

Mandela government sends invasion force to Lesotho

Chris Talbot
24 September 1998

Six hundred South African troops were sent into the tiny country of Lesotho in an attempt to put down opposition to the government headed by Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili. Acting under the auspices of the South African Development Community (SADC), this is the first time South African troops have intervened in another country since the end of apartheid rule in 1994.

The intervention is facing fierce opposition, following seven weeks of protests over rigged elections that took place last May. Although civilian demonstrators were driven out of the capital Maseru by heavily armed South African troops, sections of the Lesotho Defence Force who have sided with the opposition to the regime have taken up arms against the South African forces, killing nine soldiers so far. More than 23 people have died, with dozens wounded. Whilst this fighting was taking place, shops in the centre of Maseru were looted and shops and government buildings, including the High Court, were burnt to the ground.

This intervention will give rise to widespread questioning of the Mandela government's support for a corrupt regime and capitalist exploitation in the region at the expense of the masses.

Lesotho is one of the poorest countries in southern Africa with a yearly per capita income of only \$770. It is surrounded by and economically dependent upon South Africa. One of the main objectives of the military intervention was to secure the \$4 billion Katse dam project, which will supply water from this mountainous country to the dry industrial heartland of South Africa. South African troops were also protecting the royal palace of King Letsie III, the South African High Commission, and other strategic buildings.

Opposition spokesperson Mamello Morrison was interviewed on South African radio on the palace

grounds in Maseru. Against a background of gunfire, she said that the intervention would be unpopular with the majority of the population: 'President Mandela has sent his troops to butcher our people.' Maseru pointed out that the planned talks between the demonstrators and the government--which the South African government were supposed to be arranging--had been abruptly abandoned.

The intervention is a reversal of South African government policy. Mandela refused to send troops to the Congo to prop up the regime of Laurent Kabil. No other SADC troops have taken part in the operation, apart from 300 from Botswana who joined the South African troops late Tuesday. Acting President (whilst Mandela is in the US) Mangosuthu Buthelezi announced that the troops would stay 'until the situation was peacefully resolved,' and that they had intervened to 'normalise the situation at the request of the legitimate government of Lesotho.'

The government of the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) was elected on May 23 after winning in 79 out of the 80 voting districts. But the voting arrangements were entirely under the control of the military and were obviously rigged. In August a recount of voting which had been demanded in 32 of the constituencies revealed a pattern of 'ghost voting'. About 2,000 ballot papers in each district had no authenticating mark of the voting officer at the polling booth. A previous investigation of a sample of six districts revealed irregularities with the dates of birth of voters, with eight times as many voters allegedly born on January 1 than on any other day of the year.

Lesotho has had a series of coups and despotic regimes since 1966, including seven years of military rule. Before then for historical reasons Lesotho remained a separate British colony (Basutoland)--like

Swaziland and Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland)--and was not incorporated into South Africa at the beginning of the century. It was, however, never economically distinct from South Africa even after formal independence was granted.

Effectively Lesotho was little different from the Native Reserves or what became in the 1950s Bantustans or 'homelands'. Black workers from these segregated and impoverished regions were forced to travel to work in industrial areas at ultra-low wages. In Lesotho the King and a small circle of chiefs and administrators could accumulate great riches, but the vast majority live in extreme poverty. There are still nearly 100,000 miners from Lesotho working in South Africa, even after the 50,000 made unemployed over recent years. Fully 35 percent of Lesotho's male wage earners work over the border and 33 percent of the country's GDP comes from miners working in South Africa.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact