

SUMMARY OF EVENTS IN LESOTHO: FIRST QUARTER 1994

Background to the Army Mutiny

The first indications of trouble within the army came on the night of Friday 19 November 1993, when the Makoanyane Barracks were disturbed by gunfire. It subsequently emerged that troops from D Company at the Barracks had mutinied against four officers, whom they felt were not representing their interests. The troops had required the officers to write their own letters of resignation, and those who did so were the Deputy Commander of the Royal Lesotho Defence Force, Brigadier Motlalentoa Kopo, and one Colonel and two Lieutenant-Colonels.

Although no statement emerged from the troops about the reasons for their mutiny, there was a general view that the concerns of the mutineers were linked with those of the Basotho National Party, as expressed by its leader, Chief Retšelisitsoe Sekhonyana, at a pitso held at the 'Manthabiseng Bus Stop on 13 November, the Saturday immediately preceding the mutiny. At this pitso, Chief Sekhonyana had attacked the Basutoland Congress Party Government for allowing the BCP's former military wing, the Lesotho Liberation Army, to develop a special relationship with Lesotho's largest security firm, Security Lesotho, this firm having entrusted some of its staff with heavy weapons, and having assumed national responsibilities such as the guarding of Radio Lesotho installations. Chief Sekhonyana had further alleged that former members of the LLA were being allowed to act as dagga smugglers on Lesotho's eastern border with an encampment where a military tent was flying the BCP flag. Other former LLA soldiers were seeking South African Defence Force training. He had called on his BNP supporters at the pitso to arm themselves for their own defence.

Following the army mutiny on 19 November, the Defence Commission discussed the matter and initially instructed that the four Officers who had resigned should go on paid leave pending an investigation. However, eventually the Commission reported that it had no choice but to allow the Officers to retire. The Officers felt that if they had gone back to the barracks they might have been killed, a possibility which had been reinforced on the night of the mutiny by Brigadier Kopo himself having narrowly escaped death when a bullet went through his front door.

A substantial section of the army after November was thus in a state of unsuppressed mutiny, and a sequel was the request for retirement by Major-General O. T. Metsing, Head of the Defence Force. There were apparently unsuccessful attempts to persuade him to remain in office. He was replaced by Major-General Makhula Mosakeng, whose previous appointment had been Head of the National Security Service (the renamed Royal Lesotho Intelligence Service). He assumed duty on 10 January 1994.

Army Unrest Develops into Armed Conflict

Apparently on the very day that he assumed office, Major-General Mosakeng was approached by soldiers from Makoanyane Barracks demanding a pay rise. He asked them to put the demand into writing, which they did, and Mosakeng then took the unsigned letter to the Prime Minister. The letter demanded a 100% pay rise to be implemented by 24th January. The original impetus behind this pay rise is not clear. There had been a precedent when on 30th April 1991, Major-General Lekhanya was overthrown by soldiers demanding more pay, but the demand on that occasion was not 100%. Some commentators believed that the suggestion of an unreasonable demand of this kind originated from the leader of the BNP, who might thereby gain by destabilisation or overthrow of the Government.

The Prime Minister's response to the letter was that no special case could be made for the soldiers and they would have to wait for the normal revision of salaries of all public officers which would be undertaken routinely for implementation in April.

This reply was followed by a meeting between soldiers of the Ratjomose Barracks and the Makoanyane Barracks which is believed to have gone on from 10 30 p. m. on the night of Wednesday 12 January until 3 30 a. m. the following morning. Although what transpired at the meeting is not clear, it is believed by some that there was acceptance that the government had not replied satisfactorily to the wage demand, and there was discussion about toppling the government. Serious differences then seem to have developed as to who would replace the government, with one side favouring the BNP and another favouring Colonel Mothakhathi, a former member of the military government. The meeting apparently broke up acrimoniously as a contest for supremacy developed between the two barracks.

On the morning of Thursday 13 January, on Major-General Mosakeng's orders, security was apparently tightened around the Government Headquarters Building and the Prime Minister's Residence. However, fairly shortly afterwards the additional soldiers dispersed. Meanwhile tents appeared on the Qoatsaneng Ridge and trenches were dug. In Maseru itself, there was considerable activity with armoured cars from the Ratjomose Barracks patrolling streets and the approaches to the Lesotho Sun at the end of the Qoatsaneng Ridge.

The same day a great deal of helicopter activity was taking place, interpreted by some observers as action by the Air Wing of the RLDF to bring in troops and ammunition from RLDF bases outside Maseru to reinforce those at Ratjomose Barracks. The main armoury and ammunition store being at Makoanyane Barracks, the soldiers at Ratjomose needed reinforcements if they were to withstand a prolonged attack from Makoanyane Barracks soldiers.

The following day, Friday 14th January, the Prime Minister went onto the air at 1 p. m. appealing to the army to settle disputes peacefully, and asking sections of the army stationed in the districts to remain there and not to come to Maseru. 7 opposition parties (BNP excluded) issued a statement deploring the threat to democracy posed by the situation.

