

South African guerrillas strike at nation's oil lifeline

By Quentin Peel, Special to The Christian Science Monitor June 3, 1980

Johannesburg — Saboteurs who bombed two of South Africa's strategically vital SASOL oil-from-coal plants June 2, in addition to an oil refinery, could not have chosen their targets with more devastating effect.

The immediate cost of the sabotage was limited to eight huge fuel-storage tanks and their contents, including jet fuel, gas, diesel, and chemical products.

But the psychological effects of the biggest act of economic sabotage ever carried out in South Africa are likely to be much more serious.

The coordinated attack on three key strategic targets underlines the rapid escalation of the guerrilla war being waged against the South African government by militant nationalist movements opposed to the government's apartheid (racial segregation) policy.

The three targets were the original SASOL synthetic fuel plant and the National Petroleum Refinery (NPR) in Sasolburg, outside Johannesburg, and the massive SASOL 2 plant still being built some 90 miles east. (SASOL is the abbreviation for the South African Coal, Oil, and Gas Corporation.)

The operation was carried out in the face of South Africa's formidable security and intelligence services on some of the most sensitive installations in the country. It indicates a new sophistication on the part of the nationalist organizations. They hitherto have concentrated on hit-and-run attacks on police stations, and bombing relatively low-key targets such as railway lines and government offices.

The SASOL synthetic fuel plants are fundamental to the South African government's strategy of promoting economic and military self-sufficiency in the face of world hostility. When the second and third SASOL plants are completed, they are to provide almost half the country's liquid fuel requirements from its plentiful coal reserves. They therefore are expected to greatly reduce its vulnerability to an oil embargo.

The SASOL 1 plant, where five storage tanks containing gas and butadiene (a hydrocarbon) were blown up, produces only a fraction of South Africa's fuel needs. But the \$3.2 billion SASOL 2, which was attacked but escaped serious damage, will raise outputs to more than 20 percent of the estimated national consumption of 250,000 barrels a day when it comes into full production next year.

A third SASOL plant, yet to be built, will double production again at a cost of more than \$4.2 billion. Until those plants are completed, South Africa will continue to be very vulnerable to cuts in its oil supply.

The South African government had embarked on a series of other major capital projects to promote self-sufficiency in strategic imports, particularly in chemicals such as polyvinyl chloride, synthetic rubber, diesel engines, and military hardware. Many could be vulnerable to similar sabotage attempts.

So, too, could the country's huge new generation of power stations. A university lecturer currently is being tried on charges of passing on state secrets about power stations to the antigovernment African National Congress.

On the political front, the attack is likely to bring an immediate tightening of security and a strengthening of the position of hard-liners in Prime Minister Pieter W. Botha's Cabinet.

Mr. Botha will have to take some tough action to reassure his own white electors. The attacks could hardly have come at a worse time for Mr. Botha's program of cautious reform when white South Africa is still reeling from the result of the Zimbabwe election.

Moreover, the continuing school boycott by numbers of black, Colored (mixed race), and Indian pupils across the country has also raised concern about a new outbreak of unrest to compare with the 1976 Soweto riots.

The economic effect of such sabotage is unlikely to be serious immediately, with South Africa's economy picking up on the back of the gold boom. But the one bottleneck Mr. Botha cannot afford to have narrowed is the skilled labor shortage, already holding back many sectors of industry from needed expansion.

Thus the psychological effect of the attacks could be very serious, for any renewed white emigration or slacking in immigration could bring the recovery to a standstill.

This would leave an ever-increasing number of young blacks jobless and disgruntled.