

THE BOTSWANA – NAMIBIA BOUNDARY DISPUTE. TOWARDS A DIPLOMATIC SOLUTION OR MILITARY CONFRONTATION?

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Opsomming

Die regerings van Botswana and Namibië is tans in 'n dispuut gewikkel oor die twee klein rivier-eilande van Sedudu (bekend as Kasikili onder die Namibiërs) en Situngu (bekend as Luyondo, Singobeka, Mbala of Zoti onder die Namibiërs). Die dispuut oor Sedudu-eiland dien tans voor die wêreldhof in Den Haag, terwyl Situngu-eiland die onderwerp is van 'n gesamentlike tegniese komitee bestaande uit verteenwoordigers van die twee regerings. Daar is min hoop dat die tegniese komitee 'n oplossing sal vind. Daar is ook 'n groeiende vrees dat, met die sterk emosionele en nasionale sentimente wat daar rondom die dispuut bestaan, die moontlikheid van 'n grenskonflik tussen die twee lande in die nabye toekoms nie uitgesluit kan word nie. Daar is politieke waarnemers wat Botswana se versnelde bewapeningsprogram selfs direk met die dispuut verbind.

In 1996 is dit in die pers gerapporteer dat die Botswana regering aan die onderhandel was vir die aankoop van dertien Kanadees-vervaardigde F-5 vegterbombwerpers vir die Botswana weermag teen 'n koste van \$50 miljoen. Volgens ander berigte was Botswana blykbaar ook in die mark vir die aankoop van vyftig tweedehandse Duitse "Leopard II" tenks, ses en dertig Britse "Scorpion" tenks, 200 troepedraers en 'n onbekende hoeveelheid artillerie stukke teen beraamde totale koste van sowat \$63 miljoen. Botswana se verdedigingsbegroting het skerp toegeneem vanaf P243.5 miljoen (Pula) in 1989/1990 tot P625 miljoen (ongeveer R833 miljoen) in 1995.

Die doel van die artikel is om Botswana se versnelde bewapeningsprogram te ontleed teen die agtergrond van die eiland-dispuut in die Kaprivi en die voorneme van die Namibiese regering om groot hoeveelhede water deur middel van 'n reuse pyllyn uit die Okavango-rivier naby Rundu te onttrek. Laasgenoemde projek hou 'n ernstige bedreiging in vir Botswana se ekonomiese lewe in die algemeen.

Introduction

The Botswana and Namibian governments are currently involved in a dispute over ownership of the small islands of Sedudu, also called Kasikili by the Namibians and Situngu in the Caprivi Strip. Situngu is also referred to as Luyondo, Singobeka, Mbala and Zoti by the Namibians.¹ The dispute over Sedudu Island currently serves before the World Court in the Hague, while the dispute over Situngu has been referred to a joint technical committee that has been set up by the two governments. It is feared that, given the strong national sentiments and heightened emotions surrounding the

dispute, the losing side may not accept the Court's decision which is expected in November 1998.² Should this be the case Southern Africa could face a protracted border war. Although the dispute over the two islands have been going on for some time, it appears to have become increasingly vocal, if not hostile, over the past few years.

A second issue that is causing tension between Botswana and Namibia, is the latter's decision to divert large quantities of water from the Okavango River in Northern Namibia to ease the country's chronic shortage of water. Botswana fears that any interference with the Okavango River, which feeds the ecologically sensitive Okavango Delta, may have catastrophic consequences for the delta and the country's flourishing tourist industry. Botswana believes that the scheme, which plans to divert water from the Okavango near Rundu, has the potential of turning the Okavango Delta into a desert.

The concern of the Batswana is best gauged from the comment of Tawana Moreni, the Delta's paramount chief who, in response to the proposed Namibian pipeline, has suggested that "*We (Botswana) should buy more planes and bomb it.*"³ According to Piet Heyns, a senior Namibian water engineer, "*...it has been suggested that the Batswana wants to buy tanks to shoot at the Namibians because they want to steal water from the Okavango...*"⁴

While Botswana recognises the fact that Namibia has a serious shortage of water and that a mechanism in the form of OKACOM, a joint commission set up by Botswana, Namibia and Angola, is there to safeguard against any unilateral interference with the Okavango River, they are fearful that Namibia may unilaterally decide to proceed with its plans to pump water from the river. Representatives from Owens Corning, an American company with strong business ties to South Africa, visited Windhoek in 1996 in connection with the construction of the proposed pipeline. The pipeline, which is expected to cost about R1-billion, is designed to draw an estimated 20-million cubic metres of water from the Okavango a year.

