective South Africa involved itself in the internal politics of Lesotho and it is yet to be seen whether the operation

has paved the way for fresh elections in pursuit of a long-term political goal and settlement. On the whole, much of the success of Operation Boleas will depend upon the answers to this question.

Modalities for SADC military intervention

One of the greatest difficulties pertaining to Operation Boleas was clearly its political justification from a regional perspective. Much confusion surrounded the modalities for security co-operation under the auspices of SADC. In August 1998, SADC became the focus of international attention when Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia decided to take part in an intervention operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The decision was based on requests from President Laurent Kabila for military assistance (DRC became a member of SADC in 1997) against advancing rebel forces.⁽²⁸⁾ Still, the undertaking was *ad hoc* and was not organized under SADC auspices, although it did receive retroactive endorsement from SADC.⁽²⁹⁾

South Africa specifically emphasized the need for a peaceful solution and declined to send troops. The South African decision eventually proved to be a wise one, since Rwanda and Uganda decided to engage in the conflict in support of the rebel movement, while Chad and Sudan were subsequently drawn in to fight on the side of Kabila.⁽³⁰⁾ Another important point relates to the fact that Zimbabwe and Angola were criticized, as reporters claimed that Zimbabwe's main motive was an effort to promote Zimbabwean business interests in the Congo. Similarly, it was reported that Angola's interest was to prevent the Angolan rebel force, Unita, from using the DRC as a rear-base.⁽³¹⁾

On 31 August, the UN Security Council issued a statement calling for a cease-fire in the DRC, the withdrawal of all foreign forces, and the opening of political dialogue towards national reconciliation. The statement also repeated an earlier call for an international conference on peace, security, and development in the region to be held under the auspices of the UN and the Organisation for African Unity (OAU).⁽³²⁾ However, at the 18th SADC Summit held in Mauritius on 13 and 14 September 1998 the SADC Heads of State and Government "...welcomed initiatives by SADC and its Member States intended to assist in the restoration of peace, security and stability in DRC...".⁽³³⁾

In September 1998, shortly after Kabila's request for assistance, South Africa and Botswana intervened in Lesotho in an attempt to assist the Lesotho government in restoring law and order following the election-related unrest. The undertaking was labeled as a 'SADC force' in name after a series of phone calls between the relevant heads of state.⁽³⁴⁾ The intervention was immediately questioned as some observers claimed that the operation went beyond existence in international law as only the point that South Africa had intervened to protect certain South African interests, such as the Katse Dam, would seem to have clear existence in international law. It was, furthermore, specifically pointed out that there were no clear guidelines on the part of SADC regarding military responses to internal conflicts in SADC member countries.⁽³⁵⁾

Several questions were raised in the light of the aforementioned situation. Some relevant questions were:

- On what basis should SADC countries in general, and South Africa in particular, become involved in intervention operations, and was the SANDF's enforcement action in Lesotho legitimate?
- Should the UN Security Council grant permission for intervening in such cases?
- What about future responses to internal conflicts in terms of SADC objectives?

Authorizing military intervention

It can be rightly argued that any justification for a military intervention on the grounds that it is in the interest of peace must proceed from the assumption that such justification cannot be contradictory to the purpose and principles of the UN, as embodied in the Charter of the world body.⁽³⁶⁾ To this end, Article 24 of the Charter confers upon the UN Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Article 52 deals with "regional arrangements" and states that nothing in the Charter precludes the existence of regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with matters relating to the maintenance of international peace and security. Yet, intervention operations should not be contemplated without UN authorization, as Article 53 of the UN Charter clearly states that "...no enforcement action shall be taken under regional arrangement or by regional agencies without the authorization of the Security Council...".⁽³⁷⁾

Some analysts rightly argue that the internal affairs of many countries have become an important component of the new world order, making intervention a legitimate right. It can even be regarded as an obligation upon the international community whenever a risk or threat to international peace arises. This implies that the broad community of nations has a legitimate right and responsibility to intervene when conditions require people to preserve peace.⁽³⁸⁾

The question is: Given the sustained importance of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, when should a situation in an African state be considered to have deteriorated to such an extent that the security of people has been violated to the point that it requires an international and/or regional response on humanitarian grounds?

Until recently, intervention operations were conducted under the auspices of the UN and under the guise of peacekeeping -- especially peace enforcement. The UN operation in Somalia is a typical example as it was basically a peacemaking operation based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter. However, recent developments in Africa, with special reference to intervention in Sierra Leone, the DRC, and Lesotho, have pointed toward intervention operations without UN endorsement.

