

## **Friends: we need to be cautious as a country**

Botswana's Foreign policy could put the safety of our citizens at risk, and deny our people opportunities to prosper as a nation

In recent times, the Botswana Government issued a press statement in which the Foreign Affairs Department forcefully weighed into the international crisis that is the Syrian civil war. The carnage in Syria, including the barbaric August chemical gas (with nerve agent sarin) attack in which thousands of human beings of all sizes and backgrounds perished is a tragic blow to the human race's quest to live harmoniously as members of the human family should. People around the world are silent in disbelief at the ensuing ghastly events in Syria.

Many television networks and news media around the world continue to report profusely about the American inspired evidence against the Assad regime in respect to who may have been behind the gas attack. The President of the United States, President Barack Obama previously spoke of a "redline" beyond which vigorous action, and possibly military intervention, is to ensue against Damascus, should the redline be crossed. Recent developments, sparked by the Ghouta chemical gas attacks seemed to suggest the pendulum being nudged towards an American-led military strike against Iraq.

"As we explicitly expressed before, we hold the view that bloodshed and brutality being perpetrated by Assad's regime will only come to an end if there is regime change" are the words reported as coming out of Botswana's Foreign Affairs Department, swiftly belted out and digging Botswana firmly against the Assad regime and in favour of the United States.

Then the Government of Botswana progressed the argument, "We once again wish to register our disappointment with Russia and China, who as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, have in the past, and in the case of Russia recently, continued to frustrate resolutions aimed at interventions that could find a lasting solution to the ongoing carnage in Syria"

Despite the bold and decisive taking of sides, Botswana does not possess the infrastructure to establish exactly what transpired in the Iranian chemical gas attack. It is not always obvious, in this complex world of propaganda and counter propaganda to establish exactly what may have happened, especially in regard to countries that wield the tremendous powers that both the United

States and Iran wield. Our Government should not make such simplistic inferences about such major world powers, and air them so publicly, in a language lacking in modesty. This is not a necessary ingredient for the success of Botswana as country.

If indeed the Government of Botswana seeks to please the United States in any way, this is no way of doing it, by unduly disparaging major powers such as Russia and China. Botswana loses nothing by oiling its relationship with the United States in a quiet fashion, without provoking well-established countries, which probably own sound reasons for the postures they have chosen in the Syrian stalemate. We acknowledge the importance of the United States in our portfolio of relationships. The United States offers Botswana immense opportunity in investment, trade and other areas. Many of our citizens studied in the United States and we enjoy direct relations with the people of the United States. Botswana should keep in mind too that a majority of American citizens are not keen on any military intervention in Iran in any case.

The sentiment is rising in Africa against the United States. Those who are seen to offer the American government blind loyalty attract ridicule and are losing respect among the close-knit family of African countries. A growing number of African citizens are beginning to perceive Botswana as an American stooge. This is a major loss to Botswana's prestige as a credible exemplar upon whom others can confide and entrust with their resources. The United States is likely to learn soon, if this has not been achieved already, that the current Botswana Government is gradually descending into an authoritarian regime.

Quite contrary to the United States' wish to be perceived as a conveyor of western-style democratic and political system, the image (that the U.S. will soon have to contend with) is increasingly fading into that of a big brother who supports an increasingly authoritarian (Botswana) Government that habitually deports outspoken human rights activists and intellectuals or places unusual visa restrictions/conditions on free thinkers, progressive journalists and political figures who may have discovered that the current Government is not the beacon of hope that it has been thought to be by the international community.

Among victims of this unnecessary posture on travel restrictions to Botswana are advocate Gordon Bennett, a British lawyer involved in a local human rights case; Professor Good, a free thinker whose writings convey a stinging depiction of Botswana's descent to authoritarianism and Julius Malema, a young, gregarious South African politician whose radical rhetoric bellowed a sentiment for the need of a regime change in Botswana. Another notable victim is Steven Corry, a tenacious Green Peace International leader who is critical of the tight-fisted governance system of the current regime. There are many others, on this list of individuals, including at least seven international journalists.

The taste of Botswana's foreign relations is now on free fall in that it is no longer just the prestige of the Botswana nation that is at stake. The provocation of other nations by the tight-fisted regime sitting at the Government enclave adjacent to the Mandela highway, increasingly poses a direct risk to the safety of our citizens across the globe, and will deny our citizens opportunities for economic and social advancement. Our foreign relations will paralyze our development options as a nation.

