

Lesotho, a case study in the crisis hitting southern Africa

by Mary Lalevée

The author recently returned from a trip to Lesotho, which she visited with the European chairman of the Club of Life, Uwe Friesecke.

The whole of southern Africa is going through a series of crises: the violence in the Republic of South Africa during March had been simmering for months. Killings of black South Africans by police, murders of black councillors by other blacks, arson, strikes, school boycotts, and riots are all symptoms not only of a political crisis, but of a much deeper economic crisis that southern Africa is undergoing.

The Republic of South Africa, the most developed economy in the region, has not been exempt from the effects of the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the economic policies which are destroying other African countries.

Unemployment in South Africa is 20%, with over 3 million blacks out of work. The prime rate is 25%, leading in particular to a major crisis for farmers, hit by drought, increased transport costs (with the price of petroleum increasing by 40% in January), and usurious interest rates. The rand has depreciated by 60% against the dollar over the last 12 months. The effect of this economic crisis on the poorest in South Africa—the blacks living in abysmal poverty in the “townships” or the homelands (*bantustans*)—is predictable: a social explosion which can easily be manipulated by forces wanting to blow up the region.

The only circles coming out on top in this situation are those controlling the drug trade and the casinos, the up-and-coming “industry” in the region (see page 47). All countries in the region, including South Africa, have been targeted. South African Prime Minister Botha recently stated that a “Mafia-style crime and political syndicate” had been supplying arms to the Renamo rebels fighting the Mozambique government, and trying to destabilize the South African government. Botha said that the gangsters wanted to turn Mozambique into the “private fiefdom of international financiers and bankers,” an apparent reference to the drug mafia.

Lesotho

The independent mountain kingdom of Lesotho, an enclave surrounded by South Africa, has been severely affected

by these crises. Lesotho became independent in 1966, after 100 years as the British protectorate of Basutoland. British “protection” left the country, which is the size of Belgium, with one kilometer of tarred road—between the governor’s residence and his office—and one mile of railway.

The country is run by Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan, who has held his office since the early 1960s, coming to power originally with the help of South Africa. The Catholic Church helped found Jonathan’s Basotho (now Lesotho) National Party (LNP) 25 years ago to “counter communist influence.” Ironically, in Lesotho’s search for aid today, the “communists” have been invited in: Embassies in Maseru, the capital with 25,000 inhabitants, were opened in 1983 by the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China.

While South Africa helped Jonathan in earlier years, it now appears that it is backing a group of politicians opposed to him, the Basotho Democratic Alliance, who have promised to close down the communist embassies if elected. Elections are due to be held later this year.

South Africa is also reported to be backing the Lesotho Liberation Army, which murdered several members of the ruling Lesotho National Party at the beginning of the year. Information Minister Desmond Sisishe recently announced that the nation’s security forces had killed six members of the LLA on the Lesotho-Transkei border.

Economically, Lesotho is totally dependent on South Africa’s good will. All its imports come through the Republic, and more than 150,000 Basutos work in South Africa’s mines. The revenue they send back accounts for nearly 40% of Lesotho’s Gross National Product (**Table 1**). Another large chunk of revenue comes from payments from the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), in which Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland are given a share of customs duties collected by South Africa.

Lesotho is typical of the majority of African countries, although in miniature: 80% of its population of 1.4 million lives off subsistence agriculture, and the economy depends on the export of one commodity. In Lesotho, that commodity is not cocoa or copper. It is labor: 66% of the male population between the ages of 20 and 45 work in South Africa, leaving women, children, and old men to work the local fields.

There are no industries in Lesotho. There are only handicrafts. Unemployment is estimated at 70%. There is one small canning plant for vegetables, grown for export, such as asparagus. There is one milk-processing plant, which processes 1,000 liters of milk a day. As there are no refrigerated storage facilities, thousands of eggs spoil every month.

Food aid needed

Lesotho is one of the 21 countries named by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization as experiencing "severe food supply difficulties." Lesotho is estimated to need 74,000 tons of food aid this year. A government official told us that an estimated 600,000 people were considered badly fed—almost half the population. 20% of the children weigh less than 80% of the normal weight for their age group.

That this food shortage is not merely due to the drought which has hit the whole of Africa over the past three years is shown by the fact that Lesotho has been receiving food aid for almost 20 years, since 1968.

Subsistence agriculture is quite simply unable to feed the population. The agriculture ministry is predicting a "bumper crop" this year if the rains came on time, and even so, the country will only be able to meet 50% of its grain requirements. Compare the yields of crops in Lesotho and the neighboring region of South Africa, Orange Free State (**Table 2**). The difference is simply due to irrigation, terracing, fertilizers, and pesticides. Torrential rains in mountainous Lesotho mean that terracing of the land is essential to stop the washing away of topsoil, and yet very little has been done because of the government's lack of resources. Some land and water conservation schemes are under way, but they are far from sufficient.

The U.N. World Food Program has "employed" tens of thousands of women on "food for work" projects. In the last 15 years, these women have built 2,500 kilometers of road in the remote areas of the country, using no technology whatsoever. A government representative told *EIR* that they would most prefer to "send in the bulldozers" to build the roads, but they simply do not have the financial resources to do it. Yet, as long as the roads are in poor condition, no food aid can be delivered to these areas.

A relief worker told us in exasperation that he was feeding children with food aid whose mothers had been brought up on food aid. Food aid is essential in emergencies, but in much of Lesotho, it is a way of life. So long as agriculture is not developed to make the nation self-sufficient, that will continue to be so.

