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New Powers for Global Change: South Africa at the UN

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It is an historic twist that South Africa was one of only four states from Africa who joined the UN as a founding member on 7 November 1945. Merely a year later, the General Assembly (GA) started to adopt numerous resolutions asking the country to stop discrimination and apartheid policies. In 1973 it declared that the South African regime had no right to represent the people of South Africa and that the liberation movements recognized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) were the authentic representatives of the majority of the South African people.¹ The many UN measures taken thereafter ranged from an arms embargo to a convention against segregated sporting events.

The GA accepted South Africa's credentials only after the ending of apartheid in 1994. In the same year, Nelson Mandela stated that the elaboration of a new world order must centre on the UN and that the UN's challenge will be to ensure that democracy, peace and prosperity prevail everywhere.² In rejoining the world community of nations, South Africa pledged to strengthen the organization and to further its purpose. During the 1990s, it ratified many important agreements and quickly drew the member states' attention for its assertive multilateralism and proposals. In 1994, it joined the OAU³, the G-77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). From 1998 to 2002, South Africa chaired the NAM and continued to promote South-South cooperation as a member of NAM's troika⁴ until 2006 when it assumed the chairmanship of the G-77. South Africa also advanced the North-South dialogue with the European Union and the G8. In its outreach to Asia at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the New Asian African Strategic Partnership, both

founded in 2006, the country tries to build strategic partnerships for the discussion of UN-topics based on a shared vision of developmental challenges. Often it claims to advance not only its own objectives but also those of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African continent. The strategic partnership with India and Brazil⁵ has a particular power to further the agenda of the South in dialogue with the North.

Development for Conflict Prevention

South Africa actively participated in the design of new UN institutions while coordinating its positions with other member states, especially those of the African Union (AU). The AU supported the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council (HRC).⁶ South Africa became a member of the HRC, pledging to initiate work on a protocol that puts the right to development on par with all other rights. At the same time the country is dissatisfied with progress on UN reform. President Thabo Mbeki criticized the UN's performance, especially the "half-hearted, timid and tepid" deployment of necessary resources by the wealthier member states. The proposed reform measures would stand for a UN policy of "the rich and powerful" that leads to the perpetuation of the disempowerment of the powerless.⁷ Poverty alleviation and development are seen to be the most effective tools for conflict prevention.⁸ Hence, developed countries are urged to make concrete steps to fulfill their commitment to spend 0.7% of their GDP on development assistance. The AU also wants to have the debt of highly indebted poor countries

¹ GA, Resolution 3151 G, 14 December 1973

² At the GA on 3 Oct. 1994, A/49/PV.14, pp.8.

³ OAU was replaced by the African Union (AU) in 2002.

⁴ The troika consists of representatives of the past, present and future chair of NAM.

⁵ The India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum was founded in 2003.

⁶ Assembly of the AU, "Sirte Declaration on the Reform of the United Nations", 4 -5 July 2005, p.2.

⁷ At the GA on 15 Sept. 2005.

⁸ Executive Council of the AU, "The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: 'The Ezulwini Consensus'", 7 - 8 March 2005.

cancelled and to see Africa's special needs considered in all reform issues. South Africa will reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)-one of the major challenges being to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁹

UN Security Council

The AU claims two permanent seats for African countries with veto rights, arguing that Africa is the only continent not being represented by the recent veto powers in the SC.¹⁰ It has not presented candidates, but South Africa was a clear favorite along with Nigeria and Egypt. In 2007 South Africa was elected as a non-permanent member of the Security Council (SC) for the first time. Here, South Africa joined China and Russia in their opposition to a resolution on Myanmar; it is debatable whether it was a matter of principle or realpolitik when it did so. An abstention could have been sufficient to refer the matter to the HRC.¹¹

Disarmament and Terrorism

When assuming the presidency for the Conference on Disarmament, South Africa urged member states to resume negotiations.¹² South Africa, who entered major UN disarmament agreements, voted for the elaboration of an Arms Trade Treaty in 2006 and was one of the driving forces for the 2001 UN Small Arms Conference. The country has banned landmines in 1998 and destroyed its stocks two years ahead of schedule. It had installed a secret program to build biological weapons in the 1980s, which was abandoned in 1993.¹³ In 1995, South Africa ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention. In 1991, the country ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty, completed the dismantlement of the weapons it had developed, and entered into a safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency. Recent announcements that the country wants to enrich uranium and build reactors have reactivated discussions about proliferation.¹⁴

South Africa distinguishes between terrorism and the "legitimate struggle waged by peoples for their liberation or self-determination in accordance with the principles of international law". It wants to include topics like state terrorism, extrajudicial killings, extraordinary rendition and illegal detention in future debates on terrorism.¹⁵

Environment

In 2002 South Africa hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Comparing the goals of

the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) to the MDGs, it asks for a monitoring of countries' performance in the realization of the JPOI goals. Also, it calls for a "global science and technology for development agenda".¹⁶ South Africa argues that desertification, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and deforestation are major threats to security and stability in Africa. The country is an active participant in the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and has ratified the Convention on Biological Safety, the Basel, Stockholm and the Rotterdam Conventions as well as the Kyoto Protocol.

Table: South Africa and the UN

Contribution to regular UN-budget (2006): US\$5.6 million
Contribution to peacekeeping: (Dec. 2006): 1,057 troops, 33 military observers (20 th)
SC member: 2007/08
Important positions: <i>Mr. John Dugard</i> (Special Rapporteur on human rights in Palestinian territories), <i>Ms. Sheila Sisulu</i> (Deputy Executive Director WFP), <i>Mr. Shauket Fakie</i> (Board of Auditors), <i>Mr. Desmond Mpilo Tutu</i> (High-Level Fact-Finding Mission to Beit Hanoun, HRC)
Membership in Commissions and Committees¹⁷ Law Commission, Disarmament Commission, Commission on Population and Development; Board of Auditors; UNCITRAL; Human Rights Council; Counter-Terrorism Committee (vice-chair), Committees on Racial Discrimination, on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Program and Coordination, Information and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space; ECOSOC; Governing Councils UNEP and UN-HABITAT; Exec. Committee of UNHCR; Exec. Board UNESCO
of NGOs from South Africa registered with DPI¹⁸: 2 (out of 1662)
of registered partnerships with Commission for Sustainable Development active in South Africa: 146 (out of 322)
of South African enterprises participating in Global Compact: 17 (out of 3927)

Source: Several UN websites: www.un.org

Further Reading:

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Department of Foreign Affairs www.dfa.gov.za

South African Mission to the United Nations in New York www.southafrica-newyork.net/pmun

⁹ UNAIDS estimates that in 2005, 5.5 million persons (18.8 %) were living with HIV in South Africa.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, Document A/60/L.41.

¹¹ Nic Dawes, "Comment", *Mail & Guardian Online*, 19 January 2007 [retrieved 29 Jan. 2007].

¹² UN General Assembly, A/C.1/61/PV.19, p. 2-3.

¹³ The Biological Weapons Convention was ratified 1975.

¹⁴ SIPRI, "Country of Nuclear Strategic Concern - South Africa" (cited after www.sipri.org/contents/expcon/cnsc1sa.html [retrieved 21 Jan. 2007]).

¹⁵ GA/10488, 8 Sept. 2006.

¹⁶ South Africa at 14th Session of CSD, "Overview of Progress in the Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation", 1 May 2006.

¹⁷ For lack of space this list is non-exhaustive.

¹⁸ Data on NGOs registered with ECOSOC were not available.