Namibia has made it clear, that should Botswana reject the feasibility study on the project, it will have little alternative but to proceed with the project and that it would expect the Botswana government to see its water crisis "*... in the light of humanitarian need and will ultimately respond to the pipeline project sympathetically.*"⁵

These issues, but especially the dispute over the Sedudu and Situngu islands, have led observers to associate them with Botswana's accelerate arms procurement program since the early 1990s. In June 1996 it was reported in the South African media that

² See *The Namibian*, 7 April 1998; and International Court of Justice, Press communiqué, 98/06, 27 February 1998.

³ *The Mail and Guardian*, 29 November - 5 December 1996.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Mail and Guardian*, 6-10 December 1996.

Botswana was in the process of negotiating the purchase of thirteen Canadian built F-5 Fighter bombers for the Botswana Defence Force (BDF).⁶ The cost of the deal was reported to be in the region of US \$50 million. The deal follows hard on the heels of another deal in January, in which it was reported that the BDF was in the process of negotiating with the Netherlands for the purchase of fifty second-hand German Leopard II main battle tanks. Although these tanks were second-hand, they were more modern and more advanced than the current South African Centurion-Olifant main battle tank. The BDF has also been negotiating for the purchase of thirty six British Scorpion tanks, some 200 troop transport carriers, and a quantity of artillery pieces at an estimated total cost of US \$63 million (R315 million).⁷

According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Botswana spent about P415 million (415 million Pula) (about R550 million) on Defence in 1993. This amount was increased to P615 million (about R820 million) in 1994 and to P625 million (about R833) in 1995. These figures represent a substantial increase over the P243.5 million allocated to the BDF in 1989/90.⁸ Botswana's defence budget currently represents about 7,35 per cent of total government expenditure.⁹ It was subsequently reported that the deal for the Leopard eleven tanks from the Netherlands was scuttled by the Namibians who requested the German government to stop the sale of the tanks to Botswana. Determined to purchase heavy battle tanks for the BDF, Botswana turned to Austria who, according to a newspaper report in May 1997, agreed to sell thirty two tanks to the BDF. The Botswana parliament apparently approved an amount of P10 million as down payment for the tanks in March 1997.¹⁰ The report did not state what type of tank was purchased or whether any of these tanks have arrived.

Botswana's increased military spending since the early 1990s has raised more questions than answers. Namibian Cabinet ministers apparently publicly stated in 1996 that Botswana was acquiring weapons to attack Namibia over the border dispute. The aim of this short paper is to briefly explore these developments as a possible reason(s) behind Botswana's increased military expenditure.

1. Sedudu Island

Sedudu Island, although not the largest, is perhaps the most important of the two islands in dispute. The island, which is between 3 to 3,2 sq. kilometres in size is situated in the Chobe River near Kasane. The dispute over the ownership of the tiny island, which is clearly indicated on the Botswana side of the Namibian border, first hit the media headlines in early 1992 when Namibia laid claim to the island following the kidnapping of two British tourists, allegedly by the Namibians on the Chobe side of the

⁶ *The Sunday Tribune* (Durban), 16 June 1996; *The Daily News* (Durban), 18 June 1996.

⁷ *The Daily News*, 13 June 1996; *The Mail and Guardian*, 4 April 1996.

⁸ *Africa South of the Sahara*, 1995 (London, 24th edition, 1995).

⁹ *The Namibian*, 13 August 1996.

¹⁰ *The Namibian*, 23 May 1997.