The Lesotho government has started a "food self-sufficiency program," with a technical operations unit, tractors, and well-drilling equipment available for hire by farmers, a credit service enabling farmers to borrow money for equipment and fertilizers, and agricultural extension workers who travel the country giving advice to the farmers. Demonstra-

Table 1

Percentage distribution of GNP by sector

(GNP at factor cost and market prices: 1970-71, \$37 million; 1979-80, \$223 million)

	1970-71	1979-80
Mine wages	20.0	37.3
Agriculture	22.4	14.5
Manufacturing	2.0	2.2
Trade, const., mining	16.7	12.6
Gov't/private services	22.2	18.1
Other	15.1	15.3

Source: *Lesotho Agricultural Situation Report*, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, Lesotho

Table 2

Comparison of maize yields: Lesotho and Orange Free State*

(Kilograms per hectare planted)

	1973-74	1974-75	1980-81	1981-82
Lesotho	869	556	774	640
Orange Free State	2,927	2,658	2,832	2,833*

* Chosen for similarity of climate and proximity.

Source: *Lesotho Agricultural Situation Report*, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, Lesotho

Table 3

Maize production

(In tons)

	1973-74	1974-75	1980-81	1981-82
Lesotho	122,500	70,292	105,674	79,825
Orange Free State	3,936,000	3,299,000	5,015,000	2,707,000
Republic of South Africa	11,105,000	9,098,000	14,656,000	8,321,000

Source: *Lesotho Agricultural Situation Report*, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru, Lesotho

Table 4

The labor force

	% of population of working age		Agriculture		Industry		Services	
	1960	1980	1960	1980	1960	1980	1960	1980
Lesotho	57	55	93	87	2	4	5	9
Swaziland	54	52	89	74	4	9	7	17
Botswana	51	47	92	78	3	8	5	14
U.S.A.	60	66	7	2	36	32	57	66

Source: World Bank, *World Development Report*, 1983.

tion farms have been started where all modern techniques are used, irrigation, fertilizers, hybrid seeds, etc. Yields on these farms are far above average productivity. The government representative who showed us the farms said that farmers usually get two bags of maize per acre farmed; on the demonstration farm, it is up to 28 bags an acre. The government sets a parity price for its farmers, below which the crops cannot be purchased by buyers. The government representative told us that they are trying to prove to the population that "you can make money with farming."

The agriculture ministry's 1984 *Situation Report* points out that while there have been apparent increases in productivity in maize, these "were achieved through large government projects and cooperative ventures, and not from the subsistence rural farmer, who generally does not respond to farm prices."

The London Times March 25 called for expansion of subsistence agriculture to solve the famine in Africa! Such an approach means to willfully condemn hundreds of thousands or even millions of Africans to death. What else have they have been doing over the last 20 years except living off subsistence agriculture?

The large size of the animal herd (over 500,000 cattle wander the countryside) is causing serious problems. Overgrazing is adding to the erosion caused by torrential rains. The government is hoping to buy two-thirds of the cattle, slaughter them, export the meat, and then start a process whereby cattle will be kept in defined areas which could be treated with sufficient input to keep the pasture-land rich and healthy. The obstacle here is that the new slaughter-house which has been built has no staff or management, and existing slaughter facilities are tiny: Only about 1,000-1,500 animals can be processed per week.

Because of the traditional view of cattle as wealth, people accumulate as many cattle as possible and keep them far beyond the age normally necessary for slaughter.

The Times demands genocide

The struggle to break away from subsistence farming is not appreciated by the apostles of backwardness and genocide at the World Bank and similar agencies: The lead editorial in the London *Times* of March 25, entitled "Small Is

Helpful," called for expansion of *subsistence* agriculture to solve the famine in Africa! "There is now in the developing world a much greater acceptance of the fact that subsistence agriculture and small-scale production of edible cash crops should be the main area of development. Instead of grandiose industrial schemes worked out on a government to government basis, what Africa needs now are individuals versed in agricultural extension services, intermediate technology and small-scale water development." It continues, "If Africa is to feed itself, it needs to break away from the structure of past development finance, so that funds, expertise and technology reach it on a human scale through non-governmental organizations working with the private sector completely outside the framework of government or in collaboration with small local agencies."

The *Times* attacks Tanzanian President Nyerere, who asked in mid-March, "Should we let our people starve so that we can pay our debts?" The *Times* wrote, "Africa's more enlightened leaders, seeking food self-sufficiency, will have to reduplicate the Bourbon-like utterances last week of President Nyerere, Africa's most helped and least successful leader."

Such an approach means to willfully condemn hundreds of thousands or even millions of Africans to death. What else have they have been doing over the last 20 years except living off subsistence agriculture? That is why the average life expectancy in Africa is 20 years below that of the industrialized world. That is why the drought has meant death for so many uncounted human beings in the last three years: Subsistence agriculture means total dependence on "Mother Nature," who does not always bring rain at the right time.

Countries like Lesotho can only break out of the vicious circle of subsistence farming, food shortages, and food aid with massive infrastructure projects including the building of water-management systems to provide water for irrigation and human consumption.

Enter: Las Vegas

However, the investment that is pouring into Lesotho, is of quite another sort. Casinos and slot machines are the big new industry, all owned by South African companies. Similar processes are under way in other small countries neighboring South Africa and in the *bantustans* to which South African blacks are shipped if they are out of a job. Casinos have been built in the bantustans of Bophutswana, Cisklei, and Venda, and in the countries of Lesotho, Botswana, Mauritius, and Swaziland. The "Sun City" in Bophutswana is reportedly the "Las Vegas" of southern Africa, and was opened in a big ceremony last year attended by such unsavory stars as Frank Sinatra.

Sadly, but predictably, the people putting money in those slot-machines in Maseru are not wealthy tourists, but traditionally dressed Basuto women and barefoot children.