

A note of South African foreign policy and the "Muslim world."

South Africa's main foreign policy concerns were reflected in its African location very clearly during 1998. The civil war in the Congo, and its intervention in Lesotho were two areas of involvement that most clearly reflected increasing South African interest and participation in African events. South Africa wants a role on the continent but it has yet to define and elaborate that role. On the broad 'third world' stage the significant event of the year was the Non-Aligned Movement conference in Durban in September at which South Africa assumed the chairmanship of the NAM.

The whole range of Muslim states received their share of the government's attention. President Mandela continued to develop ties with the oil-rich Gulf states. At times it appeared that the ties were based on recent personal friendships that were enabling political relations and trade. He travelled to the Gulf States, while Vice-President Mbeki led a delegation of Ministers to Saudi Arabia to conclude lucrative deals with the Kingdom. Mbeki signed the biggest export deal in South Africa's history amounting to R8,5 billion. South Africa would export G6 motorised artillery pieces and anti-aircraft weapons to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. In 1997 President Mandela had signed a preliminary agreement for the supply of 15,000 barrels of crude oil a day. It is possible that the new agreement would also involve payment in crude oil. Since 1994 Saudi Arabia and South Africa have been enhancing their economic ties, but it is largely of an arms-for-oil nature.

Algeria became an important partner in 1997 after a series of deals were concluded between that country and various South African companies and the state sector itself. But by the end of 1998 South Africa still had no ambassador in Algiers.

South Africa and Egypt entered into three new trade and investment protection agreements aimed at promoting bilateral trade. The Minister of Public Works Jeff Radebe led a trade delegation in October to the third session of the joint commission on co-operation between the two countries. The two countries are Africa's strongest economies. Nigeria and Algeria are also large economies with both of which South Africa has been developing trade relations.

Closer to home South Africa asserted its role as a leading player in attempting to end wars on the African continent. South African diplomacy was directed at resolving the Congo conflict through peaceful means. But this approach was contradicted in the case of Lesotho. South Africa's intervention in Lesotho resulted from the growing conflict in the country regarding the elections. The 'occupation' of Lesotho was widely criticised even though it was approved by the Southern African Development Community and was meant to be a peacekeeping mission. But the defence force's ability to carry out its duties effectively was questioned after it initially struggled to overcome the resistance.

South Africa's stance on the conflict in the Congo made it the lone crusader in reviving diplomatic efforts to end the crisis. In August, South Africa had hosted a summit with role-players present in which Mandela called for a cease-fire in the war for political

dialogue to take place. It appeared that Laurent Kabila, President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, begrudged South Africa's position. The presence of Namibia and Zimbabwe on the side of the Kabila regime had definite economic foundations. South African mining companies still have interests in the area even though they are not welcome there.

During the Hajj of 1998 a number of senior government officials were guests of the Saudi Arabian government. Government ministers met briefly and in no official capacity, with Shaykh Yasin of Hamas of Palestine who was also on the Hajj. The Shaykh was subsequently invited by members of the Muslim community to visit the country and address Muslim audiences. But pressures on the government by Jewish organisations and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, who claimed that allowing the visit would be tantamount to betrayal by the African National Congress, prevented the visit from taking place. Delegations to members of the community to the government and discussions with Muslim politicians could not get the government to issue of visa to the elderly Shaykh.

In August 1998 Palestinian Authority leader, Yasser Arafat came on an official state visit to South Africa. His visit was opposed by significant sections of the Muslim community such as the Muslim Judicial Council. The Democratic Party were also very critical of Arafat's visit and his address to Parliament. The leader of the party, Tony Leon, boycotted Arafat's speech to Parliament. Both the Democratic Party and the National party were absent from the official state banquet in honour of Arafat. In his speech Arafat criticised the government of Benyamin Netanyahu and requested the South African government's help in the faltering peace process. Arafat's visit was seen as a formal recognition of the administration of Palestine and the Palestinian cause.

Despite all the economic troubles in south East Asia there were no significant changes in overall trade ties with South Africa. Malaysian companies and investors remained among the major economic partners of South Africa. It remained the country's second largest foreign investor in South Africa, with key investments in Engen, Telkom and in property markets.

The patterns of South African economic ties with the Middle East and South East Asia have not changed much. Arms production remains a major component of this country's economic capacity. It therefore can supply Middle Eastern countries with high demands for armaments. While this sector does create employment it is not in the long run a certainty. Malaysia or Gulf State investment in property or the financial markets do not create jobs neither are they areas of massive expansion in the future. The diversification of South Africa's economic relationships is not of significance. The expansion of its technological and service sectors remain marginal. What it can offer its partners in the Muslim world must be the subject of reflection and planning.