Island. The BDF, which normally conducts only anti-poaching operations in the region, immediately stepped-up its military presence along the Botswana-Namibian border. According to media reports the situation quickly deteriorated after an exchange of fire between Botswana and Namibian troops and following claims by the Namibian government that the BDF had flown the Botswana flag on the island. The Namibians accused the BDF of taking land through “*the barrel of the gun*.”¹¹

At a meeting held at Kasane in July 1992 and attended by Sir Ketumile Masire of Botswana and Sam Nujoma of Namibia and chaired by Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, it was decided that an amicable solution must be found as to the ownership of the disputed islands. It was agreed that a team of six technical experts, three from each country, be set up to determine the border between the two countries. It was further decided that until the matter has been successfully solved both countries should withdraw their troops from Sedudu Island, even those on anti-poaching duties.¹² Among the experts appointed by Botswana to determine the ownership of Sedudu Island were Professor Ian Brownlie, a consultant, law lecturer at Oxford University and author of the book *African Boundaries*; Isaac Muzila, the principal hydrological engineer in the Department of Mineral Resources and Water Affairs; and John Bates, an independent surveyor and former deputy director of the Department of Surveying and Lands. The Namibian appointments to the team consisted of the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Justice, Dr Kawana, the Surveyor General, Mr Reuter, and a Dr. Hungula.¹³

Despite the urgency of the matter the technical team dragged its feet and it was not until September 1993 that it had its first full meeting. Its second meeting was in Gaborone at the beginning of October, where it agreed on the terms of reference. By 1995 it had become clear that the team was unable to produced an acceptable solution to the dispute and in the end Botswana and Namibia finally resolved that the matter should be referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at the Hague. This was followed in February 1996 by an agreement signed between representatives from the two countries whereby they agreed to abide by the decision of the ICJ. It has since been rumoured however, that the losing side may not accept the decision of the World Court.¹⁴

Many Batswana believe that the island belongs to them and that the ICJ will decide in their favour. For this reason they have given their full support to the government's decision to take the matter to the ICJ. Chief Lopang Kadimo, of Kasene village near the island, says people in his area have used the Island for grazing and farming as long as he can remember and that there can be no doubt that it belongs to Botswana.

¹¹ Dikarabo Ramadubu, “Botswana boundary dispute”, *Pan African News Agency (PANA)*, 4 November 1993, online edition.

¹² *Africa Research Bulletin*, 1-31 May 1992, p. 10565A

¹³ Dikarabo Ramadubu, “Botswana boundary dispute”, *Pan African News Agency*, 4 November 1993, online edition.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

Another resident of Kasane, Dikeledi Lesheto, says she appreciates the government's efforts to refer the matter for international arbitration but that there can be no doubt that "... Sedudu island is part of our territory." The Island, she says, is important to Botswana because it contributes to the tourism industry.

A spokesman for the office of president in Gaborone, Molosiwa Selepeng, has denied media reports that relations between the two countries have become strained over the island dispute. Although he dismissed reports that there was a "military build-up" by the Botswana armed forces in the area in February 1996, he admitted that Botswana had sent soldiers to "investigate a shooting incident" involving poachers on the island who shot at the BDF.¹⁵

2. Situngu Island

The second island under dispute by Botswana and Namibia, is Situngu or Singobeka, named after a nearby Namibian village. The island which is about 3 (some sources suggest 13) by 7 kilometres is situated in the Linyanti River in the south Eastern Caprivi Strip. The Namibians who farm their small fields of crops on the island are all absentee landlords. They cross the river during the day to check on their crops, which appear to compete with the weeds on the island for control over the fertile soil. The island is about an hour's flying time west from the border town of Kasane. The dispute over the island came to a head in January 1998 when a high-level Namibian delegation, which included the Minister of Defence, Eriki Nghimtina, and under the escort of a Namibian Defence Force motorised unit, accompanied by two helicopters, was prevented by the BDF from crossing onto the island.

The Botswana troops that have been occupying the island since December 1997, had been instructed to stop all Namibians, even senior government officials, from setting a foot on the island. A statement released by the Botswana government stated that it was "*gravely concerned*" at the attempt by Namibian troops to cross illegally onto Botswana territory.¹⁶ In subsequent press releases the Botswana government accused the Namibian government of misleading the public and creating tension between the two countries over the Situngu island dispute. Namibian villagers from the nearby Singobeka village have complained that the BDF soldiers harass them if they could not produce passports to enter the island.

The Botswana government has defended the actions of the BDF as being part of its normal task to patrol the borders along the Botswana side of the Linyanti and Chobe Rivers, and to curb any illegal cross-border activities, including game poaching, and any encroaching onto Botswana territory through activities such as "settlement, ploughing, grazing and the rearing of live-stock."¹⁷

These developments came after a meeting of all parties at the end of 1996 where it was

¹⁵ *Pan African News Agency*, 10 April 1996. Online edition.

