

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This Report covers the activities of the third phase of the Commonwealth Observer Mission to South Africa (COMSA), from mid-August to mid-December 1993, when – after protracted negotiations – the country was preparing for its first democratic elections.

The concept of COMSA was first articulated during a visit to South Africa by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, in July 1992. Concerned by the level of violence, which had emerged as a serious threat to political negotiations, the Secretary-General proposed to South African leaders the establishment of a multidisciplinary team of experts to provide practical assistance in addressing this problem.

The mission was subsequently constituted in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 772 of 17 August 1992, which called on international organisations, including the Commonwealth, to deploy observers in South Africa to help arrest political violence.

COMSA began its work in South Africa with the arrival on 18 October 1992 of a team comprising experts in varying fields complemented by staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

After a review in January 1993 of the first three-month phase of COMSA activities, a second phase began in February 1993 and ran until May 1993. In light of widespread appeals from within South Africa for the mission to continue, the Secretary-General constituted a third group of 11 observers who arrived in mid-August 1993.

In the Communiqué following their October 1993 biennial summit in Cyprus, Commonwealth Heads of Government noted the ‘important and widely acknowledged contribution’ of COMSA in ‘helping to stem violence, reconcile communities, return refugees and initiate socio-economic reconstruction.’ They agreed that ‘the mission should remain in South Africa until after the election planned for April 1994 when the situation would be reviewed in consultation with the new, democratically elected government.’

Heads of Government also welcomed a programme of developmental activities to be funded by the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) to strengthen National Peace Accord structures and assist the transition to a non-racial democracy.

In this context they 'accorded particular priority to the provision of technical assistance and training to promote improved police/community relations and in support of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the Independent Media Commission (IMC) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA).'

Mention is made in the Report of the two projects funded through the CFTC that arose from problem areas identified by COMSA, and were initiated during this phase: a nationwide marshals training project, and a mediation/training project.

From 17–20 November 1993, the Secretary-General visited South Africa and held wide-ranging consultations with South African leaders on how the Commonwealth might usefully contribute to the remaining phase of the transition. As outlined in Chapter 9, these consultations will shape the fourth phase of COMSA, in which activities will focus increasingly on the preparations by South Africa for general elections scheduled for 27 April 1994.

Composition of the Team

As in the previous two teams, COMSA observers covering the period of this Report included a strong contingent of persons with backgrounds in law enforcement. A Chief Superintendent heading the Police/Community Relations Department of Scotland Yard in Britain, who served on the first two teams of COMSA, stayed for the third phase. Other police officers were: a Superintendent in charge of the Singapore police public affairs department; and two Deputy Superintendents of the Royal Brunei Police. The team also included a retired Nigerian Army General.

Two observers from India had backgrounds in politics and the public service: a retired Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in the state of Rajasthan; and a retired Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Transport. Zimbabwe seconded to the team an ex-Minister who had been closely involved in the negotiations for that country's independence, and with wide-ranging experience in developmental issues.

In addition – and in light of the forthcoming elections – the third COMSA team comprised two electoral experts: the Deputy Chief of the Electoral Commission in the province of Victoria, Australia; and the Principal Assistant Secretary of the Electoral Commission in Malaysia. The team also included a media expert – an Assistant Deputy Minister from the Department of External Affairs and International Trade in Canada.

These Commonwealth experts were complemented by Secretariat staff with backgrounds in diplomacy, the media and management. A full list of the observers is contained in *Annex I*.

COMSA worked closely with the CFTC-funded technical assistance component, established on the ground by a Canadian development adviser with several years experience of working with South African NGOs. A British

police Chief Inspector specialising in maintaining public order provided much of the international input into the marshals training programme, with assistance from COMSA observers with backgrounds in policing. A senior Zambian diplomat, with extensive experience in conflict resolution, at an international and grassroots level, was seconded by the Commonwealth to the National Peace Secretariat to assist with facilitation and training.

Mandate and Deployment

The mandate of COMSA was defined by the Commonwealth Secretary-General in the first COMSA Report as follows:

- In accordance with United Nations Resolution 772 of 17 August 1992, the Commonwealth mission would collaborate with the United Nations Observer Mission to South Africa (UNOMSA) and other international observers, and would co-ordinate closely with the National Peace Secretariat and other structures established under the National Peace Accord.
- Within that framework, however, the Commonwealth Group would retain its separate identity, reporting to the Commonwealth Secretary-General directly on all its work in South Africa. The Commonwealth Secretary-General stressed that each member of the Group would be serving in an individual capacity, and would be expected to make observations and judgments which reflected this independence.
- It was of crucial importance that the observers acted impartially and even-handedly in their dealings with all persons and organisations in South Africa.

As in the first two phases, COMSA observers were deployed in two areas: the Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vaal (PWV) region, and Natal, where violence in the country is most pronounced.

Activities

COMSA's activities fell into three broad categories:

- establishing as a group contacts with a wide spectrum of political parties and interest groups;
- developing, on an individual basis or in small teams, special knowledge of the people, concerns and activities in particular geographical areas; and
- providing through COMSA specific expertise relevant to reducing violence and preparing for elections.

In pursuing its mandate the mission:

- met with the Government and most political parties, including their electoral and media departments and specialists. These contacts were maintained and expanded throughout the period;

- reported regularly to the Secretary-General on the political negotiations at the World Trade Centre which were most intensive, and reached their conclusion, during the period under review;
- participated in several conferences, workshops and discussion groups initiated by the National Peace Secretariat and its related structures and by academic and non-governmental organisations. COMSA received and responded to many invitations to make presentations at such gatherings, especially in areas such as policing, the media, and elections;
- sought to reinforce the structures set up under the National Peace Accord, through regular attendance of and contributions to the meetings of the National Peace Committee and National Peace Secretariat, as well as regional and local structures. COMSA in particular sought to consolidate the grassroots work begun during previous phases in Natal, which contributed to a substantial reduction of violence in some of the worst affected areas. The team also played an active role in the East Rand of the PWV, which has emerged as one of the worst 'pockets' of violence in the country;
- attended and observed hundreds of political gatherings, rallies and funerals, where the presence of local and international observers has played an important role in defusing potential violence. The CFTC-sponsored marshal trainer accompanied COMSA observers on many of these exercises and made use of this practical experience for the design of courses. The Marshal Training Programme arose from previous observations of the important role that marshals can play in containing violence at public gatherings – if properly trained;
- built on the previously established links with the South African Police (SAP) and South African Defence Force (SADF) with a view to assisting these structures in the transition to a new South Africa. COMSA also followed, and was involved in consultations on, the setting up of a National Peacekeeping Force for the elections;
- monitored progress towards, and contributed to discussions on, the forthcoming elections and the role of the media, through regular consultations with various parties and interest groups. These discussions form the basis of several preliminary observations in this Report. They have also been an important input into discussions on possible technical assistance in these areas, as well as Commonwealth plans for observing the elections; and
- continued consultations with a wide range of political and civic organisations on socio-economic reconstruction. The period under review witnessed the removal of remaining economic sanctions by the Commonwealth and other international organisations. Plans are in hand for a Commonwealth and United Nations-sponsored donor conference focusing on human resource development shortly after the elections.

Co-operation with other Observer Missions

In all these activities, COMSA worked closely with the United Nations, European Community and Organisation of African Unity observer missions. The four missions met regularly to discuss issues of common interest and plan joint strategies. We frequently worked in teams and issued joint statements, some of which are quoted in this Report.

This daily co-operation, sharing of information and ideas has greatly enhanced our capacity. We are deeply indebted to our colleagues from the other missions for their support.