

Someday, African National Congress May Hit The Target

By **JOSEPH LELYVELD**

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JOHANNESBURG — Elsie Sekanka, a black domestic servant on a military base just outside Pretoria, received a message last week that was meant for white South Africa. It was a 122-millimeter Soviet-made rocket and it came crashing through the roof of her room in the servants' quarters behind an officer's house, exploding near her bed without causing her any injury.

If that rocket or three others that fell on the base without exploding had struck anything of military significance, the message would have been that the outlawed African National Congress, the main movement fighting white rule, had developed the capacity to operate effectively near the South African capital. Instead, the message was ambiguous: that the movement's sabotage campaign is still hampered by ineptitude and that South Africa, because of the prevalence of blacks as laborers in areas officially deemed to be "white," offers few targets that don't put black lives at risk.

Incidents of sabotage have been occurring almost weekly in the past few months, but the cost to the white state is probably less than what it loses when the price of gold dips by a couple of dollars an ounce. Yet the attacks serve as a form of political graffiti, reminding whites and blacks alike of the existence of a resistance movement and of the industrial state's vulnerability to well-conceived assaults on its infrastructure.

The African National Congress is certainly more than the sum of its efforts underground or in exile, where it has been reasonably effective on the diplomatic front, spurring boycotts and keeping opposition to white rule at the top of the continent's agenda. It is also a political tradition, serving as the main vehicle for the aspirations of those South African blacks — as far as anyone can tell, a majority — who think the solution to the country's conflicts is simply to make whites share power with the country's black majority wherever they wield it.

The banning of the A.N.C. in 1960 climaxed half a century of consistently peaceful, and futile, protest by the organization, which was influenced at its inception in 1912 by Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns among Indians here. Only after it was forced underground did its military arm, Umkonto we Sizwe or "Spear of the Nation," surface.

The government calls its members “terrorists,” but the military branch has sought to avoid actions that jeopardize civilians of any hue. The explosions this month in downtown East London and a Port Elizabeth shopping center were so out of keeping with its recent tactics that the question was raised of whether another group had come on the scene, perhaps the rival Pan-Africanist Congress, which has been paralyzed in recent years by dissension in its exile wing and nearly invisible within South Africa.

Some blacks who acknowledge privately that they are close to the African National Congress (belonging to or supporting the aims of a banned organization is a crime), contend that its tactics will inevitably become harsher when the black masses understand the necessity for violent struggle and the underground is strong enough to sustain it. The greatest restraint now isn't doctrine but the effectiveness of the state security apparatus, which has consistently managed to penetrate the movement, lacing its ranks with black and white spies and agents provocateurs.

Armed with sweeping powers, the police are able to detain people without trial and without even having to acknowledge that they are holding them. The authorities are regularly accused of torture, but they also have been able to use material incentives to gain the cooperation of blacks. In these circumstances, the African National Congress cannot launch widespread operations without putting its relatively few trained insurgents at severe risk. Indications are that the military arm is holding down recruitment to try to deal with infiltration. According to South African estimates, fewer than 1,500 men are trained or in training in Angola, East Germany or the Soviet Union. Most of these left South Africa after the black revolts in Soweto and other centers in 1976 and 1977.

The movement's greatest weakness is its lack of a reliable clandestine structure within South Africa. It has a network of sympathizers, blacks and even a few whites who are ready to take chances for it. But its operations almost invariably involve sending agents into the country across a border — the usual route is from Mozambique via Swaziland — and getting them out as soon as possible.

South Africa's security system doesn't stop at its borders. In January, its forces attacked congress buildings in Mozambique's capital, Maputo. On July 31, a key figure in the movement and its chief representative in Zimbabwe, Joe Gqabi, was gunned down outside his house in Salisbury. Zimbabwe blamed South African agents.

From the vantage point of South Africa, it is difficult to say whether the recent increase in underground activity is meant as reprisal or as part of a long-term strategy for seizing power. The indications have been that the African National Congress is hoping to serve as a catalyst for a mass rising, rather than to launch a conventional guerrilla war against Africa's strongest power. For this reason, the battleground is often said to be the

factory floor, where black trade unions have been allowed a tenuous legal existence in recent years.

The attraction of the labor front for supporters of the congress is partly ideological: If the unions can be seen as key agents of change, then the revolution can be viewed as a class rather than as a racial struggle. In the complex South African setting, however, deciding who may belong to the revolution — more specifically, whether whites can play a role — is the main issue among blacks. The A.N.C., which has maintained a tactical alliance for years with South Africa's small Communist Party, has traditionally resisted the Pan-Africanist line that the struggle is essentially, if not exclusively, for blacks.

Many of the young blacks who went into exile five years ago came out of what was known as the Black Consciousness movement and were ideologically closer to the Pan-Africanist Congress than to the A.N.C. In choosing between the two, however, they put aside ideology and went for the movement that seemed most effective.

Reports filtering out of Robben Island, where South Africa holds most of its black political prisoners, suggest that younger members of the African National Congress there sometimes get impatient with their putative leader, Nelson Mandela, on grounds that he is too moderate. But young blacks in the townships seem increasingly firm in their identification with the congress and with Mr. Mandela as its leader. "Students have high hopes because they know they will eventually see the liberation," a young student activist remarked recently, explaining his readiness to face surveillance and arrest. "All of them feel it doesn't matter when it is coming. They see it as if it is already here." A few days later, the young man was jailed. In the seemingly endless cycle here of challenge and repression, he is being held without charge under the Terrorism Act.