¹⁶ *The Namibian*, 19 February 1998.

¹⁷ *The Namibian*, 15 January 1998.

decided that the Namibian villagers, who have farmed on the island for years, would be allowed access to the island to harvest and tend to their crops. This agreement was upheld at a follow-up meeting in Walvis Bay between representatives from the two countries. Botswana, however, continues to bar Namibians in general from entering the island. This has led Victor Muititi, a spokesperson for a Lozi headman in the Caprivi, to visit the former leader of the South African Defence Force, General Constand Viljoen in Pretoria to discuss, *inter alia*, Botswana military build-up in the region; Botswana's sole claims to Situngu Island; and Namibia's apparent failure to deal with the situation. Viljoen apparently was approached by Muititi, because the headman he represented knew Viljoen from the days of the Angolan 'bush war' and was sufficiently impressed by him to seek his advice on the island dispute.¹⁸

It was reported in *The Namibian* on 2 February 1998 that the Namibian government was setting up a diplomatic front against Botswana's ongoing occupation of the disputed Situngu Island and from which its troops are refusing to move. The Namibian president, Sam Nujoma, apparently travelled to Pretoria on 29 January to consult with Nelson Mandela over the dispute. Nujoma also met with Robert Mugabe, his Zimbabwe counterpart, prior to his visit with Nelson Mandela. Mugabe is the current chairman of the South African Development Community (SADC). Nujoma informed the media, on his return to Windhoek, that he consulted with Mandela on the dispute and raised the possibility of the South African president acting as mediator in the matter.¹⁹

Despite the ongoing talks between the two countries, Botswana has flatly refused to remove its troops from the island. Botswana is adamant that the island belongs to it and that Namibia is violating the colonial boundaries drawn during the "Scramble for Africa" and accepted by Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at its foundation in 1963. It has, however, agreed that the Namibians who have planted crops on the island could continue tending to their fields and crops until harvest time. Thereafter, presumably, they must leave the island.

In terms of International Law, boundaries generally follow the centre of a river. The Anglo-German Treaty of 1890 drew the border between Namibia and Botswana, to run eastwards along the eighteenth degree south latitude until it reaches the Kwando River, from where it follows the centre of the river until it reaches the Linyanti River. From the Linyanti the border runs along the centre of the river through the southern part of Lake Liambezi and then down the centre of the Chobe to the Zambezi. According to Botswana, the border between itself and Namibia is clearly demarcated, but the Namibians refuse to accept this. Instead they prefer to base their claims on the stories and accounts of locals in the region, who claim the boundary is a stream four kilometres north of the Linyanti River. According to Major General Matshwenyego Fisher, the Deputy Commander of the BDF, this river boundary the tribesmen refer to is a dry tributary of the Linyanti and not the main channel as the Namibians claim.

The Namibians dispute this. In February 1998 it was reported that Francis Sizimbo, a

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Namibian*, 2 February 1998.

Namibian member of the opposition Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) party, whose constituency encompasses the area around Situngu Island, has stated that he does not believe the initiative to resolve the dispute will be successful due to a conflict of interest.²⁰ Both parties, he said, have conflicting views on where the actual border should be. "To us", he said, "the Botswana troops are three kilometres inside Namibian territory." Botswana, on the other hand, is creating the impression that Situngu is located in the Linyanti River, which is not the case, he said. The disputed territory, which he described as "much bigger than Kasikili", is located between the Linyanti River and a stream called Sampisi.²¹ Many believe the current demarcation commission will be as unsuccessful as was the joint commission, established by the Botswana and Namibian governments in the early 1990s, to determine ownership of Sedudu Island.

3. The Namibian and Botswana churches enter the dispute

If anyone still had their doubts about the seriousness of the border dispute, this was dispelled by the announcement in April this year (1998) that Church leaders from the Namibian Council of Churches (CCN) and the Botswana Christian Council (BCC) have met at the Kempton Park Conference Centre in Johannesburg to discuss the mounting tension surrounding the border dispute between the two countries, and to see if a way could not be found to diffuse it.²²

In a combined communiqué released by the CCN and the BCC in April, it was stated that it was "... recognised that the burden of responsibility for peace making and development of good neighbourliness rests with member churches of both Councils..."²³

A month earlier the CCN, at an AGM held in Windhoek, urged both governments to settle the dispute in a peaceful manner.²⁴

