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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

28 May 1986

Dear Charles,

South Africa: Message from President Botha

The Prime Minister will have seen the latest message from President Botha, together with Sir Patrick Moberly's account of his meeting with the South African Foreign Minister on 26 May and his comments on it (Cape Town telnos 294-296 refer).

The Foreign Secretary agrees with our Ambassador that the content and tone of the President's reply and Pik Botha's comments are thoroughly discouraging. P W Botha's message gives no ground for optimism about the nature of the South African response to COMGEP which is expected in the next few days. Indeed, the State President does not refer to the Commonwealth initiative other than in the context of exchanges about the meaning of the term "suspension of violence". The message represents confirmation that Pik Botha has lost out, at least for the present, to hard line colleagues in the Cabinet. Yet again, there is no hint of recognition of the problems caused by the raids for those who have been trying to help South Africa out of the blind alley in which they are situated. The self-justificatory tone of the letter, P W Botha's obsession with the requirement as he sees it to achieve a renunciation rather than a suspension of violence, and his corresponding failure to recognise the difficulty of expecting the ANC to concede this in advance of negotiations (and that to do so would anyway be ineffective, since they would lose credibility with their followers in black townships) are all deeply depressing.

Nevertheless, Sir Geoffrey Howe considers that there is no alternative but to continue to support the COMGEP initiative and to put what pressure is possible on the South Africans to make its continuation possible. It is uncomfortable that all our eggs should be in this one basket: but no other mechanism exists with any potential for making progress on suspension of violence/beginning of dialogue.

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The question therefore arises whether the Prime Minister should reply immediately to State President Botha's latest message. In the Foreign Secretary's view, it would be inadvisable to do so. There is little more we can say at this level to the South Africans until they have revealed their hand to the Commonwealth Group. Should they do so in the same sort of uncompromising terms as P W Botha's letter to Mrs Thatcher, the likelihood is that the Group would conclude that there is no more mileage in the initiative. This, in Sir Geoffrey's view, might be the time to make one last appeal direct to President Botha.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary intends to discuss these developments with Mr Shultz, since President Reagan is, we understand, about to send his own message to P W Botha about the raids. It would also, in Sir Geoffrey's view, be prudent to accelerate inter-departmental preparations against the possible, indeed probable, failure of COMGEP. If the initiative founders, we shall face sharply increasing pressure, from the Commonwealth, our European partners and the US for further economic measures against South Africa. Sir Geoffrey considers that it would be wise to determine our own position now, so that we shall be ready with a range of optional (but not intolerable) measures which could enable us, at some suitable point, to rally support from our main industrial partners, notably the US, France, Germany and Japan. This would involve identifying measures which would signal to the South Africans our strong disapproval of their intransigent position and at the same time limit the risk to our interests not just in black Africa, but also in the Third World in general, and more widely. If, per contra, we did nothing, the risk is that we would be held responsible for the subsequent strains in the Commonwealth which could be serious. This would carry international and domestic penalties.

There would be no more question than in the past of our taking measures in isolation, so that the risk of South African retaliation, which has been a concern to other Whitehall Departments, should be manageable. The idea would be to seek measures which have the maximum impact on white supporters of the South African Government, and cause the least possible damage either to unemployment in this country or among South African blacks. These constraints would considerably narrow the field. But they nevertheless leave some scope for action. MISC 118 should be asked to accelerate their considerations of such measures against the very real possibility that they may be needed.

/Finally,

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Finally, the Foreign Secretary has considered the hint by Pik Botha (paragraph 7 of Cape Town telno 294) that it might help if a small number of Western leaders (say those of four leading countries of the European Community) were to meet State President Botha direct. The four European countries concerned would presumably be France, Germany, Italy as well as ourselves (though Sir Geoffrey considers that it would be odd if the US were not to take part in such a summit). The Foreign Secretary strongly doubts whether our European partners or the Americans would have anything to do with such a meeting, which they would see (in much the same way as they saw P W Botha's appeal to the Tokyo Summit) as carrying a high risk of failure. Commonwealth and other Third World leaders could be expected to view such a move with less than enthusiasm. Nor does Sir Geoffrey think that much would be achieved by a meeting with the State President in his present mood. We need not however take a final position on this until the South Africans have replied to COMGEP. In any case, the proposal appears to be a personal suggestion by Pik Botha, and there is no guarantee that if we take it up State President Botha would respond.

I am copying this letter to Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

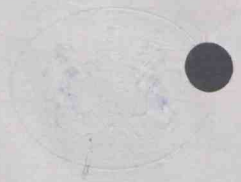
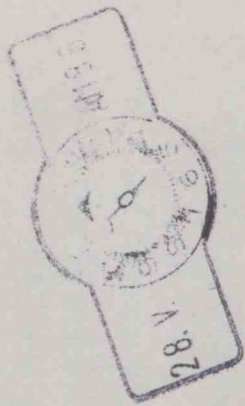
Yours ever

R N Culshaw

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Private Secretary

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