

A Challenge to South African Arms Purchases

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In a controversial move, the South African government plans to purchase 28 BAe/SAAB Gripen fighter aircraft from Sweden, 24 Hawk fighter-trainer aircraft and four heavy-lift marine helicopters from Britain, four frigates and three submarines from Germany, and 40 utility helicopters from Italy.

The Mandela Administration made the announcement in November that it intended to spend R29 billion (US\$5 billion) on warships, warplanes and helicopters to reequip its Navy and Air Force, which many believe are completely obsolete. The United Nations arms embargo, imposed in 1977 and rescinded with the transition to democracy in 1994, is often cited as the primary reason to purchase the new equipment.

The United States is not involved in the tender process because Philadelphia court indictments of 1991-1998 established that South Africa's armaments industry pirated American missile technology during the 1980s, and sold it to Iraq and China.

Jobless Rate Spurs Military to Push Offsets

With its unemployment rate at 35 percent, South Africa's military establishment lobbied long and hard to have their arms purchases include offsets that would eventually create 65,000 jobs. Thus analysts believe unprecedented demands were made on European suppliers for offsets worth R110 billion to contribute to South Africa's economic development.

It is widely held that such demands are possible because the international arms industry is a "buyers' market." However, the "free lunch" is likely to come unglued. Current practices may not benefit either the seller or the buyer. International studies of offsets show that buyer countries pay heavily for the equipment they produce and derive little economic benefit or job creation from the practice.

The notorious £20 billion British/Saudi Arabian Al Yamamah contract was hyped-up to create 75,000 jobs for Saudi Arabia. Now that the Al Yamamah deal is virtually complete, it transpires that only 1,600 jobs actually resulted. Except for an additional 300 medium-tech jobs for Saudi citizens, all the other jobs were filled by imported expatriates.

NGOs Embarrass Swedes for Arms Sales

Caught by public pressure, BAe/SAAB executives now plead that South Africa's offset requirements are exaggerated and unachievable. Sweden's first export deal for the financially and politically embarrassed BAe/SAAB Gripen project seems to be falling apart.

A campaign by Swedish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — supported by Economists Allied for Arms Reduction- South Africa (ECAAR-SA) and the South African Council of Churches — has highlighted the contradictions of Sweden's support for the struggle against apartheid with the Swedish government's promotion of weapons exports to "third-world" countries facing desperate crises of poverty.

In addition, Germany has now moved to supply four frigates and three submarines costing R11.2 billion against offsets worth R36.2 billion which are intended to create 26,404 jobs. Germany proposes to build a stainless steel plant and metallurgy center in the economically depressed Eastern Cape near Port Elizabeth.

But environmentalists have conducted numerous studies showing that the Coega project is an ecological and financial disaster in the making. Consequently there is active lobbying against the proposals by German Church supporters.

At a June 14 meeting between the Parliamentary liaison of the South African Council of Churches and ECAAR-SA, the government's chief negotiator agreed that his task is to determine whether the R29 billion weapons procurement program is affordable. Recently, he has publically announced that one or two of the six components may have to be dropped.

During the South African Defense Review conducted in Parliament between 1996 and 1998, representatives from several civil society groups argued that it would be different if South Africa were threatened by a foreign military power.

But it isn't.

Civil society critics contend that poverty afflicts millions and is the real threat to South Africa's security and democracy. Thus, we return to the submissions of NGOs in Parliament back in 1996 that the military wish-list — the 28 BAe/SAAB Gripen fighter aircraft, the 24 Hawk fighter-trainers, the four marine helicopters and the like — is simply not affordable given the social crises facing post-apartheid South Africa.

The next few months will indicate which arguments have prevailed. South Africa's weapons procurement program remains therefore, very much from being a "done deal."

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa announced his new cabinet on June 17th. The Minister of Defence is Mr. "Terror" Lekota who is considered a "dove." Even more surprising is the appointment of Mrs. Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, wife of the director of the Quaker Peace Centre which administers the Coalition for Defence Alternatives through which ECAAR-SA operates. Her appointment, described as "either a stroke of genius or a monumental gaff," must be unique in the world.

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