4. The Namibian Intelligence Service slammed by opposition politician over island dispute

In April 1998 Geoffrey Mwilima of the opposition DTA accused the Namibian government of using its Intelligence Service to spy on Namibians and to organise campaigns to encourage ethnic and tribal strife in the Caprivi, rather than using the service to gather useful information on developments in the Caprivi to help solve the Situngu /Kasikili Island dispute. He went on to say that "We can only hope they are providing the Government with useful and accurate information about any possible military build-up in Botswana, as has been suggested by that country's big air base [at

The Namibian, 11 February 1998.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *The Namibian*, 7 April 1998.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Molepolej funded by the United States."²⁵ (Italics added)

5. The Molepolele Air-base²⁶

In 1992 it was reported in *Africa Confidential*, a well informed British information sheet on Africa, that the Botswana government, with the aid of the United States, was in the process of constructing a massive but highly secret air-base near Molepolele (often referred to as Mapharangwane) at an estimated cost of some P624 million (about R780 million).²⁷

The new air-base which was scheduled for completion in 1994/95, consists of three sites. The first and main site is about 35 kilometres from the small town of Molepolele and about 75 kilometres north west of the capital, Gaborone. The second site is at Chobe in the far north near the border with Zambia and Zimbabwe, while the third site is in the north-west, in the region of the Okavango delta and the Caprivi Strip, which forms the border between Namibia and Botswana and Angola.

According to the Botswana Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mompoti Merafhe, who is also a former defence force commander, the new air-base housed the most basic of facilities and infrastructure needed to develop the air wing of the BDF. Log Radithokwa, a University of Botswana academic, however feels that the Botswana government and the BDF hierarchy are now "...unchallengeably used to the fact that the army is accustomed to getting what it asks for... and that the BDF is to all intents and purposes treated like a private institution." He went on to say that people are discouraged from speaking out against the BDF and that it takes offence every time it is questioned about its spending habits. It seems, argues Radithokwa, that the government thinks the only way to keep the BDF happy is by giving it what it wants. The size of the air-base, he points out, is indicative of the fact that the BDF will receive enough money to acquire more aircraft and other equipment in time to come.

Lieutenant-General Ian Khama, the current commander of the BDF, is seen as the main driving force behind the country's desire for an enlarged and modern defence force. He has denied claims that Botswana was going overboard in arming itself, or that it was out of step with the new spirit of peace and development in Southern Africa. As far as Botswana was concerned, it was important for the country to have a defence force to

²⁵ The Namibian, 3 April 1998. Helge Schutz, Mwilima slams spies in Caprivi,

²⁶ The Molepolele air-base in Botswana was perceived during the mid-1980s as a result of the then South African Defence Force (SANDF) incursions into that country. Although relations and co-operation between Botswana and the US have always been good, these were strengthened after the SADF raid on the capital, Gaborone, in 1985. In December of that year senior US military officials were sent to Botswana to discuss security and presumably combined operations between the two nations. Additional evidence of the growing ties between Botswana and the US can also be found in the completion of a huge new US embassy in Gaborone in 1990, as well as the size of the US Peace Corps contingent in the country. At 200 members strong it is the largest presence per capita in the world. *Africa Confidential*, 33, 3 (7 February 1992), p. 5.

²⁷ Internet address: gopher://csf.colorado.edu/00/ipe/thematic_Archive/newsletters/africa_information/Afrique.

deter potential threats, he says. He went on to say that "... As we develop our force, it must remain affordable. Unlike other military forces, we did not inherit anything from the (British) colonial administration. We started ... from scratch. We had nothing and we developed our force to what it is today."²⁸ Of course this does not explain the need for the sudden and drastic increase in military expenditure over the last few years.

The new air-base, which is much larger than Gaborone's Sir Seretse Khama International Airport, was constructed by a consortium consisting of France's Spie-Batignolles and South Africa's LTA. LTA is the main construction arm of Anglo-American.²⁹ Although it is not clear how the Botswana government is going to pay for the new air-facility it has been rumoured that the base is a CIA project and that most of the cost for its construction is being paid for by the US government. The Americans see the emerging markets of Southern Africa as important destination for its manufactured goods, especially its military products. This point of view was to a certain extent born out by President Bill Clinton's high power visit to Africa and Southern Africa recently and his emphasis on the need for American trade with Africa and his government's active support for South Africa's African Renaissance.