The same day the head of the Air Wing, Colonel Patrick Qhobela Majara was shot at his home in the shoulder, apparently by Makoanyane troops. He was taken to the military hospital at Makoanyane Barracks. It seems that immediately after Colonel Majara had been shot, his pilots flew the four helicopters of the Air Wing to Ladybrand for safety.

A day later, Saturday 15th January, the South African Foreign Minister, Pik Botha, arrived in Lesotho. He met Ntsu Mokhehle as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, and with Mokhehle's permission, met also with Retšelisitsoe Sekhonyana. Botha warned that South Africa would not recognise any non-democratic government in Lesotho, and that it could close borders so that within three days any such government would fall. Revenue from the customs union would also be suspended. It appears that Pik Botha had been approached for South African assistance to disarm the army, but that this request, like a similar one to the British, had been turned down.

Despite Pik Botha's warnings, some action seems to have taken place the same evening shortly after he left Lesotho, because heavy gunfire was heard from the direction of the Makoanyane Barracks. Also on the following day, Sunday, a single shell was fired from the Qoatsaneng Ridge in the direction of the Makoanyane Barracks.

By this time, the general public began to realise that the Maseru section of the army (total establishment 2500 but with a current national strength of approximately 2300 troops) had divided into factions, the Makoanyane Barracks or D Company troops on the one hand (some 600 in number), and the Ratjomose Barracks or Support Company (commonly called 'RLDF' from the sign on the hill) troops on the other (some 150 in number). The Ratjomose troops, familiar when not in camouflage from their red berets, had dug trenches near the centre Kopje of the Qoatsaneng Ridge (immediately above the new 'Manthabiseng Bus Stop). It was apparently the wish of the Ratjomose troops that Colonel Paepae Mothakhathi, who had been Minister of Employment & Social Welfare in the previous military government, should head the army (or some say the government, following a coup). The Makoanyane

troops indicated their opposition to this by attempting to assassinate Colonel Mothakhathi on the Monday. His pickup was riddled with about 100 bullets, but remarkably, although he and his son were injured, both survived.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, mortar fire was directed at the Makoanyane Barracks from the Qoatsaneng Ridge. However, the 5.5 km distance was apparently just beyond the range of the guns (said to be 4.8 km, but perhaps very close to 5.0 km over the range because of an 80 metre height advantage from Qoatsaneng). Damage was caused to buildings caught in the line of fire, and as a result the Mohlomi Hospital, Botšabelo Hospital and the National Health Training Centre (all of which sustained damage) were evacuated. Several civilians were injured in the crossfire. In other incidents, a Makoanyane soldier, Pte M. Mohapi, was killed by Ratjomose soldiers who were replenishing fuel supplies at the Government Garage on the Monday, while on the Tuesday, a Sergeant John Maqelepo was shot and killed inside the Ratjomose Barracks, apparently because of his sympathies towards the Makoanyane faction.

Amongst other incidents which occurred during the week was the commandeering of police vehicles from the Mabote Police Station and the Maseru Charge Office. These were taken by soldiers from Makoanyane to provide their faction with additional transport.

Meanwhile, the United Nations sent their special envoy stationed in Mozambique, Mr. Aldo Ajello, to investigate the situation. He failed to meet the two army factions, whose leadership remained mysterious to the extent that no-one seemed to know who was commanding them. Certainly neither group was taking orders from Major-General Mosakeng, although it seems that at certain points soldiers did agree to lay down their arms, only to take them up again as they learned of new provocations or atrocities from the other side.

An OAU envoy followed, Mr. Legwaila of Botswana, and although he also did not succeed in meeting the factions, the serious situation was impressed on him when he was in Maseru on Sunday 23rd January, the day of a major gunbattle.

On Saturday 22nd January, the Foreign Minister, Mr. Molapo Qhobela, visited troops in both barracks, apparently the first time that a cabinet minister had visited either barracks since the March 1993 elections which brought the BCP to power. It was subsequently announced over Radio Lesotho that his talks had been successful and the two factions had agreed to cease hostilities. However, on the following day the biggest single engagement of the confrontation began. From about 6 30 a. m., explosions could be heard as far away as Roma some 30 km distant. The main military action was by Makoanyane soldiers attacking the ridge held by the Ratjomose soldiers. Field guns were set up close to the National Teacher Training College, and machine gun and mortar fire continued for several hours, dying down only at 11 30, and then resuming in the late afternoon. Several mortar bombs went over the ridge, three of them causing damage at and near the UNDP building in the Bureau of Statistics area. Several others fell harmlessly on the Race Course.

Makoanyane soldiers managed to capture the summit of Qoaling Mountain, but they failed to take the Qoatsaneng Ridge where the Ratjomose soldiers were dug in, apparently for three reasons: the commanding officer was not prepared to sustain the casualties that a direct assault by infantry on the ridge would have created; the necessary further bombardment prior to an attack would have caused further civilian casualties if mortar bombs had missed the ridge; and finally and quite decisively a very heavy rainstorm intervened at 6 p. m. and blotted out the landscape, the rain continuing until late at night. This dampened the spirits of the attacking soldiers, and apparently also flooded the trenches on the ridge.