Take for example Botswana's handling of the first group of the Kalahari, and the visa embargo on advocate Bennet. This and other behaviour have conspired to inspire Green Peace International to trigger a possible international push to boycott Botswana's tourism sector, a sector on the back of whose fortunes Botswana could realistically become an economic power-house. The last Green Peace International-inspired boycott against Botswana diamonds cost our national coffers tens of millions in effort and cash resources, and hundreds of millions if not billions in lost diamond sales and lost opportunity. We can ill-afford another similar experience.

No one needs to agree or disagree with Green Peace's Mr Corry or his perspectives or solutions to his qualms about governance in Botswana. What we need is a Government that is open-minded, willing to take criticism, able to humble itself and one that is keen to put into practice basic tenets of democratic practice. Sooner or later, Mr Corry's and other influential groups around the world will come to understand that economic embargos will hurt our people much more than they will the political elite. Their qualm with Botswana is an eternal one, without any remedy until a new Government sweeps into power.

Groups such as Green Peace International need to realize that the real problem is that the current Government has lost its way due to its overstay in power, and that there is a true alternative

government-in-waiting that is responsible, democratic and forward-looking. The international community should begin to recognize and engage in a diplomatic dialogue with the alternative-government-in-waiting. The case for the need for a new and responsible Government in Botswana should be a topic both for the local communities and the international community. Put it differently, the international community will do well to rethink the idea of viewing non-ruling parties in Botswana with a suspicious eye.

One of Botswana's bright economic prospects has, for many years, been the possibility of the large-scale mining of coal resources and the generation of electricity at Mamabula. There was a time several years ago, at the peak of the Mamabula power-plant idea, when the project envisaged a power generation of a scale in the tune of between 2000 and 3000 MW with an investment in excess of US\$6 billion. This, however, depended on the confirmation of a power purchase agreement with Eskom, South Africa's electricity utility (and one of Africa's largest companies). This project alone, could have transformed Botswana's economic fortunes to dizzying heights.

Of course this is why those years ago, former President Mogae "broke his back" to lobby with the then South African President, along with some Ministers lobbying with their counterparts in South Africa. They humbled themselves almost desperately to receive the ear of South Africa whom, in principle, had agreed to the power uptake agreement. This is no longer the case, and no one, or not enough leaders in Botswana Government have taken up the matter with the seriousness and humility it requires, to convince the South Africans to change their minds again.

Instead, Botswana's attitude towards South Africa is that of indifference and sulking, fanned by the feeling that South Africa tends "to like acting like big and selfish brother". The fact is, yes, South Africa is a "big brother". The sooner we embrace this, and start learning to operate like all small brothers should - modest and smart - we will continue to lose out on lucrative possibilities for our country.

The larger point is, for some reason, the Botswana Government is finding it difficult to exercise restraint or behave modestly on the international stage. Botswana's involvement in talk of war and military intervention is not necessary. This is the best way to attract unnecessary attention to our citizens whom to date have enjoyed an international reputation as ambassadors of peace.

Botswana has much to learn and benefit from Iran, Russia and China. Iran is a world leader in science, much of which Botswana should be keen to exploit especially in the energy sector, including research and development in solar energy. China is a major innovator and investor, as well as a potential mass market for goods that Botswana produces or can produce in the future. Russia provides similar opportunities including in the oil sector. Many of our citizens, students, parents and professionals are potential tourists to these countries, or even students in them, shoppers, business partners and who knows what else. When our Government embroils our country in unnecessary squabbles we are squandering opportunities for our nation. This is a major mistake. We expose our people to security risk; we will be denied opportunities; and we will not be loved.

Our aim should be to be trusted as living by example - quiet, reliable, balanced, fair but effective in finding our way for things that will benefit our citizens. Our nation can and should export democratic ideals through example, not provocative speech.

The regime in Gaborone should learn to tone down its use of language, keep silent when it is not necessary to speak. We must act with modesty, in the same way that is expected of a small but smart child within a family. This is an appeal to the Government of the day, and it is in the national interest to launch this appeal in the way we now do. And then we will prosper as a nation.

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