But Washington's support and interest in Botswana also appears to be based on its growing concern over South Africa political future as well as the general political and economic stability of the rest of the countries in the region. South Africa's growing friendship with the enemies of the US, particularly in the Middle East, is seen as a major threat to its security. The US and Israel are growing increasingly uneasy about South Africa's developing relationship with some militant Arab and Muslim countries and organisations in the Middle East. The US, but Israel in particular, are concerned that South Africa might sell its nuclear and advance weapons technology to these countries. This concern was strengthened in April 1998 when it was reported that the South African Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar, and Constitutional Affairs Minister, Valli Moosa, met with the Hamas spiritual leader, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, while on an official visit to Saudi Arabia.³⁰

The meeting was condemned by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) and the South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS) who expressed their shock and anger over the meeting. In a statement released, the national director of the SAJBD made it clear that the Jewish community in South Africa consider it incomprehensible that such a meeting took place, given the dire warning which Hamas leaders issued earlier in the month in which they vowed to take revenge against Jewish targets worldwide.³¹

The US government is also concerned that South Africa may become a major conduit for drug and arms smuggling as well as the exportation of radical ideologies such as

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *The Daily News*, 22 April 1998.

³¹ *Ibid.*

militant Islamic Fundamentalism and terrorism to the US. Currently, Middle Eastern financial or material support for militant Black Islamic groups in the US such as The Nation of Islam, is prohibited by US laws. This does not, however, apply to financial support coming from or via Black groups or organisations in South Africa. Besides the normal exchange regulations, there is little to prevent Black group and organisations in South Africa from receiving money from the Middle East and passing these on to militant Black groups in the US. Both the US and Israeli governments have declared their absolute commitment to resist wherever necessary the growth and spreading of radical Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Whatever differences existed between the US and Israel in the past, over how best to best deal with the Islamist threat, have been set aside in favour of a united approach to radical Islamic Fundamentalist terrorism.

The US and Israel are not the only governments showing an increased interest in developments in South Africa. There has been a proliferation of interest by foreign intelligence agencies in South Africa since 1994. The CIA alone is known to have closed down at least thirteen of its operational bases elsewhere in Africa in favour of several new bases in Southern Africa. The CIA apparently began to show an interest in Botswana after it lost its major eavesdropping facility in Liberia during the 1989 civil war there. It needed a new and politically stable country from where it could conduct its spying operations. Since South Africa was then in the process of transforming itself from a ruling oligarchy to a full fledged democracy, Botswana presented the most attractive possibility.

The CIA's new eavesdropping facility in Botswana is apparently part of the new and more powerful Voice of America (VOA) relay station at Selebi-Pikwe. The new station was activated at the beginning of 1992. With the aid of the Botswana facility and in conjunction with an existing but smaller eavesdropping facility in Mbabane, Swaziland, the CIA is capable of monitoring events in Southern and Central Africa. This has prompted Mike Louw, the then Director General of South Africa's National Intelligence Service, in June 1996 to 'predict' that the CIA was probably also going to use South Africa as a major base for spying on the African continent.³² Information has it that this is now indeed the case.

The French government too, has a strong political and economic interest in Southern Africa. Spie-Batignolles is one of several French companies currently spearheading French military and economic interest in Africa. According to unconfirmed reports, France has promised military aircraft and equipment to the BDF as part of the deal for the construction of the Molepolele air-base. The contract for the air-base was apparently handed to France as compensation for having been shut out of the contract to build the Gaborone airport in spite of the fact that it submitted the lowest tender.³³

The growing co-operation between the US and Botswana was clearly revealed in January 1992 when the USAF held combined field exercises with the BDF for several

³² *The Daily News*, 28 June 1996.

