

Divisions in British government over arms to Zimbabwe

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The Labour government is to allow shipments of spare parts for Hawk fighter aircraft used by the Zimbabwean regime in the Congo war. Britain had imposed an unofficial arms embargo against Zimbabwe over the last year, refusing to supply parts for the 10 Hawk jets which were purchased under the Thatcher government in the early 1980s. However Prime Minister Tony Blair personally intervened last week, opposing Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, to permit the delivery of spare parts.

The Zimbabwe government was being pressured to end its military involvement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where it has supported the government of President Laurent Kabila together with Angola and Namibia against rebel forces backed by Uganda and Rwanda. The United States and Western governments have backed a United Nations peace deal agreed last summer, but which has been violated by all sides since. Last year, the IMF suspended loans to Zimbabwe because of its high level of military spending in the Congo. It had told the IMF that it was spending \$3 million a month on the war, but a leaked internal memo showed its actual spending to be \$25 million a month.

This week US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, who chairs the UN Security Council for the next six months, is bringing all the leaders of the regimes involved in the war to New York in a further attempt to hammer out a solution to the conflict.

Blair's decision to overrule Cook, and apparently go against the US-led initiative on the Congo war, is the result of his intervention in a long-running dispute between the Foreign Office, on the one side, and the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Trade and Industry, on the other. The latter opposed the Zimbabwe arms embargo, claiming it would damage

the reputation of British armament companies—a large slice of the British manufacturing industry—if the government was seen to break agreed contracts to supply spare parts for British defence equipment already purchased.

Cook has since attempted to diffuse the conflict by publicly supporting Blair's decision, accepting the commitment to supply spares. He claimed that the agreement "was suspended for a while during the fighting", but that "now there is no fighting and there is progress on the peace track"—a remark which is patently not true.

Media headlines picked up the Blair-Cook rift as yet another example of the mounting problems facing the Labour government. The pro-Labour *Guardian* newspaper declared that Labour was "in retreat over ethical foreign policy", a theme which was also taken up by the Tory and Liberal opposition.

It is, however, increasingly difficult even for the most credulous of Labour supporters to pretend that there is any shred of an "ethical" dimension in the government's promotion of arms sales. From Sierra Leone and Congo Brazzaville to Oman and Bahrain, a long list of oppressive regimes supplied with British arms under Labour has emerged. Last week, British companies rushed to renew sales to the Indonesian government once the European Union embargo was lifted.

However the decision of Blair to buck US and Western sanctions on Zimbabwe does call for an explanation, and lobbying from the British arms industry over a relatively insignificant spares contract would hardly seem sufficient to make such a policy shift. Only last November Blair created a highly publicised stand-off between himself and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, when he attacked Zimbabwe's record on human rights and involvement in

the Congo at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in South Africa.

The answer lies more in the increasing instability in Zimbabwe, and British fears that it will lose out on its own interests there. As a result of the withdrawal of IMF support and other Western aid, Zimbabwe is on the brink of economic collapse. Inflation averaged 58.5 percent in 1999, peaking at 70 percent in October. Unemployment is over 50 percent, at least a quarter of the 12.5 million population is infected with HIV/AIDS, and the cost of medical care nearly doubled last year. Official statistics estimate that 76 percent of the population live in poverty. Because Zimbabwe has now run out of foreign exchange and credit there is virtually no diesel fuel left in the country and queues at petrol stations can be up to a mile long.

A recent telegram to the British government from Peter Longworth, the British High Commissioner in Zimbabwe, was leaked to the South African *Mail and Guardian* newspaper. Headed "A Coup for Zimbabwe?" the document assesses the state of the armed forces in Zimbabwe. It points out that the Congo war has presented considerable material rewards for military top brass and business interests in Zimbabwe.

"A byproduct of the Democratic Republic of the Congo operation has been its associated money-spinning opportunities, whether through semi-overt mining ventures or outright black marketeering. We hear of some envy among more junior officers who are not getting their share of patronage at home or sufficient of the [financial] action in the DRC, but resentment seems to be directed not so much towards the government, as against more senior officers—not an immediate recipe for a coup."

The main concern of this servant of British imperialism was not, of course, for the mass of the population. He suggested that whilst a coup was not likely, the considerable influence of Britain amongst the military top brass was being damaged. Longworth wrote: "The military have not understood Her Majesty's Government's position on the DRC and bear a burning resentment as a result of the decision not to continue with supplies of Hawk spares. This will not help us influence events at a senior level in the Zimbabwe defence force."

This in turn could affect British influence with a future regime in Zimbabwe, because of the choice of

successor to Mugabe. The military "could well become involved if the party power struggle [i.e., within Zanu-PF, the ruling party in Zimbabwe] goes badly against their favoured presidential candidate. This would take the form of behind-the-scenes king-making, rather than putting troops on the street."



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