

## South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana to Lesotho, 25-8-1994

In a dispute over salaries, that was part of a broader power struggle in Lesotho's fragile democratic system between factions of the Lesotho Royal Defence Forces, the elected government and the monarchy, the armed forces killed Deputy Prime Minister Selometsi Baholo and kidnapped three ministers in April 1994.<sup>1</sup> This happened after a conflict had broken out earlier that year between opposing factions in the 4,000 armed forces, which had violently clashed in a two-week standoff.<sup>2</sup> The neighbouring countries Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe had been involved in negotiating an end to this conflict.<sup>3</sup> At that occasion, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe had declared that he would send in armed forces if so requested by the Lesotho government. The South African government, however, had rejected requests for military intervention.<sup>4</sup>

On 16 August, King Letsie III, grabbed power in a coup carried out with the support of the armed forces. King Letsie III announced the dismissal of Prime Minister Mokhehle and his cabinet and his assumption of power on national radio.<sup>5</sup> One of King Letsie III's objectives was the reinstatement of his father King Moshoeshoe II, deposed by the previous military government. This had been refused by the prime minister. Instead the prime minister had established two commissions of inquiry. The first commission would consider the role of the monarchy and the second commission would examine the conflict between the armed forces of earlier that year. Both the armed forces and King Letsie III dreaded the commissions. The king perceived the commission as a threat to the survival of the monarchy.<sup>6</sup>

The coup did not receive widespread popular support in Lesotho, a country entirely landlocked from all sides by South Africa. The influential Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisations staged a two-day demonstration on 22 and 23 August.<sup>7</sup> South African President Mandela soon expressed his concern about the ensuing situation but stated that 'it's premature at the moment to even think in terms of any kind of military intervention. It will depend on developments there in the coming days.'<sup>8</sup> Following the coup and the unrest that ensued in Lesotho, the presidents of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe gathered in an emergency meeting in Gabarone on 23 August to coordinate their efforts in the framework of the Frontline States.<sup>9</sup> They subsequently met with the Prime Minister Mokhehle and King Letsie III in Pretoria on August 25. The secretary-general of the Organisation of African Unity was also in attendance. During the meeting they impressed on King Letsie III that he needed to restore democratic order. They gave him a deadline of seven days suggesting that sanctions of an economic and military nature, would follow should he not comply by

---

<sup>1</sup> N.M. Bukae, 'An Analysis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Preventive Diplomacy in the Kingdom of Lesotho: A Case Study' (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 2012), 289–91. Mafa M. Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', in *Peace and Security in Southern Africa*, ed. Mandaza, Ibbo (Harare: Sapes Books, 1996), 69. Tandeka Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper: The Lesotho Crisis in Perspective* (African Association of Political Science, 1997), 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Matlosa Khabele, 'The Recent Political Crisis in Lesotho and the Role of External Forces', *Africa Insight* 24, no. No. 4 (1994): 226, <http://content.ajarchive.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/02562804&CISOPTR=560&REC=15>.

<sup>3</sup> Khabele, 226.

<sup>4</sup> Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 15, fn.12.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie Nathan, 'Bound by Law: How Regional Response to the Lesotho Crisis Defied International Conventions', *Track Two* 3, no. No. 4, 'The Politics of Reconciliation: A model of governance for Africa?' (December 1994): 16. Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 68. Some sources put it on 17 August. See Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 8. Brendan Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon: The Lesotho Experience and South Africa's Role in Peacekeeping', in *South Africa and Peacekeeping in Africa*, ed. Mark Shaw and Jakkie Cilliers, vol. 1 (Halfway House: Institute for Defence Policy, 1995), 93–94, <https://www.issafrica.org/pubs/Books/PKV011/9Seery.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 65–68, 78–79.

<sup>7</sup> Sejanamane, 70.

<sup>8</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 94.

<sup>9</sup> Seery, 94.

1 September.<sup>10</sup> The summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which convened in Botswana on 29 August, condemned both the actions of the Lesotho security forces and those of King Letsie III. The SADC advised the King 'to act in the best interests of his country and the region at large by immediately and unconditionally reinstating the legitimate Government of Prime Minister Mokhehle.'<sup>11</sup> The SADC as well as South Africa had received a request for foreign intervention from the deposed government, something that the Lesotho opposition was not in favour of.<sup>12</sup> The foreign ministers of the Frontline States subsequently visited King Letsie III and, 'when the situation became totally out of hand' and they 'were on the verge of a military invasion' told the King once again to 'rescind his order which relieved the government of power.'<sup>13</sup> They delivered a letter written by President Mugabe of Zimbabwe written on 30 August which repeated the earlier issued ultimatum. The letter stated:

I wish on behalf of my colleagues and myself, to draw your Majesty's attention to the need for the restoration of constitutionality in Lesotho within a 7-day period following the Pretoria meeting. As we explained to your Majesty, it clearly meant the reinstatement of the Government of Dr Ntsu Mokhehle without reservations. It also meant the withdrawal of the unconstitutional orders and other measures that your Majesty enacted following your Majesty's assumption of executive powers. ... Your Majesty, we would be pleased if your response to our appeal could indicate a forward movement towards the establishment of a constitutional and legal order. The absence of such a forward movement would leave the region with no other alternative but to join the rest of the world in imposing economic sanctions. In the event of no progress being made, we would have no alternative but to consider the imposition of such specific measures as members of our region would agree upon.<sup>14</sup>

While President Mandela sent a letter to King Letsie III which stressed the benefits to be gained from cooperating, it is unclear whether the Botswanian President Masire did so too.<sup>15</sup> One report characterises him, similar to Mugabe, as taking a more hawkish position than the President of South Africa which was reported to be less inclined to use military force.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisations said Lesotho would not accept 'foreign deadlines'.<sup>17</sup> After discussions with King Letsie III, who claimed he needed to consult with his advisers, the foreign ministers extended the deadline to 5 September.<sup>18</sup> The Prime Minister Mokhehle, meanwhile, burgeoned by the international support, also increased the pressure, demanding in a letter the restoration of his government by 5 September at the latest.<sup>19</sup> During the crisis, the international community kept abreast of developments and expressed their support for the return of democratic

---

<sup>10</sup> Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 8. Khabele, 'The Recent Political Crisis in Lesotho and the Role of External Forces', 227.