³³ *Africa Confidential*, 33,3 (7 February 1992); and *Africa Research Bulletin* (January 1992), p. 10435.

days. The joint manoeuvre code named 'Operation Silver Eagle' represented one of the largest US operations ever seen in Sub-Saharan Africa. Historically, the BDF was created in 1977 in direct reaction to the Rhodesian bush war. The BDF is currently about 7500 - 8000 men strong and rather insignificant if compared to the South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) approximately 100 000 men and the Zimbabwean Defence Force (ZDF) of about 40 000 men. Even when the BDF is increased to its proposed strength of 10000, it will still be a relatively small force. The Zimbabwean defence ministry stated in June 1996, that Zimbabwe does not feel threatened by Botswana's arms purchases and that the two countries have an excellent relationship with each other. He later also told the Zimbabwe Inter-Africa News Agency (ZIANA), that his government was satisfied that Botswana was buying the arms for self-defence.³⁴

Botswana's reported intention to purchase sophisticated military hardware and to increase the size of its defence force has been greeted with trepidation by some of its neighbours who have expressed their fear of the possibility of an arms race developing in Southern Africa. Namibia in particular has been sharp in its criticism. The Namibian Foreign Minister, Theo-Ben Gurirab, has criticised the Botswana government's planned arms purchases as 'provocative and unnecessary.' According to the minister the last thing "...we [should] be spending money on now is military equipment, particularly sophisticated equipment. We want to appeal to the friends of southern Africa not to do anything to escalate an arms race and to resist the seduction of the military-industrial complex. We're looking for regional re-construction and development."³⁵

The Botswana government, on the other hand, claims it needs the tanks [and presumably also the aircraft] to "... help with anti-poaching and border-control efforts."³⁶ Of course, this explanation has done little to settle Namibia's concerns about Botswana's intention behind the accelerated arms purchases. Its explanation that the weapons is needed to stop poaching and to exercise border control, has been described as laughable. It has been pointed out that it would cost about US \$50 million (about R230 million) to train thirteen pilots for the F-5 fighters and that the Botswana government would have to spend an equivalent amount annually in maintenance and fuel to keep these pilots flight-ready.³⁷ The BDF's air wing currently only has a few planes, some of which are third-hand reconditioned jets purchased from Saudi Arabia. There are also some helicopters and transport aircraft. The biggest problem is that there are apparently very few pilots who are trained to fly them.

Remarks made by the eminent African-American historian Professor Ali Mazrui during a visit to South Africa in 1995, as well as the reported comments by the South African

³⁴ "Zimbabwe says Botswana arms procurement no threat", *Pan African News Agency*, 21 June 1996.

³⁵ *The Sunday Tribune*, 16 July 1996.

³⁶ *The Daily News*, 18 July 1996.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Minister of Defence, Joe Modise, that member countries should arm themselves 'to the teeth' to protect their mineral wealth, has met with strong reservations from political leaders in the region. Mazrui's statement, which came barely eighteen months after the final episode was written in Africa's colonial history, is unashamedly Pan-Africanist in nature. It is a strong reflection of the Pan-Africanist views expressed by Kwama Nkrumah and others in the early 1960s. Nkrumah broadly suggested that the more powerful independent African countries such as Ghana should take the lead in bringing the smaller non-independent countries in Africa to full independence. Once this has been achieved, these newly independent countries should be united into a larger united Pan-African federation of states. Nkrumah's views on the leading role that Ghana should play in this process, caused consternation among its smaller neighbours who did not want to be prescribed to by either Nkrumah or Ghana.³⁸ As can be expected Modise's remarks met with similar opposition from neighbouring states such as Namibia, whose official opposition party, the DTA, has described his proposal as 'insane'.³⁹ No doubt, the ruling ANC government's desire for an 'African Renaissance', and the leading role that South Africa should play in bringing this about in Southern Africa, if not in the rest of the continent, has equally strong Pan-Africanist overtones.

Since the news on Botswana's proposed arms deal broke in the press in June 1996, the US, which now controls some 52 per cent of the world arms market as compared to only 25 per cent in 1987, has been called upon to reduce its global arms sales particularly to nations in regions - such as Southern Africa - where it could lead to an all out arms race. An advisory panel, appointed by President Clinton, has warned that the \$22-billion global trade in increasingly sophisticated conventional arms of which the US holds 52 per cent, seriously threatens to undermine the security of the United States and its friends but in particular Israel. It has called on Washington and its allies to exercise more restraint in selling such weaponry to other countries.

Although the panel noted that some arms sales to friendly regimes such as Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia can add to US security, it warned that modern arms "*have in some cases attained degrees of military effectiveness, (previously) associated only with nuclear weapons*", and expressed particular concern about the risks of selling to unstable regimes in Asia and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁰ The panel called for US policy makers to stop approving weapons exports to prop-up declining US defence firms, a recommendation which is at direct odds with a US conventional arms control policy adopted by Clinton in February 1995. National security interests, the report pointed out, should be the sole criteria for making such exports.

