

British prime minister's South Africa visit provokes anger over air strikes against Iraq

Police fire on protesters

Mike Ingram
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As Prime Minister Tony Blair arrived in South Africa for his first official state visit last Friday he was greeted with angry protests against Britain's part in the recent air strikes against Iraq.

South African police opened fire on a demonstration by Muslim groups opposed to the bombing of Iraq. In scenes reminiscent of the apartheid era, birdshot, rubber bullets and tear gas were used to disperse the 150 protestors, many of whom were women. Demonstrators carried placards reading "Death to Tony Blair" and chanted "One Blair, one bullet".

At least three people were injured in the incident outside the parliament building in Cape Town. A journalist working for the South African Broadcasting Corporation was wounded in the leg by rubber bullets and was taken to hospital. A woman protester suffered a head injury and a male protester was hit in the arm by a rubber bullet. Both were arrested. Police at the scene claimed that protestors had opened fire first, but reporters said there was no evidence to support this claim.

Earlier protests by right-wing Afrikaners against Britain's role in the 1899-1902 Boer War were allowed to pass by peacefully.

Blair said that the main purpose of his visit to South Africa was to say goodbye to outgoing President Nelson Mandela and to welcome his likely successor, Thabo Mbeki. More important, however, was the signing of a series of agreements aimed at increasing trade and investment--particularly in armaments--between the two countries.

In a meeting with Deputy President Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria, Blair promised a 40 percent increase in British development aid to South Africa, amounting to \$140

million over the next three years. In return South Africa has committed itself to further negotiations on defence contracts worth \$1.6 billion.

Those meeting also agreed that Iraq must comply with UN Security Council Resolutions and that Britain and South Africa would remain in close contact on the issue. In his speech Blair defended the action against Iraq, saying: "If we had not confronted Saddam when we did last month, we would only have had to do so at a later stage in circumstances more dangerous for his neighbours and the rest of the world."

In Cape Town Blair spoke in the parliament building where Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had, almost 40 years previously, delivered his famous "wind of change" speech recognising the approaching end of Britain's empire. Nothing so profound could be expected from Blair. He referred to the "year of change", but rather than addressing the political turmoil embracing South Africa, he spoke primarily on media and opinion polls within the UK.

"It is on the Third Way that I wish to focus today, for a new politics is arising from the ashes of the struggles of the twentieth century between traditional views of capitalism and of socialism," Blair said. "The Third Way seeks to combine economic dynamism with social justice; indeed it does more--it avows that the one depends on the other."

Blair praised Mandela as "one of the heroes of the century" and referred to his deputy Mbeki as "a man of keen intelligence and of keen political insight". He also paid tribute to the role played by the African National Congress in "creating a democratic South Africa after the apartheid era".

Whether Blair chooses to acknowledge it or not,

nowhere has the concept of marrying "economic dynamism" (a worshipping of the capitalist market) with "social justice" proved more bankrupt than within South Africa. The *Guardian* newspaper in Britain is extremely supportive of the Labour government. But it expressed regret that Blair had chosen to focus his speech on his "beloved Third Way", which they said "sounded trivial in the context of South Africa's very different balance of internal power".

The comment, subtitled "South Africa needs justice", said that no visitor to South Africa could overlook "the huge economic, social and psychological gap between blacks and non blacks which has scarcely diminished since President Nelson Mandela's African National Congress came to power ... the reality of five years of multicultural politics is that the old colour bar remains as a wealth bar."

It went on to speak of the central contradiction of South Africa being that which underlies the ANC itself. "A movement which in exile and underground opposition promised to redress the grotesque injustices of apartheid with a programme of income redistribution and strong government intervention has shifted towards a conventional 'trickle-down' approach ... the government's central ideology is one which avoids heavy taxation on middle incomes, let alone the rich, and has sought to minimise the role of government itself."

The ending of apartheid in South Africa revealed that the fundamental division in society was not between black and white but between the capitalist class and the working class. In the company of their new-found imperialist friends, the ANC's use of apartheid era-style brutality shows where their true allegiances lie. This will only serve to further alienate the working class and oppressed masses. Expressing the concerns of the ANC regarding such a development, one of Mbeki's senior colleagues on the national executive, Matthews Phosa, said: "The masses will not eat our good intentions, let alone empty slogans. Politics is cruel. It will eventually punish us if we do not convert dreams into reality."



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