

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Rajiv Gandhi on the frontline

Rhetoric ran headlong into reality during the prime minister's whirlwind visit to Mauritius.

Rajiv Gandhi's sudden and unusually high-powered 36-hour visit to the tiny island-nation of Mauritius on July 4-5 seems to have been a singular misadventure for Indian diplomacy. In the event, however, it may have served to bring something of a reality principle to the push for mandatory sanctions against South Africa, a push for which Prime Minister Gandhi is emerging the self-appointed leader.

At a July 4 state dinner in his honor, hosted by Mauritian Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth, Rajiv Gandhi declared categorically that there was no alternative to comprehensive and mandatory sanctions to end the era of apartheid.

During official talks the following day, Mr. Jugnauth reportedly explained to Mr. Gandhi that the sanctions were very nice, but there was no way that Mauritius could participate without compensation for the economic losses the island will suffer the moment it cuts trade links with South Africa.

At a joint press conference before his departure that evening, in response to a question about Mauritius's reluctance to endorse sanctions, Mr. Gandhi delivered a small lecture on "principles" before proposing that the Commonwealth link the sanctions with a compensation guarantee for those adversely affected by cutting links with the Botha regime.

"When one stands up for certain principles, one has to make certain sacrifices," Rajiv Gandhi instructed the Mauritians, adding that in 1964, when India snapped ties with South Africa,

8% of its trade was with that nation, and it could have grown much larger.

It remains to be seen what effect such a patronizing approach, however earnest, will have on India's relations with Mauritius, 60% of whose population is of Indian origin. Bilateral ties slightly frayed by recent public charges of "Indian interference" may need more than the \$10 million aid-promise the prime minister also brought along.

More immediately, the visit gave a two-pronged jolt to the sanctions campaign. First, Mauritius's insistence on putting reality before rhetoric forced out onto the table the open secret of the Black frontline states: their economic dependence on South Africa.

Second, Rajiv Gandhi's typically earnest response—the proposal for the Commonwealth to compensate the boycotters—may be the deathknell of the sanctions initiative itself.

According to Mauritian officials, the country's import bill would soar if the tiny nation were forced to import goods from countries other than South Africa. Mauritius not only has tourist and trade links with South Africa, but is angry at having been singled out for condemnation while the other, larger frontline states maintain their dealings with Pretoria at the same time that they wax fiery on the need for economic boycott.

In fact, Mauritius is not unique, except perhaps in the candor of its government leaders. There is not one southern African nation that isn't dependent on ties with South Africa for anywhere from 50-90% of its eco-

nomie activity. Yet, during Rajiv Gandhi's big May tour of the frontline states of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Angola, not a whisper of this complication was heard.

India is, to be fair, not at all unaware of the urgent and rudimentary economic needs of the African nations, as shown by Foreign Minister K. R. Narayanan's participation in the recent U.N.-sponsored session on Africa's economic crisis.

But now that the cat is out of the bag, so to speak, Rajiv Gandhi seems to have put himself in the curious position of sponsoring a proposal which will bring the sanctions campaign he has championed to a permanent halt. When he announced the compensation proposal in Port Louis, the Indian prime minister vowed it would be on the agenda of the August Commonwealth Summit. But it can hardly be expected to garner support from the repositories of monetarist austerity, both in and out of the Commonwealth, who could otherwise underwrite its provisions.

A Commonwealth breakup over the South Africa issue, seriously mooted in some African quarters, wouldn't help much—unless, that is, India itself is prepared to finance the sanctions. Indeed, India is finding it difficult to even maintain trade ties with Africa, and proposals are circulating here to get European aid flows to Africa earmarked for purchases in India.

India's imports from Africa have dropped from 10% of its total imports in 1970 to less than 2%, and today represent no more than .6% of Africa's exports. Moreover, most of the purchases are not direct, but through London or other colonial centers. The purchase of \$1 billion worth of diamonds in Belgium annually, much of which no doubt originates in South Africa, is a case in point.