The important role that the US plays in the international arms theatre is born out by the fact that its share of the global arms market is expected to increase to about 60 per cent by the end of this decade. This represents a phenomenal increase if one takes into account that the global arms market has shrunk by more than 50 percent since the end of the Cold War.

³⁸ *The Daily News*, 6 September 1995.

³⁹ *Rapport*, 14 July 1996.

⁴⁰ *The Daily News*, 26 June 1996.

Conclusion

At the onset of this paper two questions were asked: **one**, whether Botswana and Namibia may be drifting towards a possible border confrontation over the islands of Sedudu and Situngu in the Caprivi Strip and **two**, whether the current dispute over the islands has any bearing on Botswana's accelerated arms purchases since the early 1990s? The answer to the first is a qualified no. Although relations between the two countries over the islands appear to be tense, despite claims to the contrary, there are currently several initiatives under way to find a peaceful solution to the border dispute. In May this year it was reported that the Namibia and Botswana governments have signed an accord, agreeing to find a non-military solution to the territorial dispute between them. Of course this may change once the decision of the World Court is made known towards the end of the year.

The answer to the second part of the question, however, is more difficult to formulate. The planning for and construction of the air-base at Molepolele was started during the latter part of the 1980s and presumably, before the Islands in question became a hotly disputed issue between the two countries. Nonetheless, there are growing indications that Botswana's accelerated arms purchases during the 1990s are at least, to some degree, related to its ongoing border dispute with Namibia and the latter's decision to pump water from the Okavango River. Botswana and Namibia have also become seriously distrustful of one another and have accused each other of hidden agendas, despite claims to the contrary.

The two countries are not expected to take any meaningful decision over the islands until the World Court has made its ruling on Sedudu in November this year. Both governments have indicated that they will abide by the decision of the World Court, yet some observers are of the opinion that the losing side may eventually be forced by growing national sentiment, to reject the courts decision. Should this happen the possibility exists that Botswana and Namibia may follow the path of Eritrea and Ethiopia in settling their difference through arms.

Botswana's increased military expenditure was highlighted at a meeting of the South African Development Community (SADC) meeting held in Zimbabwe in August 1996. At this meeting it was pointed out that, while the destruction of apartheid has removed the greatest destabilising factor in Southern Africa, other factors, such as the growing tension between Namibia and Botswana over the Caprivi Islands, and Botswana's massive expenditure on arms have the potential to create instability in the region.⁴¹

Botswana's political future is closely linked with its socio-economic future which in turn depends to a large degree on the future development of the Okavango for tourism. Although Botswana is rich in diamonds, which accounts for almost 80 percent of the country's exports, as well as in other base minerals, it needs a secure and constant supply of water to develop its economic resources in order to meet the demands that are currently being made on the country by rising unemployment and a rapidly increasing population. It has also been pointed out, that in order to create more jobs,

⁴¹ Elliot Mahende, "SADC prepares to handle trouble spots", *Pan African News Agency*, 23 August 1996. Online edition.

Botswana will have to move away from its dependence on diamond exports. Like most countries in Southern Africa, Botswana has seen a steady rise in unemployment, crime, and other social ills since the early 1990s. The country's employment situation has deteriorated to such an extent that even graduates are now unable to find work.⁴² In 1994 the United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP) rated Botswana as the country with the most skewed income distribution in the world and that the gulf between rich and poor is widening. All this has serious political implications for the future of ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP).

Although some observers have argued that the current boundary dispute between Botswana and Namibia is little more than a storm in a tea cup, others are more concerned, and have argued that the dispute has the potential to quickly develop into open confrontation and in the process pull neighbouring SADC countries into the conflict. Africa has a long history of boundary conflicts that in many instances have proved difficult if not impossible to solve. Only time will tell whether Botswana and Namibia will abide by the decision of the World Court which is expected towards the end of 1998. Botswana's growing ties with the US and its decision to strengthen its military capacity at a time when such a course of events seems out of kilter with developments elsewhere in the region suggests that it will not allow its SADC neighbours to prescribe to it or that it will bow to any of its neighbour's stronger defence force.

⁴² *The Daily News*, 28 September 1994.