The all-day battle in Maseru attracted considerable media attention, with the different factions being labelled as 'Loyal' and 'Rebel'. It was only later that the media realised that neither side was really on the side of the government, and that the fighting had become a contest between the two army

factions each wishing to defeat the other. Civilian casualties from the action were surprisingly light, with some 11 persons detained in hospital, and no civilian deaths. Most injuries were from stray bullets, and these were reported to have penetrated houses over a wide area from Lithoteng Ha Seoli to Maseru West. Military casualties also appear to have been light, but there were reports of three soldiers killed and a number of injuries.

Commentators on the fracas tried to assign a role in the conflict to the Leader of the Opposition, Retšelisitsoe Sekhonyana, who, as has been seen, was believed by some to have encouraged the soldiers in their pay demand and who also had been urging his followers to arm themselves. In relation to Sekhonyana's role there were plenty of rumours but few hard facts. However, it seemed likely that more would emerge when Sekhonyana was charged with sedition following his statements at the pitso on 13 November. (His first court appearance on this charge was on 4 February, and he was then released on bail until 18 February.)

Ceasefire and International Attempts at Reconciliation

Many people expected hostilities to resume on Monday, but there was in fact a ceasefire. Maseru gradually returned to near normal, and government ministers inspected damage. On Monday night, however, one of the leading members of the Ratjomose faction, Warrant Officer T. Qothelo, was killed in a collision involving his unlit armoured car on the main road outside Lesotho High School.

A speech on Radio Lesotho by the Minister of Justice, Kelebone Maope, on the Monday, in which he condemned the role played by Chief Sekhonyana, was apparently followed by heavily armed soldiers going to his residence on the Tuesday. However, the soldiers found that Maope was not there, having left for Gaborone.

On Tuesday two representatives of the Commonwealth Secretary-General arrived in Maseru, but their activities were initially overshadowed by a high level meeting held in Gaborone on Wednesday 26th January between the South African, Botswana, and Zimbabwean Presidents together with Nelson Mandela, and the Lesotho Deputy Prime Minister, Selometsi Baholo, and the Lesotho Minister of Justice, Kelebone Maope. It was reported that an international initiative would be taken using diplomatic pressure, backed up with force where necessary, the objective being to end the Lesotho crisis. As a result of this initiative, the media reported the formation of a task force, the existence of which was denied by the Foreign Minister Molapo Qhobela, who apparently was at odds with his Cabinet colleagues who had gone to Gaborone. What eventually came to Lesotho as a result of the Gaborone initiative was better described as a fact-finding mission.

The two Commonwealth delegates were meanwhile working hard to achieve a meeting between the warring factions. Dr. Moses Anyafu, a Ghanaian, and Mr. Max Gaylard, an Australian, were no strangers to Lesotho, having previously been involved in matters relating to the position of King Moshoeshoe II, and also having been part of the Commonwealth election monitoring group in March 1993.

After separate meetings with the two factions (in which both factions said they were loyal to the government), the Commonwealth representatives achieved a meeting with 10 delegates from each faction, who sat down to talk at teatime on Sunday 30th January. The venue was the Lesotho Sun, not far from the point where a week ago, the two factions had been engaged in heavy fighting with each other.

As a result, the situation was defused and on Tuesday 1 February, both factions dismantled their forward positions on hills, and a procession of military vehicles bearing white flags passed down Kingsway to cheers from people watching. The helicopters of the Air Wing returned to their base at the

Mejametalana Airport on Friday 4 February and the two Commonwealth delegates left on Monday 7 February.

However, observers were in general agreement that the overall situation remained serious, with factionalism within a leaderless army still a serious threat to stability. The two Commonwealth delegates themselves also noted in a press conference before departure that the problems within the army were unsolved, and it would be for the Basotho to work out solutions.

A month later, despite numerous meetings in which the Heads of Churches in Lesotho were very much involved, the two army factions still did not seem to have come to any agreement. Moreover, neither faction had appointed a spokesman to make public the nature of the disagreement.

Independent Candidate wins Qeme By-Election

At a time when the situation in Lesotho remained tense and unpredictable, some attention was diverted to politics and the Qeme by-election, particularly after the somewhat flamboyant Bofihla Nkuebe, who had expected to be the BCP candidate, was not supported by the party leadership. On Nomination Day, 14 February, Nkuebe, announced that he would stand as an Independent candidate. He was duly elected on polling day on 26 March. His emblem on the polling forms was a tree, and the general public celebrated his victory by saying the tree had defeated the knobkerrie (the BCP emblem).

Bofihla Nkuebe thus became the first opposition member in the 65 seat National Assembly.

Cabinet Shuffle

Towards the end of March, the first change in Ministerial positions since the election took place with the splitting of the Ministry held by the Prime Minister's controversial brother, Shakhane Mokhehle. A new Minister of Labour & Employment, Mr. Notši Molopo was sworn in, leaving Shakhane Mokhehle with the reduced portfolio of Trade & Industry. At the same time, three new Assistant Ministers were appointed, Mr. Sephiri Motanyane as Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister, Mr. Moneri Ntšaba as Assistant Minister of Home Affairs, and Mr. Lira Motete as Assistant Minister of Finance.

[Updated to 31 March 1994]