<sup>11</sup> SADC, 'Communique Botswana - Gabarone: 29 August, 1994, SADC Head of State and Government - Summit Communiqués - 1980-2006', 29 August 1994, 50-51, [http://www.sadc.int/files/3913/5292/8384/SADC\\_SUMMIT\\_COMMUNIQUES\\_1980-2006.pdf](http://www.sadc.int/files/3913/5292/8384/SADC_SUMMIT_COMMUNIQUES_1980-2006.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Bukae, 'An Analysis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Preventive Diplomacy in the Kingdom of Lesotho: A Case Study', 291. See also Ron Krayhill, 'Flexing Our Muscles? Interview with LH "Rusty" Evans, Director General, Department of Foreign Affairs, on South Africa's - and the Region's - Response to the Lesotho Crisis', *Track Two* 3, no. No. 4, *The Politics of Reconciliation: A model of governance for Africa?* (December 1994): 20. Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Krayhill, 'Flexing Our Muscles? Interview with LH "Rusty" Evans, Director General, Department of Foreign Affairs, on South Africa's - and the Region's - Response to the Lesotho Crisis', 20.

<sup>14</sup> Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 71-72.

<sup>15</sup> Sejanamane, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 92. Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 73.

<sup>17</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 95.

<sup>18</sup> Khabele, 'The Recent Political Crisis in Lesotho and the Role of External Forces', 227.

<sup>19</sup> Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 76.

order to Lesotho, including the UN, the Organisation of African Unity, the EU, the US, the UK, and the Commonwealth. Foreign aid to the country was suspended.<sup>20</sup> The US did warn the Frontline States that a 'military intervention must only be undertaken as a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted.'<sup>21</sup> Further inaction of King Letsie III, however, increasingly made the Frontline States contemplate military action. The South African Representative Evans, in a final attempt to avoid this, went back to the king and told him that the ultimatum was real and that the king had no option other than restoring the government.<sup>22</sup> In the next days, Evans met with all key players on the Lesotho side and negotiated the text of a document. A public statement issued by Prime Minister Mokhehle and King Letsie III in which they agreed 'on the principle to restore constitutional order, and embark immediately on determining mechanisms and procedures in this regard' seemed to signal the end of the crisis.<sup>23</sup> But that was premature. After Evans had testified in the South African parliament that an 'absolute agreement' had been reached on 5 September, and the three coercing governments declared that the threat contained in the ultimatum was lifted, Lesothian factions from both sides quickly denounced that there was an absolute agreement.<sup>24</sup> When King Letsie III still did not put his signature to the document, and Lesotho armed forces started protesting the forthcoming agreement, a decision was made to conduct a show of force, which was left to the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to carry out.<sup>25</sup> On 9 September, its forces staged a massive show of force along the border with Lesotho which included 'low-swoops by Mirage jet fighters, the dropping of paratroopers and the deployment of armoured infantry patrols' on the South African side of the Calderon river dividing the two countries, watched on the other side of the river by the Royal Lesotho Defence Force.<sup>26</sup> Despite different statements of the SANDF and the South African Foreign Ministry as to the purpose of these movements (with the former relating it to the situation in Lesotho, and the latter denying any relationship, calling it an 'exercise'), the show of force brought the message home to King Letsie III: he finally indicated his willingness to comply and he subsequently signed the agreement on 14 September.<sup>27</sup> According to the agreement Prime Minister Mokhehle was reinstated, but at the same time the two commissions that would review the position of the monarchy and the armed forces were re-abolished; participants in the coup would not be prosecuted; and the former King Moshoeshoe II was to resume his throne at the earliest moment possible, which he would do the following year.<sup>28</sup> All in all, while the coercion of the tiny Lesotho by its three much stronger neighbours, spearheaded by the regional powerhouse South Africa, was eventually successful without resort to military force, King Letsie III had also achieved his own objectives.

---

<sup>20</sup> Krayhill, 'Flexing Our Muscles? Interview with LH "Rusty" Evans, Director General, Department of Foreign Affairs, on South Africa's - and the Region's - Response to the Lesotho Crisis', 20. Bukae, 'An Analysis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Preventive Diplomacy in the Kingdom of Lesotho: A Case Study', 292.

<sup>21</sup> Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 73.

<sup>22</sup> Krayhill, 'Flexing Our Muscles? Interview with LH "Rusty" Evans, Director General, Department of Foreign Affairs, on South Africa's - and the Region's - Response to the Lesotho Crisis', 20.

<sup>23</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 95.

<sup>24</sup> Seery, 96. Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 96.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan, 'Bound by Law: How Regional Response to the Lesotho Crisis Defied International Conventions', 17. Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 87.

<sup>27</sup> Seery, 'Africa's Reluctant New Policeman Twirls His Truncheon', 87. See also Nkiwane, *My Brother's Keeper*, 15, fn.15.

<sup>28</sup> Sejanamane, 'The Lesotho Crisis and Regional Intervention', 64-65.