Co-ordinating military intervention

It should be noted that the formulation of UN mandates is generally a time-consuming process that does not *per se* provide for swift intervention in internal crises. For example, in the conflicts in Angola and Rwanda, the UN forces were brought in at a fairly late stage of the proceedings.⁽³⁹⁾ Moreover, it can be argued that in recent experiences, the OAU has found that even when Africans are prepared to provide the forces for deployment in UN operations in Africa, the Security Council

has been reluctant to authorize such missions. One explanation is that some of the Security Council members are unwilling to commit resources to African operations that may continue for indefinite periods. This was the case in Congo Brazzaville, Sierra Leone, and the Comoros.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In addition, some analysts argue that the current UN structure is not suitable to the proper conduct of intervention operations.⁽⁴¹⁾

What seems to be important is to address potential conflicts or coups before they can take place or escalate beyond control. This was strikingly articulated by the Officer Commanding Operation Boleas, Colonel Robbie Hartslief, who suggested that "...this kind of intervention (in Lesotho) be accepted as a new kind of peace operation in Africa, because such operations may prevent a massive loss of lives and enormous economic damage". According to Hartslief, everything possible must be done to prevent civil war, and this can be achieved only if intervention takes place before armed conflict can occur. "The problem is that people romanticize peace support operations. It would seem to me that firstly they want to have an outbreak of civil war, then a cease-fire, then an agreement which is acknowledged by the UN, and only then should the peace force move in".⁽⁴²⁾

At the same time, it should be remembered that peacekeeping is essentially a UN responsibility, that it should be endorsed by the world body, and conducted in accordance with the internationalist ethos of the UN Charter. This would imply that any justification for military intervention on the grounds that it is in the interest of peace must proceed from the assumption that it is not contradictory to the UN Charter. To this end, some analysts suggest that intervention operations should be led by regional organizations or military alliances, or even a single nation, under the political authorization of the UN.⁽⁴³⁾ However, this would imply that the formulation of UN mandates should not inhibit swift intervention in internal crises, and that regional or sub-regional organizations should clearly provide for guidelines as regards military responses to internal conflicts within the framework of sound objectives. Besides, no organization may ever prop up any questionable government and the legitimacy of a particular leader may never be in the eye of the beholder. In addition, no military intervention should ever go beyond the ambit of international law, since the international community or regional groupings are obviously in no position to engage or interfere in any country's domestic affairs in unqualified terms.

What is also significant is the fact that the UN now seems prepared to form partnerships with willing regional organizations and alliances in Africa as far as operations for maintaining peace and security are concerned. This relates to the idea of a shared responsibility between the UN and continental stakeholders for the effective management of conflict in Africa. As such, Africa is the first continent where extensive efforts have been made recently between the UN and the OAU with the specific objective of enhancing the management of conflicts in the region.⁽⁴⁴⁾ However, many issues remain unclear as regards an ideal arrangement between the UN, the OAU and other role-players. If these and the above-mentioned issues remain unclear, the justification and motives of interventionists in regional conflicts are likely to be called into question, and consequently the military aspects of the operation are also likely to be subjected to a greater deal of criticism and scrutiny. Operation Boleas is probably a case in point as many reporters and analysts seemed to be unclear on the mission's exact intention and on the ambit of South Africa's foreign policy framework in respect of peace making efforts.

Conclusion

In view of the preceding, it would be of great value if the relevant groupings (and countries) in Africa could develop a set of broad principles for responsibilities to preserve regional security. It is advisable that they should especially determine clear means to respond appropriately and speedily to threats to peace, in co-operation with the UN and other stakeholders. It is imperative to develop such principles so as to avoid a haphazard, reactive response and decisions implemented hurriedly in reaction to unforeseen crises -- especially as African countries and organisations are accepting an increasing burden of responsibility for conflict prevention and resolution on the continent. It is likewise of major interest that African governments should not send a message to the world that Africans prefer different methods for dealing collectively with conflict than those accepted by the UN. Hence, it would seem that the legal basis for delegating responsibilities for maintaining peace and security in the African context needs to be clarified.

What has been highlighted by Operation Boleas is the need for an overarching political framework in which SADC countries - and South Africa in particular - can exercise judgement and undertake enforcement action within a circumscribed framework. The challenge is to establish an acceptable basis for involvement or intervention in intrastate conflicts or threats to regional peace that respects the dignity and independence of states without sanctioning the misuse of sovereign rights to violate the security of people residing within a state's borders. Suffice it to say that regional enforcement action is extremely difficult, risky and expensive. Such operations should, therefore, be contemplated in the realm of international law and be governed by a clear set of broad principles for responsibilities to preserve regional security. Multinational operations in the name of peace and security reside in the interface between political and military affairs and success in any operation of this kind depends upon a broad political process. The SANDF's intervention in Lesotho clearly bears testimony to this.

Notes

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2. T Sutton-Pryce, C Baudin and N Allie, "Baptism of Fire for SANDF", *Salut*, November 1998, p 26.
3. Internet site <http://www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-2.htm>, March 1999.
4. Presentation by Colonel Robbie Hartslief, Officer Commanding *Operation Boleas*, Maseru, 2 October 1998.
5. Internet site <http://www.mil.za/SANDF/Current%20Ops/Boleas/Boleas-2.htm>, *op cit*.
6. M Buthelezi, "It was Intervention, Not an SA Invasion", *The Star*, 6 October 1998, p 6.
7. Originally four countries were requested to participate, namely Botswana, Mozambique, South

Africa and Zimbabwe, but in the event only South Africa and Botswana were physically able to help.

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11. J-J Cornish, "The Incursion that Went Wrong", *Pretoria News*, 26 September 1998, p 5.

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17. J-J Cornish, *op cit*, p 5.

18. K O'Grady, *op cit*, p 11.

19. P Fabricius, *op cit*, p 14.

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22. *Ibid*, p 12.

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42. A Stofberg, "SA moet mag nou steun", *Beeld*, 3 October 1998, p 9.
43. C Bir, *op cit*, p 25.
44. M Vogt, *op cit*, p 1.

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