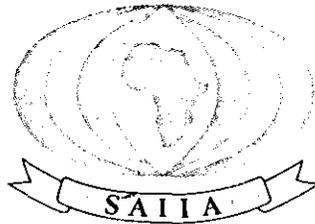


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DERAILED : TRANSPORT POLITICS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

EVENT

In December 1986 the Botswana Government announced its decision to suspend indefinitely its projected take-over of a section of the railways from Zimbabwe on 30 December 1986 because of a stalemate over a new train exchange arrangement with the Governments of Zimbabwe, South Africa and Bophuthatswana.

The next day the Bophuthatswana Government informed the Botswana Government by telex that all holders of Botswana passports and travel documents would require visas to enter Bophuthatswana, a requirement that was extended to Zimbabweans a month later.

Following a temporary stoppage, discussions with the South African Transport Services (SATS) took place for a possible exchange of locomotives and crews in Botswana. The Botswanan authorities earlier completed a loop at Rakhuna on Botswana soil.

Early in February 1987 a new system for exchange of locomotives between SATS and the National Railways of Zimbabwe at Rakhuna instead of Mafikeng was introduced.

ANALYSIS

The most plausible explanation for the Bophuthatswana Government's sudden demand for Botswanan and Zimbabwean train crews to obtain visas before entering its territory is that it is an attempt to gain de facto recognition from the other states in the region. Transport politics allow Mmabatho an opportunity to demonstrate its independence of Pretoria.

However, the issue is more complex than this. There are other considerations. The fact that Bophuthatswana's independence is recognised solely by South Africa is only one of them.

The Mangope Government may have several other reasons for demanding visas. One is a security consideration. Mmabatho and Pretoria desire tighter control of their borders. In view of recent ANC infiltration through Botswana and Zimbabwe this consideration is understandable.

A further consideration is that the Mangope Government gave a warning to its northern and western neighbours that in the event of future threats against it, it might retaliate again by closing its borders to them.

The timing of the event, coming as it did just as Botswana was about to take over from the National Railways of Zimbabwe the line that runs through its territory, suggests another more compelling explanation - both Mbabatho and Pretoria engineered the border crisis to remind Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia of what might happen to their transport outlets if they carry out their threats to institute sanctions against South Africa. On this issue, the interests of Pretoria and Mbabatho converged.

The South African Government finds itself in a paradoxical position: on the one hand, it is caught between its commitment to Bophuthatswana's independence; on the other, its obligations under the Southern African Customs Union agreement, to allow for the free flow of cross-border intra-regional trade.

Pretoria is formally adopting the role of intermediary in the dispute, and it is to be expected that SATS and other relevant branches of the government will engage in further negotiations on this matter with a view to normalising trade relations with its neighbours.

But even if this view is accepted, it is likely that perceptions will exist in the region that Mbabatho and Pretoria were in cahoots on this issue.

SIGNIFICANCE

If unresolved, the border crisis will not improve South Africa's already dented reputation as the 'destabiliser' of the region. But it will be more than Pretoria's image that will be dented if no resolution to the crisis is reached; the interdependent economies of southern Africa may be seriously harmed. Botswana in particular relies heavily upon the link - it carries on average between 8 000 and 11 000 tonnes of Botswanan goods per day.

Transport dependency on South Africa varies. In the case of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, virtually all imports and exports are routed through South Africa. Presently, some 45% of the combined total imports and exports of Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Zaire are carried to and from South Africa by SATS. During the 1984/85 financial year SATS handled 6 million tons of traffic to and from the seven SADCC countries. Of this figure, more than 4 million tons of goods were exported to South Africa from SADCC countries. The remaining 2 million tons represented the foreign imports and exports of these countries.

Bophuthatswana could, in time, be bypassed by a new railway link. The most feasible would run from Mahalapye to link up with the existing SATS line at Ellisras. This alternative route was investigated some time ago as a means of transporting coal from the Morupule mine in Botswana. Such an alternative railway link would be costly, but Botswana and its northern neighbours might consider it worthwhile if their economies and trade were being adversely affected by a Bophuthatswana blockade, and if the South African Government agreed to co-operate.

In a more general sense, the type of action taken by the Mangope Government may well give greater impetus to the attempts of the Frontline States to lessen their transport dependence on South Africa by creating alternative transport networks such as the Beira Corridor.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing, it was announced that SATS has stepped in to avert a potentially major transport crisis which would have affected railway traffic on the main line between South Africa and black states to the north.

SATS has agreed, as an interim measure, to take over southbound trains inside Botswana, thus avoiding the need for Botswanan and Zimbabwean railway employees to cross into Bophuthatswana. It is understood that SATS will also hand over north-bound trains to Zimbabwean and Botswanan crews inside Botswana. The crew changes will be made at Rakhuna Halt, 5 km inside Botswana, instead of at Mafikeng, as was the case under the previous arrangement.

This interim arrangement will continue for two months while efforts are made to negotiate a more permanent solution to the border crisis. All indications are that a more permanent arrangement will be negotiated, especially because all the parties trust the intermediary role of SATS and stand to lose considerable revenue in the event of non-resolution. Regional and South African interests demand a more permanent and satisfactory arrangement.

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